The Mystery Teens 2: Seasons of Change

by darkspine10

Summary

A second season of adventures for Dipper, Mabel and Pacifica. This time the trio will discover a variety of new mysteries, as well as dealing with more personal struggles.

As with before, each chapter is a new self-contained episode, all of which build towards a 'season arc'.

Notes

After completing the first season of The Mystery Teens, I thought I'd be done with writing about Gravity Falls. Instead, I found myself coming up with more and more ideas, I just couldn't get them out of my head. So here we are, ready to roll out another 26 chapters with these characters :)

With this season I hoped to stretch myself a bit more. I aimed for a more 'character-based' goal, as well as attempting to create and use a wider variety of characters than in season 1. I also experimented with narrative and writing styles in certain chapters.

While last Season focused most on Mabel’s character arc, this season tends towards Pacifica as a focal character, though there’s still plenty of Dipper and Mabel centric chapters.
There will be a set upload schedule this time around (unlike the previous season where I just uploaded whenever I was done with a chapter), with 3 chapters a week coming out on Wednesday, Friday, and Sunday. This means that the finale will be posted on 23/08/19.
The full moon shone high above the forests of California. Along a short stretch of road dividing a forest in two, a roadblock had been set up. The edges of the trees were illuminated by the alternating blue and red light from a police car. A single vehicle was driving down the road, and it slowed before it approached the roadblock. Stepping out of the red pickup into the chilly night-time air, Dipper Pines took in his surroundings. “Guess we’re going on foot from here Mabel. Don’t wanna get in trouble with the cops.”

From the other side of the pickup Mabel hopped out onto the road. She was wearing a grey sweater, bright yellow lightning bolt stitched on the chest. “Rightyo bro, stealth mode, activate!” She crab-walked to the edge of the treeline, making Dipper chuckle. He was glad to be out here with Mabel again, searching for spooks or ghouls in the dark. It was nothing more than his idea of a perfect night out. Though then he thought that made him sound kinda nerdy, he was sure Pacifica would tease him for having such a weird nightlife.

Mabel reached the edge of the trees and peered beyond the pines. There wasn’t much she could see back there, the occasional flashes from the police car didn’t penetrate far. She adjusted her glasses to try and re-focus, she still wasn’t quite used to wearing them all the time.

Dipper sidled up beside her. He pulled out a flashlight, but rather than shining it into the woods he aimed it down, pointing at Journal 4. “If the rumours are true, then we’ve got a big potential find out there, major street cred points if we can get a glimpse of it.” Mabel bent over to examine the page and listened as Dipper eagerly read out the description. “From what I’ve been able to piece together, it’s some kind of ‘living rock’, a geo-morph of sorts.” There was no sketch yet, Dipper had assembled the page from scant clues they’d pieced together from the rumours. The police presence suggested that they were on the right track. “It’s supposed to pretty dangerous from the reports, stuff like knocking down barns and toppling trees. Hopefully we can get some more solid info tonight.”

“What are we gonna call it then?”

“Actually, I thought since you always like coming up with the names, I’d let you do the honours this time.”

She appreciated that he was considering her input for once. “Thanks Dippingsauce. I guess since it’s like a rock monster, I could call it a Rosetta?”

“Rosetta?”

“You know, like the Egyptian stone thingy. Just sounds kinda cute.” Mabel had gone on a bit of an Egyptology binge recently, her recent stint in Siwa having given her a curiosity for the country’s rich history.

“Oh right, yeah. A Rosetta. Guess it’s as good a name as any.” He quickly scribbled the name in before tucking away the journal. “No time like the present then. Am I right?” He gave Mabel a small nudge, and she smiled warmly.

“It’s the best time to be doing stuff in.” She dramatically jabbed a finger at the trees. “Mystery Twins, away!” Then she dashed off into the dark with Dipper following happily after.
A cool breeze ruffled the trees as Mabel cheerily skipped her way through the woods. It was a cool March night, and she was glad to be back wearing sweaters again. Her goth phase was now solidly in the past, though she did still find herself occasionally trying on her old black lipstick and eyeliner on some days. She was sort of glad to be done with putting up a show of ‘inner pain’. She’d had enough of that for real recently after all.

Her hair was still stubbornly taking its time to grow back on the left side of her head, she’d kept it shaved for the last few months. It would still be some time before ‘Mabel Classic’ would be back. Though she supposed, with her tattoos hidden beneath her woollen sleeves and her new glasses, she wouldn’t truly be going back to the way she was before. That thought didn’t worry her though, she accepted that she was different now, and that she’d carry the reminders of her change with her.

She looked back at her brother, who seemed to be enjoying their latest excursion in the woods. It felt like there was less of a distance between them now, after all that happened with Journal 9 in the past month. Honesty was turning out to be a great policy for Mabel. She promised herself, no more secrets from Dipper. It was an easy arrangement; she didn’t exactly have anything to hide anymore.

She heard Dipper panting, as he jogged to keep up with her bouncy gait. “Mabel, I think we’re far enough into the woods now. You got the gold dust ready?”

One added benefit of her baggy sweater was the large pouch on her stomach. She reached in and rummaged around, before removing her grappling hook. The metal hook had been replaced for tonight, instead, a small capsule had been attached. She stuck her tongue out and took aim at the stars. “Ready Dipper, let’s light up the sky!”

She pulled the trigger, launching the small capsule up above the tops of the trees. It reached the height of its launch, then burst open. Golden particles sprinkled down on the tops of the trees for a moment. Suddenly, as if possessed by some force, the dust flew off towards the hills. “Great, looks like I was right about the gold dust guess. The creature must be an anti-aurumite like I suspected, it’s polarised to gold, the stuff just gets repelled from a distance.”

Mabel watched the trail of glitter disappear over the trees. “So we just have to go in the opposite direction, neato.”

“Let’s see, the moon is there, so that direction must be… where did I leave my compass again?” Before he could complain to Mabel, she thrust a compass in his face.

“That’s the benefits of having bumper sweater storage space Dipper, never underestimate my stitching prowess!”

“Thanks Mabel… looks like the creature went east then. It’s a bit uphill, shouldn’t be too hard a trek, even if this is wild country.”

“Do you have a plan for once we find this thing? Even if we had our tranquiliser rifles, they won’t do much good at breaking solid stone.”

Dipper gave a light shrug. “I need to examine the creature first, get a sense for what we’re dealing with. You know how it is with knowledge based on rumours.”

She conspiratorially winked at him. “Maybe we’ll get lucky and it’ll be another herbivore. Onwards then- oof.” Mabel had tripped on something as she’d started to move away. She fell roughly on some exposed branches. “Ow, stupid trees, my namesake has betrayed me!”

Dipper knelt down to examine what was tangled around her foot. He stuck his pen through
whatever she’d fallen on, lifting it to his face. It looked like a pair of swimming goggles, a brown leather strap with darkened lenses.

Mabel got up, putting her glasses back on and focusing on the goggles. “What are those Dip?”

“No, someone dropped them I think.” He decided to try them on and strapped them over his head. To his surprise, the view through the tinted glass didn’t merely show a darkened view of the forest. Instead he saw everything lit with bright blue tint. He panned around, briefly jumping when his eyes crossed a bright patch of orange light. It was Mabel’s face. “Woah, these are heat-vision goggles! Infrared I think.” He watched Mabel’s bright orange smile grow, then looked around the woods. He could make out some slightly brighter patches against the blue of the ground. They led off in the same direction that the gold had flown away from. “I think I can make out some tracks with these!”

“Coolio bro, what a handy find!”

He pulled the goggles down to his neck, having to adjust back to the lower light levels. “Yeah, ‘handy’. This seems like a really compact piece of kit, pretty high-tech. What are the chances of it just lying around in the woods? Unless…”

“Unless what, Dip?”

“Unless it means we’re not alone out here…” The twins quietly contemplated this statement for a while. On all their Mystery Hunts so far, they’d never once come across anyone else on the same trail as them. These goggles certainly didn’t belong to the rock monster, nor were the police actively searching the area, content to seal off the woods for a few days and hope the problem blew over. Dipper also suspected that the simple utility of the goggles were above what normal police officers used. Warily, he put the goggles back over his eyes, tracing the small indentations left by the Rosetta’s paw prints. “Come on Mabel, we’ll think about whose goggles these are later, first things first we find the monster.”

Their uphill hike brought them to a large river, too wide for them to ford. Whilst walking, Dipper had discovered several other modes on the goggles, including a zoom-and-enhance feature, target ID tracking, ultraviolet scanning, and one mode, X-ray vision, that had given him the fright of his life when he’d seen Mabel’s skeleton walking around.

The tracks dead-ended on the bank, right beside a tall waterfall stretching above them. Mabel suggested that the Rosetta must have swum across to the far side but Dipper’s scan with the goggles however showed no tracks there. “I think it might have gone underwater, too heavy to swim, probably just walked along the riverbed. Must be a cave upstream, behind the falls perhaps.”

Mabel took off a shoe and dipped a tentative foot into the stream. It was cold, but not uncomfortably so. “Next step we swim across, right?”

Dipper was pulling the goggles over his hair but seemed hesitant to proceed. “I don’t know about that, I’m not exactly dressed for swimming. It’d ruin my clothes. Besides, I can’t get this wet.” He opened his hoodie and pointed at the pocket that held his journal and camera.

“No biggie, I can just go in alone.” Mabel wriggled her grey sweater over her head. Underneath she was wearing a plain green tank top. She’d have to live with getting that and her skirt damp. She tucked her glasses into her skirt pocket, then began easing herself into the river.
As she stepped both feet into the water, she felt Dipper’s grip on her shoulder. “Wait, maybe we should try and find another way. We’re a team remember, we should do things together.”

She looked back at his concerned face. She could tell how much he was trying to care for her, accommodating her at every turn. It made her feel all warm and fuzzy inside. But there was a monster they needed to find. “I’ll be fine Dipper, you stay here and give me 15 minutes. I’ll see what’s in there and come right back out. Trust me.” She raised a hand, and he fist-bumped it back.

“Ok, stay safe down there, you big goof.” He knew Mabel would be fine holding her breath for some time, she’d once spent a month practicing breathing exercises, had a mad dream of visiting Mermando without scuba gear.

Mabel waded out until the water was at her waist, then inhaled deeply and plunged beneath the surface.

Whilst he had some spare time, Dipper sketched the goggles they’d found. Breathing in the cool forest air, he wrote down his notes while wearing them, they had a light enhancing mode, so he wasn’t just relying on moonlight. Once he was finished with that, he removed the goggles and sat back to count the minutes before Mabel’s return.

About 10 minutes after Mabel had disappeared beneath the surface there was a small disturbance. A handful of medium sized boulders broke off from behind the waterfall, causing splashes in the river. The boulders were quickly swept under the surface. It seemed to be an isolated tremor at least, that was some small comfort. He was suddenly feeling very anxious for Mabel’s sake.

His whole body froze as a crack like thunder rang out through the woodland. That was the sound of a rifle shot. He saw a flock of distant birds off some way behind the falls take flight, spooked by the noise. Maybe there was a land-ward entry to the cave up that way? If someone was out here with a gun, then Mabel was in serious trouble. He started panicking, not sure what to do. There was a horrible moment of indecision, his worry for his sister fighting with his practicality. He should just wait for Mabel, 5 more minutes. But things had changed now, she needed to be warned.

He didn’t have time to take any clothes off, he would just have to hope his hoodie pocket kept its contents dry enough. He took a deep breath, and was prepared to dive straight in.

Right then, a firm hand tightened on his shoulder. He was pulled back hard and fell onto his back on the riverbank. He stared up into the barrel of a gun. The gruff voice of whoever was holding the gun spoke down at him. “Well well well. Look what I’ve caught.”

Pushing against the river’s current, squeezing through a tight passage and emerging into some kind of cave, Mabel sat trying to dry herself by the edge of the pool she’d come up through. Her top was clinging to her skin, and her hair felt like it weighed twice as much due to all the water. She was regretting leaving her shoes behind, the floor of the cave had a lot of jagged stones strewn about.

After spending a few minutes not getting any drier, she took a look round the cave. There was a rounded tunnel and numerous stalactites and stalagmites hugged the passageway. The walls felt smooth and damp. There were no signs of the creature that she could see. Maybe they’d have to bring those funky goggles down here to pick up the trail.

She ceased her exploration of the cavern a short way into the tunnel, deciding that she wasn’t going to find anything in the time she had left. Her exposed legs were getting cold as well, she’d head back to Dipper and properly dry off. Her feet already had numerous small cuts from the stony
floor, so she sat by the edge of the water to check them over. She was already thinking up ways that
she could spin this for her parents’ sake when they got home.

She prepared herself for the swim back out to Dipper, stretching her arms and legs. She took a step
towards the pool but stopped herself. Her foot had stepped onto rock that felt very different to the
soft limestone of the cavern walls. It was noticeably drier, with more jagged edges. Very slowly
she lifted her foot. Before she could remove it entirely she felt the floor began to rumble lightly.

She jumped back away from the pool, then watched as part of floor detached itself from the rest,
shaking as it rose on four legs, then turning to stare at her. She’d found the Rosetta!

It crawled forwards on its very chunky legs, made of overlapping plates of rock. It hunched low to
the ground and the shoulders were squared, leaving it looking like it had a turtle shell on its back.
From beneath the rocky outer surface, blue gemstones shone, pulsing slowly. The legs shifted from
side to side like a reptile. She stared into two gemstones on the creature’s head, that she assumed
were eyes.

The rocky jaws opened, and Mabel tensed. But to her relief, it was just yawning. She tried to
carefully approach it. “Hey there big stone monster, I won’t hurt you.” She was more worried
about it hurting her, those jaws looked like they could do some damage. Even though this thing
was roughly the size of Waddles, it was still quite intimidating. She felt very vulnerable down here,
with almost no protection.

She tried to edge around the Rosetta, trying to get back to the water so she could escape and
describe what she’d seen to Dipper. The blocky creature stood its ground, impassively observing
her. As she got a look at the creature’s side, she noticed something glinting in the soft light from its
inner glow. She crept closer to the beast, which recoiled slightly. She held up her arms. “It’s ok,
just having a peek.”

It was something stubby and metal, one end was flat, the other sharpened to a point. She realised it
was a bullet. The rocky skin around it was cracked, but the bullet didn’t seem to have penetrated
very far.

She reached into her skirt pocket and pulled out her small swiss-army knife. It was the only thing
besides her glasses that she’d brought down here. “This is only gonna hurt for a second.” The
Rosetta stared vacantly at her as she wedged her knife under the stone plate. She waggled the
blade, causing the bullet to fall out. The creature briefly grunted but seemed otherwise
unconcerned.

Mabel picked up the bullet and rolled it around in her hand. Without her glasses on she couldn’t
make out the finer details, but it was clear that the bullet was unmarked. Whoever had fired the
shot had made this himself. A flashing red LED light suddenly came from the bullet, which must
have been acting as a tracker. She tossed it away, then continued edging towards the pool. The
Rosetta seemed content to just sit there watching her progress.

Before she could get much closer however, a loud echo came through the tunnel. It sounded like
another shot, somewhere deeper in the cave system. She wanted to get back to Dipper right now.
The Rosetta reacted to the shot too, crawling into a ball, the plates on its limbs sliding smoothly
together. She tried to comfort the frightened rock beast, rubbing a hand on its outer shell. “Hey,
don’t worry, Mama Mabel’ll be right back with help.”

She recoiled from the Rosetta as a puff of blue dust shot out into her face. She coughed as she
inhaled some of the substance. The whole creature was surrounded by the dust for a moment, some
kind of defensive instinct had kicked in.
Mabel felt the dust in the back of her throat and tried to get to the water so she could have a drink. All of a sudden she started feeling woozy. Wobbling on her feet, she collapsed at the edge of the pool. Her vision started blurring, so she furiously blinked to try and see clearer.

She looked back at the Rosetta, but her mouth gaped open at what she saw. The blue light from inside appeared to be bleeding out from the creature, twisting and bending in the air. It must have been a trick of the light. The colours started shifting, becoming brighter, more saturated somehow. She tried to focus her mind, keep it aware of her surroundings. But she just felt a growing numbness. She looked down at her body, seeing the tattoos on her arms. These colours too seemed to melt away, then spun around, encircling her body in a wash of light.

Then a massive grin grew on her face. The numbness gave way to an intense buzz of pleasure throughout her entire body. She delighted at the new rainbow of colours her eyes were taking in. She rested her head on the lip of the pool, forgetting all about Dipper or rock monsters. This was the greatest thing she’d ever experienced, a bodily nirvana.

She suddenly wanted to see more, not satisfied with the dull monotone colours of the cave. She unsteadily rose and wandered off deeper into the darkness, not a care in the world.

To be continued…
Mabel was tumbling down a swirl of colours, the sensations of pure happiness all she could think about. She’d never matched the high she was feeling right now before, not through drugs or lovers or Smile Dip or even the thrill of a Mystery Hunt. This was simply blissful. She slid down and landed on a floating cloud, then found herself wrapped in the covers of an enormous bed. The bright pink sky above was the most beautiful thing she’d yet seen in her 17 years. A happy giant sloth waddled over to her, and she high-fived it. “Hey there buddy, let’s party until the sun explodes!”

In her haze of dopamine, she completely forgot about her brother, why she’d come here, and any sense of danger. As far as she was concerned, she never wanted this moment to end. She passed a sweet river of bright red jam, still bodies smiling up at her from within the liquid. She waved back cheerily at them.

Out of nowhere, the feeling of endless joy she felt evaporated, and the colours turned dark. Her surroundings now felt unpleasant to the touch. Shadows started lengthening, a sense of dread creeping over her. She felt a desperate crazed longing for the bliss to return. Whatever was causing this would have to be stopped. Up ahead, she sensed shapes shifting the dark, moving towards her. “No! Get away!”

They were monsters. There were monsters coming, and she was going to kill them.

A thick arm of muscle yanked Dipper roughly onto his feet. He was slammed into a tree truck, a hand gripping the neck of his shirt. He was suspended off the ground, so when he tried to scrabble away his feet just found the air. “Please, what do you want?!”

The man that spoke had a voice like he’d been smoking 20 a day for decades, it was such a deep and rough tone. “What do I want, little man?! I want you to explain what you’re doing looking for my Bloodstone!”

“Your what!?!” He felt the grip around himself loosen and he fell to the floor. He looked up, trying to get a sense of this aggressive stranger. He carried a heavy looking rifle in one hand. He was wearing a sleeveless jacket which showed off his ample musculature. A bandolier holding grenades was slung over his shoulder. His face was coarse, there was a stubble and obvious scarring. One eye was covered by a patch.

Dipper was intimidated by this hulk of a man towering over him. “Who- who are you? I’m not your enemy, man!”

The gruff man studied the kid at his feet. Dipper tried to put on air of strength and confidence, but his wiry frame didn’t convey much of that. “I could ask you the same thing, trespasser!”

“Trespasser? Hey, neither of us are supposed to be here. You’re not exactly a police officer now, are you?”

“I’m looking for the rock monster. That’s my one and only goal. If you get in my way… then I’ll have to find a reason to use ‘self-defence’.”
Dipper gulped. “I… might be looking for the same thing… possibly.” He tried grinning at the man, but it was painfully forced. “Maybe we could go look for it together?”

The man laughed in his face. “Ha, you’re weak! Why would I need your help? Just stay outta my way, I’m gonna go find it myself.”

Dipper didn’t like the idea of this crazy hunter wandering around with Mabel missing and a potentially dangerous monsters on the loose. “Wait! I know where it is!” The man stopped and turned back to look at him.

“You’d better be serious kid, or I’ll be bagging two prizes tonight!”

“Um sure, I’ll take you right to the creature. I’m, um, I’m Dipper.” He feebly lifted a hand for a shake, but the man just squinted at him. Then he suddenly shouted.

“I am Morbid, the huntsman! YAHH!” Dipper hurriedly covered his ears as the man fired off a round of bullets wildly into the air.

Dipper slowly removed his hands. “Right, ‘Morbid’, nice to meet you? Who are you exactly?”

“I’m a hunter, didn’t I make that clear.” He showed Dipper the rifle again, and he eagerly nodded, not wanting to endure another round of gunfire. “Most people don’t see it, but this world has a cracked underbelly, pits of hell and insanity. There are things out there you wouldn’t believe.”

“Actually, I think I know exactly what you’re talking about. Weird stuff out in the woods, or mysteries that can’t be solved. So what, you find and catalogue them too?”

Morbid gave a ragged laugh. “I don’t just find them. I deal with them, to keep the normal people safe from their depravity.” He ran a finger down the side of his face. “You see this scar? I got this from a wild Gnome ambush. Had to slay two dozen of them before the day was out.” He pulled out a rope that was tied around his neck. It was adorned with numerous small artefacts. “Look at these trophies. Manotaur horn, Pyrosaur talon, mystic crest. All taken from defeated enemies.”

“Oooooook. Good to know.” He didn’t feel remotely comfortable around this guy. It was strange though, for so long he’d considered his explorations into the unknown unique. Sure, there was Ford, but Dipper was simply carrying on that same legacy. But now he found out that there were others with the same kind of secret knowledge? It was a slightly disturbing concept, he was so used to being the arbiter of the hidden side of the world.

“So where is it?”

“Huh? Oh, the ‘monster’, right. There’s a cave system behind that waterfall over there, I think there might be another entrance up on the hill.”

Morbid glanced at the landscape, then shrugged. “Worth a shot.”

“Right, let’s go… deal with this thing then. Um, after you?”

Dipper gathered up his equipment, and Mabel’s sweater, then reluctantly followed the huntsman up the hill. Morbid didn’t turn to look at him, just silently stomped forwards towards their goal.

He was carrying Mabel’s grappling hook and attached another small vial of gold dust to the firing mechanism. He shook it briefly, watching the particles shift to one side of the vial, which
confirmed they were moving in the right direction. “So, once we find the Rosetta—“

“It’s a Bloodstone! Why’d you call it a damn pansy name like that?”

Dipper frowned, not liking this indirect insult against his sister. “It’s just the name we chose, ok? Anyway, once we find it, do you have a strategy? My research is only based off the rumours, you say you’ve seen it up close."

Morbid grunted a confirmation. “Yeah, I’ve seen ‘em before. I have a plan for dealing with it.” He turned and flashed a toothy grin. “You can trust me.” Dipper was more put off by his missing teeth than reassured in the slightest.

They came to the base of a tall hill they couldn’t climb. Nestled at the base behind some bushes Dipper uncovered a small aperture in the rock, hopefully leading into the same cave system Mabel was in. Morbid dragged him over to a nearby bush, and the two of them sat in wait. Dipper wanted to know more about this dangerous stranger but drumming up small talk wasn’t his strong suit at the best of times.

Morbid was surveying the cave entrance. “Wish I had my damn goggles, they got dislodged in the hunt.”

“Oh, you mean these?” Dipper waved the goggles at him with a smirk. Morbid tried to grab them, but Dipper recoiled. “Ah ah ah, finders keepers. I’m sure you can make yourself another pair.”

Morbid’s eyes narrowed. “This is serious business boy, one mistake and we’re both dead men!”

“How’d you even find out about all this supernatural stuff anyway. I found a journal that told me all about it when I was younger.”

Morbid stared off into the distance, a pained look crossing his face. “When I was your age, a frightened creature came to my family’s door. It was unlike anything we’d ever seen, hideous and terrifying. He was some kind of lizard man, I don’t know the details. Long story short, my parents gave him shelter, then he massacred the rest of my family in their sleep.”

“Oh, that’s awful. I’m so sorry. What happened to the lizard man?”

“I ripped his entrails out and feasted on his flesh.”

“Ah. I… see…” Dipper wanted to drop any further conversation with this man, he was clearly unhinged.

“Look, there!” Morbid pointed over to a rustling in the trees.

Dipper stared in awe as he finally laid eyes on a Rosetta. It covered in rocky plates, with an unnatural red glow coming from within. The whole thing was enormous, bigger than a car. He quickly pulled out his journal and started writing down his first impressions. “Amazing, walks with a side-to-side gait, like a Komodo dragon! Hardened stone exo-skeleton, and crystalline core beneath!”

“Now we just have to kill it.”

“Exactly!- wait, what?”

Morbid looked incredulously at him “What did you think we were gonna do, boy? Try and ‘befriend’ the damn thing?! Those things are merciless killers. You smell that?”
There was a scent like the whiff of an old penny. “Yeah? Isn’t that iron?”

“That’s blood, son.” Dipper’s stomach immediately felt queasy. “These things eat anything. Their digestive systems can grind any organic matter down to a fine paste. They practically live off blood, it’s like their favourite flavour. I don’t call them Bloodstones for nothin’.”

Dipper was suddenly very afraid, both of the lumbering creature and his companion. He didn’t think he could deliberately kill something. The very thought made him feel sick. Then again, they couldn’t just leave a dangerous beast roaming the woods. “Can’t we, like, relocate it somewhere safer?”

Morbid sneered at him and exited the bush. “I don’t have time for your wishy washy nonsense. I’m going to collect what I came for.”

“What? What do you mean? Collect what?”

Morbid didn’t respond, he just charged into the clearing before the cave mouth. “Hey, Bloodstone!” The creature whirled around and started slowly marching towards him. “Eat this you damn freak!”

Dipper watched him toss one of the grenades from his bandolier straight at the beast. He dived into the bush for cover. The clearing was rocked by the blast, and Dipper clamped his hands over his ears again to block deafening reverb. When he looked back into the clearing however, he was amazed to see that the Rosetta was barely affected all. Some of the outer rock had been blasted away, but the inner core was still shining brightly.

Morbid was now wearing a strange mask over his face. The Rosetta crawled up into a ball, the interlocking outer rock acting as a shield. Morbid casually strolled over to the immobile beast. There was a hiss as red smoke streamed out from cracks in the outer shell. Dipper now realised that Morbid was wearing a breathing mask. He’d known about this defence mechanism.

Before the Rosetta could unfurl and try attacking with its claws or teeth, Morbid jammed another grenade through the rocky surface. Dipper crouched down again, as a high pitched beeping signalled another imminent blast. The body of the creature fell apart as the blast tore its innards to shreds.

Dipper waited for a moment, then emerged from the bush, trying to see how bad the damage was. There were shards of rock and red crystal lying everywhere. Morbid had already entered the cave, he seemed to be carrying some of the internal crystals with him. “Wait, come back!” His cry was pointless, the man was already out of sight. He made to follow but tripped on something. It was the stone head of the Rosetta, staring up at him with unmoving eyes. It was a horrible sight.

He suddenly realised how bad this situation was. Mabel was almost certainly lost in those same tunnels, and now there was a deadly psycho killer on the loose, as well as probably more giant rock monsters.

He took almost no time to decide on a course of action, before running into the cave. “I’m coming Mabel!”

The source of the darkness grew stronger as she made her way deeper into the caves. Mabel’s mind was taken up entirely by a desire to purge the intruders, so she could return to the joyful ecstasy she’d know before. Every moment she spent away from that state felt harsh and dull, a crushing
lack she couldn’t satisfy. She only knew that that she had to kill the invaders, protect this pure place.

She heard footsteps scrabbling around in the dark. Something was there, trying to find a way through the tunnels. She broke into a run, trying to catch whatever was here. Turning a corner, she caught sight of it at last. One of the monsters.

It was bulky, like a bear. Razor sharp teeth jutted out from the body at every angle. Instead of a head, there was only a skull, blackened by flames. It was covered in the stench of death. By chance it didn’t see her, having its back to her.

She was momentarily petrified, not wanting to fight such a fearsome demon alone. She backed away and ran down a different tunnel. She hated that thing, wanted to see its hideous form ripped to shreds. But she had to be cautious, to pick her moment to strike when it was least expecting a killing blow.

There was a sound coming from another passageway. It was some kind of animalistic cry, a deep unending roar. This time she wouldn’t hesitate to kill. She traced the sound of the new monster, then spotted it down a side tunnel. She hugged the wall of the cave, waiting in the shadows for it to approach.

As it passed close by, she got a look at it. Seeing it made her want to gouge its eyes out and tear off the head.

The monster was a horned figure, body drenched in blood. The arms were like spindly needles, the whole thing had an unnaturally thin frame. The monster’s face was pockmarked with hideous diseased pustules, and it had a mad grin, like it wanted to take pleasure in destroying her.

It passed her by, not seeing her in the dark. She took her chance and leapt at its back. She pulled her arms around its neck, trying to squeeze with all her strength. The monster shoved her back into the wall, trying to dislodge her. Her grip loosened and it got free. She whirled around and threw herself at it again, trying to scratch it wildly with her fingernails.

The monster got a hold of her wrists, trying to force her onto the ground. She headbutted the monster right in the cluster of pustules, stunning it. Her next move was desperate, she lunged for the monster’s neck and sunk her jaws into its skin. There was a deep cry of pain from the monster, who fell onto its back.

She started flailing with her fists, trying to crack the monster’s skull with the force of an impact. It rolled around, too slippery for her to get a hit in. She felt her legs get trapped, then she was flipped over. The monster had wrapped his legs around hers to get a better vantage of attack. It grabbed her shoulders, shaking her back and forth trying to bash her head against the floor of the cavern.

That strange roar from before returned, the monster was screaming it in her face. It was a horrific sound, making her feel sick to her stomach. She wanted this disgusting creature to die, wanted to see the life drain slowly from its eyes.

She kicked out with her feet, sending the monster flying back. Some objects it had been carrying fell to the floor, a cursed spell tome and chunky black box. There was something else too, a stubby black tube. There was something about it that made her hesitate, the slightest pang of familiarity. Then she realised that it was a gun. This was her last chance to finish this. She charged at the monster, screaming out in rage.
Just before she could reach it, the monster grabbed a hold of the gun and pointed it at her face. She heard the monster speak, now suddenly clear and audible. “I’m sorry!” Then it fired, and a bright flash took up her vision.

She stumbled around, unable to see. Her face was coated in a fine dust. She collapsed against the wall of the cave, now feeling weak. She cleared her eyes, trying to see where the monster was. She saw it get to its feet and walk over to her. Barely above a whisper, she tried to get it to show mercy. “Please, I’m so tired. Don’t hurt me.”

It was shaking her shoulders again, this was the end. But as she looked up into the face of the monster, the darkness surrounding it started to melt away. What had appeared as blood was now just a red fabric. The pustules on the face receded into a small cluster of spots on the forehead. The demonic horns disappeared entirely. What was left at the end was a scrawny teenage boy.

She listened to him speak, that strange roar finally coalescing into an intelligible word. “Mabel! Mabel! I’m here! It’s ok!” She fell back and closed her eyes, exhausted from the effort.

Dipper had found Mabel soaking wet and shivering in one of the tunnels. At first, she’d attacked him without provocation, trying with all her might to bring him down. He’d noticed that her pupils were dilated to an incredible degree, and she had a crazed look on her face. He’d tried to get her to realise who he was, but she’d just madly continued her attack. He was actually bleeding from where she’d bitten his neck. If it wasn’t for the gold dust causing her to stop, he wasn’t sure what would have happened next. Presumably one of them would have had to… ’subdue’ the other.

He shivered, not wanting to imagine how close Mabel had come to winning their brawl. Now he’d wrapped her up in her sweater, trying to warm her up. She was sleeping fitfully, propped up against the cave wall. He tried to tend to her wounds, her feet were covered in nasty gashes and there were several bruises from their fight. This was gonna be a hell of a story to try and explain to Mom and Dad.

While he was sticking a plaster on his neck, Mabel finally woke up from her slumber. Her voice was shaky and slow “Dip… what… what happened? Where are the monsters?”

“Hey, hey Mabel, it’s ok. You’re safe.” Her eyes had mercifully returned to normal now, the effect of whatever had driven her crazy was gone now. “Do you remember what happened.”

“I’m not sure. Everything was so happy and bright… then not so happy. But before that, I do remember.” She described her encounter with the blue Rosetta. From her description and Dipper’s sighting of the red Rosetta outside, he guessed that Mabel must have encountered an infant creature. When she told him about the blue gas that the creature had emitted, he put two and two together.

“Ok, so you inhaled some of that blue dust or whatever. I saw the adult one do the same thing. It must be some kind of drug, you were high as a kite! Then when I hit you with the gold dust it must have cancelled out the effects, we got super lucky.”

“Why did it make me go so coocoo though?”

“Maybe a defence thing, the creatures thought we were a threat to their home, so they used you as an attack dog.”

“I didn’t hurt you, did I?”
Dipper briefly glanced away. “No, I’m fine.”

“What are these things then, the Rosettas?”

“Probably a kind of Heliotropazoid, least that sounds sciencey enough a name for me.”

“So what now?”

“Now, you rest. We don’t know if there are any after-effects to the stuff you breathed in. Plus, you’re tired and hurt.”

Mabel tried to stand up despite this. “Never mind me Dipper, we have to get out of here before the monsters come back!”

“Mabel, there are no monsters, it was just an effect of the drug.”

“But I saw two of them, one turned out to be you, but what about the other one?”

“Ah. I may have neglected to mention that we’re not alone down here.” They both heard the sudden echo of rapid gunfire. “On second thought, your plan it is! We’re getting out of here.” He pulled Mabel upright and she winced as her injured feet brushed the cavern floor. “You just have to put up with that for now, we have a proper medical kit back at the pickup.”

She gritted her teeth and nodded. Dipper pulled her by the hand and tried to lead them back to the upper cave entrance. Mabel was unsteady on her feet, having been completely drained of energy.

“Who’s this new friend we have to deal with then?”

“Some crazy hunter dude, I saw him… kill one of the Rosettas.”

“That’s awful, they’re not hurting anyone.”

“Well, they kinda are, you smell that? It’s the scent of blood, these things are killers.”

“I think… when I was ‘confused’, I saw a river…I thought it was jam…” She felt shaken by the memory but tried to stay resolute. “They still don’t deserve to get hunted. Tigers or wolves kill things and we don’t go around hunting them for sport.”

“I know Mabel. But we have to make sure they’re not hurting anyone. The police have this place closed off for a reason.”

Mabel didn’t say any more but was clearly pouting. They came to the tangle of bushes blocking the entrance.

“Oh thank god, we’re nearly out of here.” Dipper started to push branches aside, but then they heard movement from behind. Mabel pulled him over and they flattened themselves against the cave wall as two Rosettas stormed past them. There was the small blue Rosetta Mabel had seen, as well as an adult with green gemstones.

“Mabel, hold your breath, just in case they emit the gas again!” The twins held tight against the wall until the creatures passed outside. The plants blocking the exit had been trampled down. Mabel was thankful to be out in the open air again and breathed deeply. Then she shivered, remembering that it was the middle of the night and she wasn’t wearing nearly enough.

Both her and Dipper dropped to the grassy ground as another shot came from the tunnel. “This guy’s so trigger happy! What are we gonna do Dipper!?”
“I have a plan, not a great one, but it’ll have to do. I need to get close to the huntsman though.”

“Are you insane! I thought I was the one whose brain was addled.”

“Leave it to me, ok. I know what I’m doing.”

“Do you really though?” She grinned at him, some of her fire finally returning. This emboldened him, and he stood in the middle of clearing and called out.

“Morbid! We need to talk!”

From his side, he heard Mabel. “Pfft, 'Morbid'? What kind of guy are we dealing with?”

“Just stay down and stay quiet Mabel. I can handle this.”

While the Rosettas cowered at the edge of the clearing, the huntsman slowly poked his head out of the cave entrance. The breathing mask was around his neck. “Out of my way boy, you’re standing between me and my prize.”

Mabel spied his eyepatch. “Woah, is he a pirate?!”

“Shh Mabel!” Dipper looked down at the remnants of the red Rosetta, who he now realised must have been the mate of the green one. This reinforced his opinion on the matter. He made sure to position himself right between Morbid and the Rosettas. “You have to stop, right now! No more killing tonight! I’m not gonna let you murder these creatures just for sport, to hang their heads on your wall for some sick game!”

“Game? This isn’t about fun boy, this is about a public service, ridding the world of two more abominations against nature. The added extra I get from them is just a bonus.”

“Added extra? You took some of the crystals from this dead one.”

“Right boy. Once I get out of here I’m gonna grind the stones up into a fine powder. That stuff goes for an incredible sum on the black market.”

“You’re using them for drug smuggling?! That’s obscene!”

“It’s simple profit, I get to kill another monster and skim the proceeds on the side. Win-win. For me anyway. You on the other hand are a nuisance. I’ll get as much joy from killing you as I did my poor family.”

“But you said the lizard killed them? I don’t understand-“

Morbid was suddenly shouting at him, overcome with a new zeal “They stood in my way! I was righteous in slaying any who protected that filthy creature! I vowed that day to hunt them and all their kind from the face of the Earth! Damn creatures and weirdness, it all deserves to be purged!”

“No, you’re wrong!” Mabel had risen to stand beside Dipper now, gripping his hand partly in solidarity, and partly to stop herself falling over from how weak she was. “Things aren’t evil just cause they’re ‘weird’! Supernatural beings can be friendly too, we’ve met tons of magical people that are totally awesome or don’t hurt anybody!”

Dipper nodded along with his sister. “Yeah, they aren’t ‘wrong’ for just existing! You’re just a sick, twisted…”

“Monster?”
“Exactly sis.”

Morbid frowned at the two of them. “You and your high and mighty principles! You think my clients care how I get them their supply of drugs?”

Mabel tried to passionately respond. “I got drugged by those things, it was terrible! One minute I was totally lost in a crazy high, the next I was paranoid and tried to kill my own brother!”

Morbid just waved a hand in the air. “You just got unlucky, if you take the stuff in a safe environment you’d be fine.”

“You still have to kill them first! I… we won’t let you do that!”

Morbid raised his rifle, aiming it straight at Mabel’s head. “Try and stop me girl. You won’t be the first person to disagree with my methods.”

“Mabel, now!” Dipper released the glass vial he had hidden behind his back, sending a flurry of gold dust into the air. Since the Rosettas were immediately behind him, the dust flew straight at Morbid.

“Ah! What the!” Blinded by the dust, he dropped his rifle. A rogue shot went off as it hit the ground. Mabel and Dipper both ran at him then. They tried to knock him down, but his raw strength was too much. Dipper abandoned that idea and scrabbled at Morbid’s neck. He pulled off the breathing mask, then dragged Mabel back away from him.

Morbid clawed at his eyes, clearing the dust away. He stared at the twins with a murderous rage before running after them. “I’ll kill you all!”

Dipper ran past the Rosettas, who were still cowering it at the edge of the clearing. “Come on you hunks of rock, do your thing. Mabel, stand back, I’ll deal with Morbid!” He had a look of determination, so Mabel trusted in him and darted through the trees.

“Bold of you boy, to defend your sister. But it won’t save either of you.” He was clutching another grenade in his fist, prepared to blast the Rosettas. “I’m gonna snap your neck with my bare hands, then I’m gonna take what’s mine!” He rounded the Rosettas, trying to grab Dipper.

“I don’t think you’ll be hurting anyone else tonight Morbid. Now do your thing!” Dipper kicked out at the Rosettas, trying to provoke them. It worked, and the parent and child began curling into balls. Morbid reached for his breathing mask but panicked when he found it missing. Dipper smirked at him then tightened the mask around his own face.

A mist of blue and green gas erupted from the rock creatures. Morbid was consumed in the cloud. “No! No! You can’t… you… can’t.” The hunter collapsed onto his front, one arm splayed out trying to reach the Rosettas.

The mist began to clear, so Dipper called for Mabel. “You can come back now, it’s over.” He rolled Morbid over onto his back and started dragging him towards the cave. His expression was now a wide grin. It looked wrong on such a rugged face. He dumped the body by the cave mouth, then returned to the Rosettas. Mabel was lightly stroking the younger blue one.

“You and your mama… papa…? Well whatever you are, you’re safe now. What do we do now Dipper? They don’t seem like killers.”

Dipper took in the larger green Rosetta. At that size it could do some serious damage, intentional or not. “I don’t know. We can’t move them, they’d never follow our instructions. I think we can get
them to stay away from this area though.”

Dipper went back over to cave entrance. Morbid was wandering deeper inside, in a daze. He poured the rest of his gold dust on the floor of the cave mouth. Both Rosettas seemed to instinctively know they should leave and started to sidle away. “There, they won’t come back here at least. By the time Morbid gets over his current state they’ll be long gone. That said, I don’t actually know how long the effect will last, you only came out of it cause of the dust spray.”

“He’s a big meanie anyway. I hope he never comes back out!”

“So do I Mabel… so do I.”

The twins watched the Rosetta pair disappeared into the woods, Mabel giving them a big wave goodbye. Dipper wasn’t sure whether they really were as dangerous as Morbid said, but he wasn’t about to stop them getting away from him. It wasn’t his place to judge.

Dipper retrieved Mabel’s shoes from the riverbank, which meant their trek back to the pickup wasn’t as hard on her injured feet. Once they finally got back to the old red truck, Mabel collapsed in the passenger seat. “Ah, I feel terrible. My whole body aches.”

“Hey, it’s not all bad, we got these nifty goggles at least.” Dipper spun them round on his finger. He brought round the medkit and cleaned up her wounds, making sure to disinfect any open cuts. “That should do it. I think you’ll probably have to skip school tomorrow though, you need a rest after what you’ve been through.”

“Blah, that’s sucky. Dipper, is it weird that I kinda miss how it felt? The happy part felt sooooooooo good.”

“Hush, that’s probably just the addiction talking. That stuff was so strong it’d put every other drug on the market out of business.”

As Dipper went to put the kit away, Mabel noticed the plaster on his neck at last. “Hey, what’s that?”

“Oh… you kinda… bit me.”

“Bit you!?"

“While you were trying to… kill me.”

Mabel threw her hands up over her mouth. “Oh Mason, I’m so sorry. You’re right, that weird drug gas can go take a hike. It’s not worth it.” She gave him a weak hug, too tired to grip very tight.

“I’ll drive you home Mabel, you just rest now.” He pulled the seatbelt over her, then got into the driver’s side. By the time he got the engine going, Mabel was already lightly snoring beside him.
Chapter End Notes

^BaKaiju has been kind enough to do a sketch of the Rosetta from these first two chapters: https://www.deviantart.com/baka2niisan/art/Rosetta-805637811
Blood Sucker

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It was a quiet Saturday morning in Piedmont, and Mabel was up early. She’d walked a short distance from home to an abandoned building site. The whole area was slated for redevelopment at some point, but for now it was just a gutted complex of empty grey buildings. It was perfect for Mabel’s favourite new pastime. She wore a simple white vest top and jeans, and a pair of black sneakers. No extra fuss was wanted for what she had in mind.

First she bunched up her long hair (recently returned to a mostly normal length after having half of it shaved since last September) into a ponytail using a pink scrunchie. Strapping in a pair of headphones to her exposed ears, Mabel analysed the grid of buildings laid out before her, scanning for the best routes through the site. She pulled up her playlist of ‘intense running music’ while stretching her arms and legs. Last, she tucked her glasses safely away in her pocket.

She broke into a dash forwards, the white cable of her earphones trailing slightly behind her as she ran. As she approached the first building, she reached her arm out, using it to vault through a rectangular hole in the wall that used to hold a window. Rolling smoothly across the frame, she immediately continued her run by charging vertically up some scaffolding. Once she reached the top of the wooden platform, she sped off and leapt over a gap to land on a higher concrete floor, barely stopping for a moment. She fluidly slid under a desk and span back into an upright run.

Where Dipper had his attention detail when writing notes in his journal, Mabel was applying that same precision to her every movement, focusing on what hand-hold to grab, where to place her feet. It was an elegant ballet of motion across the gritty environment. This was her newest hobby, urban parkour. This abandoned place was one of the few places she could put her skills into practice, at least without getting called out by the police. The freedom of movement gave her a buzz she found addictive, the split second decision making to find the right path becoming almost automatic after a while. Her enthusiasm was only bolstered by the music pumping in her ear.

In a way, it was an extension of her skill with arts and crafts. The exacting nature of working with her hands translated well to navigating this concrete jungle. There was another blank window ahead, and she hurried her pace to gain momentum. As she reached the lip of grey stone, she threw her body through the gap. Extending her arms out, she gripped hard on a metal pole stretched across the space in front of her. Spinning on the pole, she gracefully landed both feet back on the dirt.

She was breathing heavily but was exhilarated from the jump. She hoped that one day she’d be able to put these new parkour skills into practice on a proper adventure, if only to show off to Dipper. She also considered her physique, her attempts at getting fit by going to the gym had petered out quickly. But now she almost forgot about the effort, enjoying the thrill too much.

She was about to head off on another sprint, but she turned her feet too fast, causing a jet of pain to stab up from below. She winced, annoyed that she hadn’t been more careful. Her feet had been torn up on her last Mystery Hunt (and they were considering changing the name, so it didn’t involve the word ‘hunt’ anymore). They were still tender if she moved the wrong way and rubbed against the side of her shoes.

Explaining that one to Mom and Dad had been tough, she’d had to pass it off as an attempt at acupuncture gone wrong. That still didn’t explain the mystery bruises on her arms, nor Dipper’s
clearly severe neck injury. They’d just about managed to convince their parents that nothing was wrong, but it had been close. Another stupid risk they’d taken.

She sighed and halted her further running. She sat on a cinderblock and removed her shoes to make sure that none of the cuts had reopened. Pondering her predicament wasn’t what she’d wanted from this morning. Parkouring allowed her to zone out and focus on pure motion alone, a realm of snap decisions and moment-to-moment planning, not an environment where she wanted to consider the deep ramifications of her actions.

Her right foot was fine, but a gash on the side of her left foot had started to bleed slightly. She’d have to head home and apply a plaster, there was also some gel she had that could soothe the pain. At least there was only a little blood.

She immediately ate those words as a dollop of blood splatter suddenly burst over her foot. She was gobsmacked, simple cuts weren’t supposed to explode with blood like that. Then she realised that the blood had fallen from somewhere else, it wasn’t hers. She looked up to try and see where it had come from and was rewarded by another drop splatting her in the face. “Ew! Gross!” She hastily tried to clear it off and noticed that a dark cloud was forming right above her.

It had been a perfectly sunny morning before then, this cloud was appearing out of seemingly nowhere. More drops of blood started falling around her. They were heavy and hit the ground with loud splashes. She darted away, trying to get out from under the cloud. More warm blood drops hit her back.

Mabel didn’t usually like to swear, she preferred to keep her mouth ‘pure’, as she put in her mind. But sometimes when irritated, she’d let loose her sailor mouth, including some colourful phrases inherited from her Great Uncle Stan. Now was one of those times. “Ah! Oh crap! Ew ew ew! Gosh darn heck! Hot Belgian Waffles! Goddamn freaking bullshit!”

“You find yourself in the tomb of the great king. All is shrouded in darkness- when suddenly the torches flicker to life! You’re surrounded by the evil brain minions of the Council of Ursa Minor! So, Princess Andromeda, what do you do?”

“Hmm, I try to win the minions over to my side with my incredible wealth! I roll for charisma. I got a 12.”

“12, let’s see, weighed against their stats, plus your starting info… yes, it works, you recruit the minions as bodyguards!”

“Yay! Let’s go win back our treasure!”

“Right, beyond the tomb is a massive network of catacombs. There are two pathways ahead you can choose to take. Which will you-“ A rapid series of knocks came from the front of the house. Dipper rolled his eyes. “Ugh, sorry Paz, we have to pause. Sounds like someone’s at the door.” The doorbell was ringing like crazy now.

“Sure thing Mace. Get back soon though, I wanna try out my new war-axe!”

Dipper regretfully placed his set of die down and got up from his cross-legged position to answer the door. The banging was still constant. “Ok, I’m coming! Sheesh.” He grabbed the latch and began his automatic door-answering routine. “Hi, this is the Pines household, how can I- Mabel!!”

Standing in the now open doorway was his sister, a look of pure anger in her face and covered
from head to toe in red.

“Is that… blood?!”

Mabel gave him a withering look. “10 points for your observational skills Dip.” The blood was still fresh, she was dripping onto their carpet. It was layered so thick on her skin that Dipper couldn’t even see her arm tattoos beneath it.

“Ohmigosh, are you hurt?! Is all this yours?! What happened-oof.” Mabel shoved a bloody hand over his mouth.

“Ah ah ah! No talky, I need a shower first.” She barged past him up the stairs, leaving a small trail of drips as she went.

He grimaced as he wiped his face on his sleeve and returned to the living room. A burst of static distortion came from his phone, propped up on a table at his eye level when sitting. “Anything interesting?”

“Well, kinda. I think it’s a ‘weird’ sorta thing. Might have to cut our session short.”

“Oh damn. I was just getting into the swing of it.”

“I guess we could play a little longer, Mabel still has to clean off all the blood in the shower, should take her a while.”

“Blood?!”

He shrugged. “Mabel didn’t seem too worried about it. Come on, I’ll give you a chance to wield your battle-axe.”

A few minutes later, Mabel came downstairs, wearing a white bathrobe and dabbing her hair with a towel. “My clothes are totally ruined! I’m so lucky that my music player isn’t broken now.”

Dipper held up a hand. “Hold on, you roll a… 7, that means the trap kills your bodyguards.”

“Aw, hell. At least I still have the crystal crown.”

Mabel bent over and saw Pacifica on Dipper’s phone screen for the first time. “Wait a hot second! Are you two playing that super nerd game?!”

“It’s called DD&D, and we both enjoy it. Right Paz?”

From her room in Gravity Falls, Pacifica crossed her arms. “Yeah, it’s fun. It’s the only way I can go on ‘magical adventures’ while I’m stuck at home.”

Mabel mimed speaking into a radio. “Chhck, Mabel to base, this is Mabel speaking. Dipper and Paz are being totally lame, over.”

“Yeah, whatever Mabel. We have fun, that’s all that matters.”

“Boo! Lame! Don’t let my brother drag you down into being a dork Paz! There’s still time for you escape the nerd zone!”

Dipper reached over and grabbed the phone. “Sorry Pacifica, I’ll have to go now. Gotta deal with
Mabel’s ‘blood issues’.

“Fine, maybe see you this evening?”

“You can count on it ‘Princess Andromeda’.” He winked at the screen while Mabel rolled her eyes. He noticed that, so ended the call. “Ok, love you, bye!”

“Love you too-“ He cut her off mid-sentence.

He looked over at Mabel. “You seem a bit grumpy today.”

“So would you be if you’d been drenched in a blood rain!”

“Ah… so what happened?”

“One minute I was out doing my new running, you know, all that climbing and jumping over in the industrial park? Then my feet got sore cause I twisted them weird. One of the cuts was open, so I was gonna head back.” She lifted a foot and wiggled the toes, showing off a new plaster stuck on the side. “Then the next thing I knew, blood was falling from the sky! This cloud deely just came out of nowhere right above me! It covered the whole building site!”

“Hmm, blood rain. That’s a new one. I think Ford told me about that once, said he had a new suit that got completely coated by a freak shower. I don’t have any detailed notes though. I might be able to find something online, rumours of weird weather always have some kind of origin.”

“Well you’d better hurry, if this thing keeps happening, then I don’t wanna risk looking like a horror movie villain every time I go outside.”

“Oh, and you’d better hope you can get blood out of a carpet, cause otherwise Mom’s gonna flip.” He pointed back at where Mabel had left a trail of splatters leading upstairs.

“Oops, shoulda been paying more attention. Ok, let’s split up! You go do all the hard brain work and find out about the blood, I’ll clean up the carpet!”

Dipper’s research didn’t turn up much. “There are scattered cases of ‘blood’ rain throughout history, but those have been dismissed as having other causes, like dust, or spores.”

Mabel was now wearing a dark green sweater with a mushroom on the chest. “This was definitely real blood Dip, it was hot and sticky. Just makes me feel all icky just thinking about it.”

“You’re one hundred percent sure? We don’t wanna jump to any conclusions.”

“Dipper, I know what blood looks like. I’ve had plenty of cuts over the years. Remember that time we donated our blood, you fainted when they put in the needle?”

“Yes, I remember that. Did you have to bring up the fainting thing?”

“Nevermind that. I’m just saying, I’ve seen blood and the stuff that rained on me was definitely the same thing.”

“Well the only sources that mention ‘real’ blood are on the same crackpot forums where people claim that the moon is a hologram, or that Vikings once conquered all of North America… then
again, those same crackpots said that the Diquís spheres were made by aliens, so maybe it’s worth a shot.”

“What do we have to do then?”

“Says that the rain is usually associated with cursed objects. Maybe there’s one at the building site that got unearthed? Then your blood triggered it to activate!”

Mabel cheerily headed for the door. “Great, let’s head over there and stop anyone else from getting horribly scarred for life by a torrent of blood!”

Back at the building site there was a fresh layer of red covering the whole place. “See, I told you Dip! Look at all this gunk.” Mabel quickly hopped over the gate, but then remembered that Dipper didn’t know parkour. It was quite a hassle trying to lift him over the gate without getting caught on the barbed wire lining the top.

Eventually she got him inside and the pair started searching the empty buildings. “Guess it’s time to try out our newest little toy.” Dipper pulled out his new pair of goggles, which he’d looted from their last night-time excursion. He swept his gaze around the site, checking in X-ray to search for objects buried under the surface. He spotted something right in the centre of the building site, something circular just beneath the topsoil. “Mabel, I think I found it! Quick, grab those shovels!”

There was ample digging equipment lying around in the complex, and they got to work unearthing the artefact. Mabel’s shovel impacted whatever it was, so she scrabbled in the dirt with her hands to retrieve it. It was a circular medallion of some kind, the outer ring was wooden, while the core was metal. She focused her glasses on the artefact, seeing that symbols had been inscribed in two different languages. “What do you make of this Dip?”

She passed him the medallion. “Looks like Norse runes on the wooden layer, definitely Greek on the metal. Well, I guess we’ll just have to activate it and find out the whole story. Can I borrow your pocket knife?”

She dug it out from her sweater. “Sure, what for?”

“I just need to make a small cut.” He extended the blade and held it up to a fingertip.

“You sure you wanna do this bro?”

“I’m sure, you already got too many cuts last time, now it’s my turn to make a small sacrifice.” He stabbed at his finger, then cried out. “Holy mother of Probabilitor! Ah, ah, that stings!”

Mabel chuckled. “Ha, you’re such a baby sometimes Dipper. It’s just a little blood.”

Dipper looked queasy. “It feels like a lot to me.”

“Well don’t just stand around, what about the medallion?”

“Oh, right.” Dipper slapped his forehead with his spare hand, then positioned the medallion under his bleeding finger. He allowed a single drop of blood to fall onto the surface of the artefact.

Initially, nothing happened. Dipper watched the drop soak into the material. Then the runes on the outer layer began to glow the same colour as his blood. “Here we go Mabes.” The medallion shook in his hand, then a light shone from the opposite side, sending out a cone of red light like a
“Watch out Dip, oh, it’s gonna be so gross again.” Thankfully, the blood rain was more contained this time, only falling in the area that was illuminated by the medallion’s light. The twins watched as blood pooled around at their feet. Layers upon layers of blood began stacking up, approximating the shape of a burly man.

The liquid body shimmered, then details began forming. A large beard came down to the man’s waist, and it was knotted in several long braids. He wore a conical helmet, with two gull wings sticking off either side. A pair of axes were slung over his back.

“Woah! A real-life Viking berserker!” Dipper held a hand out to shake with the bloody warrior, but Mabel pulled him back.

“Woah, slow down Dip, he’s still made of blood remember.” Both twins stood back as the Viking raised a fist to his mouth. Then he let out a string of coughs.

“Ahem hem! Gah, a thousand years, not used to having vocal cords, even if they are made of liquid.” He spoke with a Scandinavian accent, and a softer voice than they’d expected. He sounded positively cheery to be here. “Thanks for awakening the blood seal, been far too long.”

Dipper’s eyes were wide with excitement. “Who are you!”

The Viking put his hands on his hips. “I am the renowned explorer, Thorvald the Blue!”

“Well, that’s ironic give your current colour.” Mabel sceptically crossed her arms. “If you’re really a Viking, then where are the horns on your helmet?”

Dipper gave her a side-glance. “Mabel, even I know that the idea that Vikings wore horned helmets is a myth, propagated by pop culture.”

The Viking nodded. “Exactly. Everyone knows that it was the Romans who had horns on their helmets!”

“Wait, what?” Dipper shook his head. “Not important. What is this medallion then? Curse, I assume?”

“Aye, tis a wretched object indeed. I traded the inner metal section with a Greek traveller, he claimed it would enrich the blood, giving those nearby a fearsome and unstoppable prowess in battle. The Bloodlust Seal, it was called.”

“So what happened, what’s this stuff round the edge?”

“Ah, the blasted Greek was a fraud. Curse you Barnabas, I’d flay you if I could… that is if you hadn’t likely been dead for 10 centuries. Rather than give us a mighty strength, the damned medallion gave us all nosebleeds. Someone’s idea of a practical joke I reckon.”

“These runes then, you added them?”

“Indeed, hired a proper shaman and everything. Unfortunately, the process backfired somewhat.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, just look at me now.” Dipper looked up and down at the tall warrior, who now seemed to be permanently stuck as a sentient puddle of blood. “I am now and forever trapped… as a Haemo-
goblin! It’s wordplay, ya see?”

The twins shared an awkward glance then nodded. Mabel had another question. “So how did you end up here, in America?”

Dipper couldn’t help but add his own knowledge on the topic. “Yeah, I mean, there were a few Norse expeditions and settlements in North America, but all of those were on the East Coast.”

“That’s a sad tale. You see, me and my crew were explorers, determined to chart the far reaches of the world. We heard tell of Leif Erikson’s daring voyage to far-off lands and dared to match his feats. Only, you see, we were the worst sailors you could ever lay eyes on. Navigation was a word none of us knew, half the crew were permanently drunk, and our helmsman had double eye-patches. We did have one man in the crew who knew how to find his way using the stars, but I marooned him for daring to grow a longer beard than me.”

“You got so lost you came the wrong way round the entire world!?”

“Like I said, worst sailors ever. It’s a miracle we didn’t sink on our first day outta port.”

“So...” Dipper tried to figure out what to do next. “Like, is the blood rain gonna keep happening, or...”

The sanguine Viking shook his head. “Don’t worry about that, was just an attempt to restore this corporeal form. Your sister there’s cut was close enough to the medallion to trigger the rain, but not enough to give me solidity.”

“Uh huh. Now what?”

“Well, I reckon I have a couple’a minutes of corporeality left. Once that runs out, I’m going to need some more of that there blood.” The twins backed away as he slowly withdrew one of the axes from his back.

Mabel raised her hands and tried to reason with him. “Hey now Thorvald, buddy, can’t you just get by on paper cuts and nosebleeds? You don’t need to flay us alive.”

“I wish that were so, I pretty much need a constant supply of the stuff. Sorry kids.” He slammed his axe down onto the concrete. “Wish it didn’t have to be this way.”

“Oh well, nice knowing you Thorvy- Dipper, run!” She shot off with a fast acceleration towards the maze of hollow buildings. Dipper was slower, he hadn’t been practicing this kind of activity like she had. The jury-rigged medallion was still clutched tightly in his grip.

The Viking just slowly dragged his axe after them, leaving a red gash in the pavement. “Please, can’t we do this with civility? I just need to break one of you apart and nourish myself on your blood. No reason to make it a whole big thing.”

The twins tried to ignore their affable aggressor by darting into one of the buildings. They pushed through a metal gate, and slammed it shut behind them. Immediately Mabel began clambering up a pile of crates. She hadn’t had time to bunch up her long hair and felt self-conscious wearing her glasses. If they broke she’d be in even more trouble. She built up enough momentum so she could run along the wall, propelling her close to set of overhanging wooden beams. Hefting herself up by her arms, she reached the second floor.

Only to realise that Dipper was standing dumbstruck below her. “Mabel, help! I can’t do all those flashy parkour moves like you!” He yelped and ran under the floor she was on as the Viking...
entered the building. He walked straight through the metal gate, his liquid body sliding effortlessly through the bars.

“You’re only delaying the inevitable kids. It’s time to donate some blood! It’s for a good cause.” Mabel yanked off her sweater and dangled one of the arms down for Dipper to grab.

“Dipper! Get up here to the overhang!” He grabbed a hold of the green sleeve, then tried to pull himself up. Thorvald took slow steps towards them, narrowing the gap inexorably. Dipper’s face was scrunched up from the effort of trying to climb, but he’d barely gained any height at all. “Use those arms Dip! I can’t lift you all by myself!”

“I’ve got no upper body strength Mabel, I’m too weak!” Mabel felt the sleeve go slack as Dipper was pulled off. He felt a sloppy wet fist grab the back of his hoodie and was lifted up like a trophy.

Mabel took a few steps back from the edge, she knew it was now or never. “Ugh, I really liked this sweater too!” She took a deep breath, then ran straight towards the edge. Dipper gaped up as she leapt off the overhang, sticking her arms out in front of her in a diving motion. She splashed into the Viking’s torso, sending blood flying and breaking his grip on Dipper.

The Viking collapsed into a mass of writhing body parts, trying to reassemble his full form. Dipper ran over to Mabel, who looked up at him through red tinged lenses. “Not again! This stuff takes ages to wash out! And yeurgh, I got some in my mouth! It’s all globbuly!”

“Think we have a bigger concern right now Mabel!” Behind them, Thorvald had mostly reformed himself. This time his upper torso was on backwards compared to the legs.

They backed into the corner of the room. “Grr, my sweater is ruined! Now we’re gonna cleaved down by the world’s friendliest axe murderer! We never shoulda dug up that stupid piece of junk medallion!”

Dipper looked down at the janky rings of wood and metal he still held. “Wait, that’s it! I know what we can do! Thorvald!” Dipper stood forwards to confront the Viking.

“Huh, what did I say?” Mabel queried.

Thorvald was spinning his dual axes menacingly but halted as Dipper approached. “What is it child? Have you come to offer yerself willingly?”

“Not exactly! If you stay here, I can get some tools that might be able to fix your medallion for good. Just gimme five minutes to run and get them. Mabel, stay here as insurance.”

Mabel started to protest. “But Dip, I’m covered in blood! I wanna go home and shower! Plus,” she whispered, “I’m not sure I wanna be left alone with axey-mcbloodface over here. I don’t trust him.”

“Just five minutes Mabel, trust me.” Dipper darted off and struggled over the main gate, leaving his sister and the Viking standing awkwardly together.

Mabel rubbed the back of her neck, before realising it was coated in blood. “So. You ever played rock, paper, scissors before?”

Dipper flailed himself back over the main gate, landing roughly in the dust. He found Mabel and Thorvald sitting cross-legged in the hole they’d dug to extract the medallion. He looked down at
his handywork, surrounding the wooden outer ring was a new ring of green circuitry. He’d quickly fashioned a donut shaped circuit board and attached it to the medallion. “Hey guys, I’m back,” he called over to the Viking, who was intently focused on the game he was playing Mabel.

“Aww, poop, you cut my paper! You’re too good at this.” Mabel stood up as Dipper approached. She was going to come over to him, but he recoiled, not wanting to get blood on himself.

“Thorvald, I have your medallion. It’s all fixed now.” He passed the chunky circle of materials over to the Viking. He looked at it with appreciation.

“Thank you. What happens now then, what does your modification do? ‘Tis a strange substance you added.”

“It’s a feedback looper. If I just do this…” Dipper reached over and flicked a small switch on the back of the medallion. “There. That should cancel out your consistency.”

Mabel seemed unsure of Dipper’s motives. “What does that mean Dip? What’s it gonna do?”

“It means our bloody friend here is gonna find himself falling to pieces any second now.”

A flash of shock at the betrayal crossed the Viking’s face, but then he noticed that he was dripping and resigned himself to his fate. “Oh. Well, that serves me right for trusting a teenager to fix an ancient blood curse, especially after I so gracelessly tried to murder him. Shame.”

“Sorry dude, had to be done. Maybe we’ll bring you out at parties or something.”

The Viking looked down and sighed. “I thought this would happen sooner or later. Oh well, I had a good run. If you see Barnabas, tell him he owes me a refund!” He started dribbling his words together after that, as they watched the blood return to a puddle in the middle of the hole.

Mabel waved her hands in the air. “Thank goodness that’s all over. Well that was weird. I mean, weird for us, not for normal people. How’d that circuit thingy work anyway?”

Dipper picked the medallion out from the pool of blood. “It’s partly alchemy, I carved some Norse runes on the board, the material makes a good conductor for the energies involved.”

“Got it, nerd magic.”

“Come on, let’s go. I’m gonna stick this medallion in my secret drawer and never bring it out again.”

Mabel gave a hearty nod. “Agreed. Now to head home and wash, so I can stop looking like the victim of a chainsaw massacre!”

Chapter End Notes

The first section I wrote for Season 2 was the opening 500 words with Mabel practicing parkour. The idea came to me as I was editing up the finale of S1, and I felt compelled to write it down somewhere so I could use it as part of a later, more fleshed out chapter.

Random headcanon sidenote: Mabel’s favourite video game is Assassin’s Creed
Syndicate, because a) twins!, and b) GRAPPLING HOOKS!
“It’s here, it’s here, it’s here! Today’s the day!” Skipping along through the streets of Piedmont, Mabel was making her way to the local post office. There was a specific package that had just arrived, and she couldn’t wait to get her hands on it.

Last night, Dipper had received a coded email, sent from somewhere in the south Pacific. After figuring out the key, he deciphered the text. He was elated to discover that it was a message from his Great Uncle Ford, giving them a new update on their travels. Both Ford and Stan had been sailing around the Indian and Pacific Oceans for the last few months, tracking anomalous readings and exploring the world. It was the kind of life Dipper could only dream of having.

Ford had been slow getting used to modern internet technology over the course of the last 5 years, his only real past experience of computing being McGucket’s primitive laptop, but Stan knew enough to be able to send an email. The message was to let the twins know that they’d sent a pair of parcels to Piedmont. Dipper had been sent a parcel from Ford, whilst Mabel was receiving something from Stan. Mabel already suspected that she knew what was in the package, Stan always made an effort to pick up knick-knacks and touristy souvenirs wherever the twins travelled and would send them on to Mabel when he had a chance. There was also the prospect of a letter from Stan, giving her a rundown of their adventures.

Dipper himself had sent a detailed message to Ford a few weeks back, relating their run-ins with Merak, the Council, and the Ursus at the start of February, letting him know all about Journal 9 and the Alignment’s effects on reality. Both Grunkles had been understandably worried at first but reassured by their success in saving the universe again. Ford had promised to send something to Dipper that would make future adventures a little safer.

Mabel continued to skip cheerfully to the post office, eager to collect her package. Dipper was off doing something else, something Mabel hadn’t bothered to find out about. It was probably research into some supernatural activity, but Mabel was too excited by the parcel to care. He’d have to pick up his own parcel later, she was too lazy to carry both of them back home.

Her long trek to the post office was finally over, and she bounded through the door. Immediately she started babbling to the woman behind the desk. “Hey, parcel for the Pines family, address 715 Wildwood Avenue! Come on come on come on! I can’t wait any longer!”

The rather overwhelmed post manager rifled through the deliveries, before presenting the two parcels. “Do you want both?”

Mabel quickly glanced at the labels. She read the first, which said that it was from Stanford Pines. “That’s the one, you can leave the other one for my brother to pick up.” She grabbed a hold of the chunky cardboard package and started racing back home.

She could barely contain herself on the return leg of the journey, clutching the parcel close to her chest and smiling with an intense delight. She was so wrapped up in her elation that she didn’t notice the box she was holding judder and shake several times during her return trip.
Mabel burst through the door and slammed the parcel down on the living room table. “Finally! Ooh, I can’t wait to see what Grunkle Stan got me! Maybe he got me more of that weird coconut candy that Dipper hated!” She started tearing at the packaging wildly, ripping the cardboard box to pieces in mere seconds. “Wow! I can’t believe it! It’s a… it’s a… huh.”

She looked down at what she’d been delivered. It was a silver sphere the size of a football. It seemed to have been made out of metal sheets nailed together. She turned it over in her hands and poked the surface. “Maybe it’s some kind of extra layer of packaging? Or some futuristic puzzle toy?”

It slowly dawned on her that this wasn’t Stan’s gift to her. She rummaged through the torn shreds of packaging and found the delivery label. “Ugh, Stanford Pines! Dummy, that’s Grunkle Ford!” Even after all these years, she still hadn’t gotten used to the fact that Grunkle Stan’s real name was Stanley. “Great, I got stuck with Dipper’s dumb science ball. Or whatever this thingy is.”

She set the ball down on the table. She didn’t know where Dipper was, and she damn well wasn’t going to admit defeat by going back the post office again. She’d just figure out what this thing was herself.

There were no switches or obvious buttons on the surface. She tried pressing the top of the sphere down, stroking the sphere, touching every available part of its circumference. There was a lot of blind trial and error, before she finally found something. A panel on the sphere slid downwards, curving around into the metal and exposing a gap. The sphere was open at least now. “Now what? Ford should really write better instructions- aaaaah!”

A jolt of electricity suddenly shot through her body. A slice on the top of the sphere had popped up, and a red flashing light was coming from the newly exposed section. Small streaks of blue light flickered out at her. “Ah! That tingles, really uncomfortable!”

She couldn’t let go of the sphere now, it was stuck to her hands by a static force. She tried waving it loose, but parts of the sphere’s metal interior detached and flew out through the gap she’d opened. Metal plates began folding themselves around her chest, arms and legs. Then the sphere itself shot towards her face.

She screamed as she was momentarily blinded. Then her vision returned as the sphere rotated. Finally, that annoying electric pain ceased. She looked down at herself. Her chest was covered in a breast plate, thick and impenetrable. Cylindrical sheets of metal clung to her shins like cast-iron leg warmers, and the metal that stretched down her arms stopped just before her knuckles, making it feel like she was wearing fingerless gloves. The sphere itself acted as a bulky helmet.

She was about to try and move around, when a visor dropped down from the sphere, knocking her glasses off her face. A heads-up display flashed in her eyes, but without her glasses it was too fuzzy to make out. “Damnit Ford, why do you never include instructions! Maybe Dipper’s journal has the answers. Gotta find him.”

With cheeks puffed in thought, she raised a hand to stroke her chin, but then felt a weird tingling in her fingers. She pointed the arm away from her face a static charge began building up around her hand. Wiggling her fingers, she tried to shake off the sensation. Suddenly a bolt of electricity shot out from her fingertips, scorching a dark patch into the wallpaper.

“Woah! I’m all sparky and electricly now!” Then she smelt the burnt wall. “Oof, gotta clean that up before Mom and Dad see it. And gotta get this armour off. Dipper’s journal!” She made her way awkwardly up to Dipper’s bedroom, the shin armour making her legs stiff.
The bedroom was empty. She checked Dipper’s desk for Journal 4, but it was absent. “Uh doy, he’s taken it with him like always. Great, now I’m stuck as Iron Mabel. Wait, the tracking bracelet, of course! That dork always carries it around with him.”

She rifled in his drawer and found the matching tracker. A map flared up, pinpointing his exact location. “Gotcha bro, time to go get you.” As she said that, she felt a rumbling in her legs. “Uh oh, not again.”

She barely had time to consider what was going on before she shot out of Dipper’s room headfirst, leaving a hole in the ceiling. “Ok, now I’m flying! Wahh!” Mabel zoomed off across Piedmont towards wherever her brother was.

“And then you just divide by X, and voila! Equation solved! Any questions?” Dipper surveyed the confused faces looking back at him. “Alright, I’ll go over it one more time! But this is the last.”

He was sat at a long table in the Piedmont High School library, a group of four other students listening to his every word. Dipper had recently started working as a tutor after school, a few afternoons every week. The students were all younger than him, most of them 7th graders, and with his excellent grades he’d been selected to help them out.

It reminded him of his nights spent helping Pacifica over video chats. Recently she’d mentioned learning how to sketch, she’d been thinking of trying out designing clothes, but didn’t think she had the skill. He wasn’t great at teaching that kind of thing though, he preferred to stick to subjects with logic and order, like math and history, than to dabble with creative subjects. Those had always been Mabel’s speciality anyway.

He wondered when he’d next have a chance to see Pacifica, her parents were laxer now, but still probably wouldn’t be happy if they found out who exactly she was visiting on her ‘trips down south’. It was a fine line they trod, the Northwests still had a longstanding grudge against him for the whole ‘party ghost’ incident.

He turned back to his new students, who all looked rather grumpy at him. “Dipper, can’t we have a break? We’ve been at this for ages.”

“It’s only been 20 minutes Simon! But fine,” he grumbled. “Five minute break, then we’re cracking this problem.”

Three of his students began chattering amongst themselves, resting their minds from the torment of calculus. Dipper pulled out Journal 4 and continued some notes he was making. The last student, the oldest of the bunch, started up a conversation with him. “So ‘Professor’ Dip, writing in your ‘storybook’ again?” She gave him a wink and he smiled back.

“Yes Alice, just writing all about a rock monster me and my sister found.”

“Are you gonna tell us about it!”

“Hmm, maybe, I do like telling ‘stories’.” The precocious Alice Miller was his favourite tutee at the moment. She was one of the only people in Piedmont who knew about the twin’s secret lives hunting the supernatural. An encounter with a piece of sentient software had brought her to their attention, and Mabel, true to her promise, had eagerly accepted the younger girl into her friend groups. She’d grown in confidence a lot over the last few months, her newfound friends helping her to overcome her old loneliness issues.
Since she knew about the Journal, he liked to joke around with the other students, passing it all off as ‘fairy stories’ he made up. His actual ability at writing fiction was pretty mediocre, again, Mabel was better at imagining stuff like that. It was nice though to share his experiences with someone else. He did the same with Pacifica when he could, sharing the some of the wonders he’d seen was a delight. It was also just a good way to give his students a break from the work.

“Shall I tell you more about the ‘bizarro brains’ or do you wanna hear a new tale about…” he flipped back a few pages in the journal, “‘the club-crashing beings from beyond’?” Alice chuckled beside him and he grinned at the enraptured kids that he was teaching. “Ok, so my sister Mabel, you’ve probably seen her around, loads of tattoos, bright sweaters, glasses…”

“She used to scare me!” One of the youngest students piped up.

“Don’t worry, she’s past the ‘scaring little kids’ phase now Thomas.” Dipper remembered Mabel in her ‘goth phase’. She had probably looked a bit creepy in all the black. “She’s totally harmless really, wouldn’t hurt a fly. Anyway, my sister wanted to help me and my friend Pacifica go out together.”

“Like on a ‘date’!?"

“Well, yeah, kinda.” He was amused by the shocked and grossed out faces he received. “So, my sister dragged the three of us to the club. I thought it was gonna be a terrible night… but then something incredible happened!”

Just as he said that, there was a massive crash from above. The people milling about in the library scattered and ran as plaster fell from the roof. Also descending from the roof was a silver robot, with bright streaks of flame around their feet slowing their descent. Dipper got to his feet and quickly placed himself between the robot and his tutees. “Stay back! I’ll handle this!”

He looked down at Alice, who nodded. “Ok kids, time to go, you heard Dipper!” She tried to shuffle the kids out, but one of the pointed a desperate finger at the robot.

“It’s the scary girl!”

Dipper looked closer at the robot, who had now come to a stop in the middle of the library. Students were huddled around, trying to catch a glimpse of whatever it was. He started seeing details he recognised. Her sweater, which seemed to be cerise pink and tangerine yellow with a moose in the middle, was torn one on arm, revealing some of her tattoos. There was a panicked and stressed look in her eye, but it was unmistakeably his sister. “Mabel?!”

She turned to look at him, and her face lightened up. “Oh, hi Dipper! Finally, I can get this suit off, it’s so tight. Plus, I feel like I wanna punch things. Why is that?”

Dipper slowly grabbed his journal off the table and flipped through the pages, looking for one that described what was going on with Mabel. He recognised the football-helmet shaped metal sphere she was wearing. “It’s an electro-defence sphere. Don’t tell me you opened it!?”

“Well how was I s’posed to know it was dangerous!? Urg, I just want it off!” She nearly screamed the last word, then punched down, leaving a large indentation in the carpeted floor.

“Calm down Mabel, the suit’s pumping you full of adrenaline and testosterone! I’ll get that thing off in no time!”

Mabel felt that same strange tingling in her fingertips. Then her arm started to move upwards, out of her control. “Uh-oh Dip, you shouldn’t have said that!” Through her visor, she saw a red outline
form around Dipper. “I think the suit thinks you’re a threat! Get down!”

Dipper dove to the floor as a bolt of lightning shot just over his head. He felt some of his hair standing on end from the static buzzing about. Alice was suddenly at his side, dragging him back to his feet and pulling him behind a bookcase. The other students were there too. “I told you guys to get out!” Protecting a gaggle of 13 year olds would make things extra tricky.

“Dipper, how do we save Mabel?!” Alice was tugging at the sleeve of his hoodie. It was strange, she was only 14, a year older than the next oldest student, but she was so much less fazed by all this chaos. He supposed that being thrust into danger at that age would give anyone some extra maturity.

“Ok, here’s what we’re gonna do-“ Paper exploded over them as Mabel blasted through the bookshelf. “We’re gonna run! That’s what we’re gonna do!” The group split in two, with the younger kids running one way and Dipper and Alice running the other. Mabel climbed through the gap she’d made in the bookcase and turned to Dipper with a forced smile that wouldn’t have looked out of place on a serial killer.

“I’m coming Dip! Let’s have some fun!” The suit’s chemicals were overtaking her muscles and impulses, increasing her aggression and making her attack against her will. She shot off another bolt of energy, but Dipper had already rounded a corner. All the other students that had been in here when Mabel arrived had left, it was just Dipper’s group of tutees now. Mabel halted in the library floor, shaking her head wildly. “No, stop! I don’t wanna hurt anyone!”

He rifled through the journal again, desperate to find a solution before Mabel ended up hurting someone. “Come on, there has to be an off-switch or something! Why is it Mabel’s trying to kill me so much recently!?” He found the right page again and tried to skim the information. “How to turn on, weapon systems, flight mode, weaknesses, ah! To switch off, simply- Eep!”

Mabel had karate chopped her way through another set of shelves. “Oops, sorry!” Books crashed down around him in a pile. She was standing above him now, arm outstretched. The air was fizzing with energy, any second now she’d let loose another blast.

Careening in from the side, Alice barrelled into Mabel, knocking her down and sending her shot wildly into the corner of the room. Alice tried to pull the metal sphere off Mabel’s head, but it seemed stuck on by a static force.

Mabel grabbed the girl and reversed her position, slamming her down on the library floor. “I’LL BLAST EVERY LAST FRECKLE OFF YOUR ADORABLE FACE!” Alice screamed and tried to writhe free of Mabel’s grasp. Mabel shook herself manically again, causing Alice to squirm loose. “Alice, run! I can’t… urgh, can’t stop it!” The suit began charging up again.

“Mabel, over here!” She turned her arm so that it was pointing directly at Dipper’s chest. “That’s right, I’m here, big ol’ target.”

Whilst Mabel was distracted by her brother, Alice punched out at Mabel’s face. The red visor shattered, and Mabel stumbled around blindly. “Dipper, what now?”

“Gimme a sec Alice, need to build up a charge.” He rubbed his feet back and forth furiously over the carpeted floor. “Boy I hope this works!” He reached out a finger and tapped on Mabel’s forehead.

Like a cork from a champagne bottle, the helmet shot off of her head and rattled away. Mabel fell forwards, but he managed to catch her. The other metal parts attached to her body fell uselessly
He hefted Mabel upright, and she blinked uneasily a few times. “Dipper, is that you? It’s too fuzzy without my glasses.”

“Yeah, it’s me sis. You’re ok now.”

Mabel’s eyes suddenly went wide with fear. “Is Alice ok!? Did I hurt anyone else!? Oh jeez, where even are we.” Her eyes settled on the rows of shelves. “The school library! What the heck were you doing here at this hour?”

“I’ve been acting as a tutor for some of the kids.”

“Ugh, trust you to want to do extra school work.”

With some trepidation Alice came over to Mabel. “Are you ok now? Not gonna ‘shoot off my freckles’ or something?”

“Huh, did I say that?” Mabel seemed rather out of it at the moment.

Dipper surveyed the damage around the library. Several shelves demolished and books destroyed, not to mention the hole in the roof. At least the armour seemed to be offline now, and the sphere was sparking and fizzing. What a waste. He saw his other students moving out from behind some of the debris from the fight. “Woah, are you guys ok?”

He realised that with all the destruction they’d witnessed, it would be near-impossible to sweep this all under the rug. He inwardly groaned at the prospect of yet more people learning about his secrets. If word of it got out and found its way to his parents…

“That. Was. Awesome!”

“Wait, what?” One of his tutees, Thomas, had blurted out that sentence and the other two kids were nodding along.

“Those special effects were amazing! It was like one of your stories came to life!”

Dipper played along, nodding exaggeratedly. “Yeah! Right! Effects. Aren’t these two ladies great actors, round of applause to Mabel and Alice!”

He half-heartedly clapped, but the kids whooped and cheered. Mabel rubbed her temples and groaned, but Alice blushed at all the attention. With luck, he could convince the kids that this had indeed all been an elaborate light show. As for the damage, maybe he could pass it off as a juvenile prank gone wrong? He gathered up the scattered pieces of metal to take home and melt down later.

As he pulled Mabel towards the exit, and she gave little resistance, he passed Alice and said a farewell. “See ya round Alice. I should bring you on one of our Mystery Hunts someday, you can certainly handle yourself in a pinch.” She beamed brightly and led the other kids out of the library.

“My head is like buzzing Dip. So weird, it’s like a headache and a sugar rush had a baby.”

“Probably just latent after-effects of all the electricity and adrenaline. You’ll be alright tomorrow. My defence-sphere on the other hand…” He looked sadly down at the pile of jumbled metal.
When the sphere had short-circuited, it became unsalvageable. He doubted that Ford could find him another one at short notice.

Mabel was now happily looking over her own parcel, Stan’s overpriced curios from abroad always made her overjoyed. Dipper noticed a hint of distance in her eyes though, like she wasn’t quite focusing on the objects. “You ok Mabel?”

She seemed shaken out of her reverie. “Huh? Oh, just… thinking, that’s all.”

“About? We aren’t psychic for real, you know. I mean twins and all, but still.”

This elicited a small chuckle from his sister. “My head’s just in a weird space right now. Been through a lot recently. I’m thinking about getting a fresh perspective.”

“What do you mean by that?” He had to agree with her having gone through a lot recently, with her drug trip with the Rosettas and this recent sphere thing, not to mention the lingering memories of the Ursus event.

“Thinking about Stan and Ford. It just makes me wanna… get my thoughts in order.” She could tell that Dipper didn’t really understand her. His mind was very logical most of the time, he had some social anxiety and paranoia, but he knew himself well enough. Mabel felt like she was re-defining herself, and she wanted somewhere she could get away to and properly sort that out.

She had one place in mind in particular, a place that held a lot of deep memories. The next time Dipper had a busy weekend, she’d take the opportunity and go there in person. Maybe then she could figure out who she wanted to be.

Chapter End Notes

Before settling on the concept for this chapter, I attempted a draft of one set around a school play. In the end, I scrapped the 400 or so words I wrote, since I couldn’t get the main motivation to work right, and the prose I wrote felt too stilted.

As a replacement, this chapter is more satisfactory to me, though I do feel it’s one of my weaker writings so far, was hard to get the middle to line up well with the opening and ending. At least it does set up some things further down the line, so it’s not all bad.
Catch of the Day

Chapter Notes

This was the first chapter of Season 2 to be fully written, since it was very standalone. I followed with writing the next 3 chapters before circling back to the opening two-parter.

Dipper groaned as he took in the sight in front of him. Spread out before him was a lake, surrounded by wooded banks of trees on all sides. The sky overhead was grey, no hint of sunlight. It was a gloomy place for a day out, and the lack of any other tourists in the parking lot reaffirmed that opinion.

“Dad, do we really have to do this? Can’t we like, go watch a movie or something?”

His father stepped out of the car, hefting a fishing pole in one arm. “Now Dipper, a bit of fishing never hurt anyone. I remember when Uncle Stan used to take me on his trips to the lake. I thought you enjoyed your trip to the lake too?” Like the twins, Mr Pines had spent several summers in his youth staying with Grunkle Stan at the Shack. Thanks to not having a handy journal, he’d managed to stay blissfully unaware of anything strange and unusual going on in Gravity Falls.

Dipper thought back to his first day out at Lake Gravity Falls, which had mostly been spent in pursuit of a giant mechanical sea creature. Even when they had gone fishing with Stan, it had been more about the company and friendship than anything about fish. But his father seemed resolved to do this.

It had come seemingly out of nowhere. One minute Dipper had been reading *The Paranoia Code 2: Divinity & Devilry* in bed, when Dad insisted that the two of them would have a family bonding session. Mabel had already packed up and left in the pickup, going away to visit a friend for the weekend, having been told of Dad’s plan in advance.

Mom had just agreed with Dad. “It’ll be good for you Dipper, you don’t want to waste away indoors all the time.” Partly he suspected that she just wanted someone to keep an eye on Dipper for one weekend, after so many mysterious trips out following supernatural rumours.

Now Dipper would have to put up with Dad’s attempts to be ‘one with nature’. This weird desire cropped up every few weeks. Mr Pines worked for an IT firm in the San Francisco financial district (a stone’s throw away from the old Polaris Research Institute’s abandoned tower). His job was very computer focused, leaving him little time to appreciate the ‘great outdoors’, so every now and again he’d drag one of the twins or Mom out to do some practical nature activity. The last time Dipper had been dragged out he’d been forced to help out building wooden cabins with the boy scouts. His arms had been so sore that night that he hadn’t even been able to sleep.

Dad walked over the still water, pulling his inflatable dinghy out behind him. He knelt down and started the automatic pump. “Here, put this on son.” He handed over a life jacket, which Dipper shrugged over his shoulders.

“Can’t we just go for a walk round the lake? I like walking.” He tried to vigorously nod his head and smile, but his father was having none of it.
He looked up with a stern expression. Dad’s bushy eyebrows and squared jaw were very different from the curving face of his son. He resembled his grandfather Filbrick more than anyone else in the family. “Now Dipper, you know we’ve been missing out on days like today. You’ve had your head stuck in those books of yours, it’s about time you got some fresh air.

Dipper inwardly tensed slightly. Dad didn’t know the true nature of his journal, the one that was currently sat in his hoodie pocket. He’d always had to be careful not to leave it lying around when at home. “But fishing’s so boring. You just sit there waiting for something to happen for hours. I don’t even like eating fish.” In actual fact, both Dipper and Mabel had been committed vegetarians for the last few months. Mabel because of her love for all living things, and Dipper simply because his experiences with so many bizarre life-forms gave him a respect for animals (his encounters with talking animals in particular made him wary of meat).

He shook his head, resigning himself for the day ahead. Once the boat was inflated, the two of them pushed it out into the water and got in. Dad rowed out to the centre of the lake. They had a prime choice of anywhere in the water, since no-one else was out here today. “This looks like a good spot. I’m sure we’ll have a whale of a time.” Ah, the fishing puns at last. Dipper mentally prepared himself for the bevy of further puns to come. Dad slowed the boat, then prepared his line and tackle. Dipper reluctantly set his own line into the water. “Isn’t this the life Dip? No walls out here in nature. Just the free open sky.”

His words came back to bite him, as a trickle of rain began falling from above. Dipper slouched and moaned again. “Oh great, today’s gonna be so much fun.”

The rain turned into a heavy downpour. Both Pines hastily put rain ponchos over themselves. Dipper also had Wendy’s lumberjack hat pulled over his head. Dad was insistent that they wait it out, no small shower was gonna get in the way of his plans. It was a familiar thing for Dipper, his father was always very punctual and detailed in his plans, so when anything went wrong he’d just try to adapt, no matter how bleak the situation. The sat back to back in the small boat, both of them not saying much.

Neither of them had picked up so much as a tug from their lines, so Dipper had propped his rod up and pulled out Journal 4. Better to go over old notes than be bored out of his skull. Sat with his back to his father, he read over a section chronicling his Road Trip with the girls. He’d copied most of the important notes from Journal 9 and added an outline of their own experience. Drawn over what had once been a vague fog was a hastily added addition from Mabel in bright pink crayon, showing what she’d seen that night and explaining about the Ghost Procession that he’d slept through. He tried to ignore the rain and focus on the text. He was lucky that unlike Mabel he still didn’t require glasses, they’d have been covered by water on a day like this.

Unfortunately, his attempt to be studious was interrupted by a cough from behind. “So, how about this weather eh? Pretty miserable if I do say myself.” Dad was being crashingly unsubtle in his attempts to spark some kind of conversation. The fact of the matter was just that Dipper had never had a very close bond to his dad, a bond that had lessened even more after his many trips to Gravity Falls. They had very little in common to talk about, Dipper knowing nothing about computers or programming.

He sighed, then half-heartedly tried to say something. “Yeah, it’s… like looking through a waterfall?” There was a grunt of agreement, then another awkward silence.

“Dipper, has your mother asked you about your grades recently?” Here it was at last, Dipper knew it would be coming. The last few months had been a tumultuous time for him. Finally expressing
his feelings for Pacifica, Mabel’s problematic emotions and secrets, stopping world-ending catastrophes. But the core reason for his slacking in school was staring him in the face. He’d always kept notes of course, but ever since he’d resolved to resume Mystery Hunting in the school term he’d been mildly obsessed recording everything, just as Grunkle Ford had done. He knew he could do a lot of his homework in his sleep but trying to focus on school work was always tricky when he had such intriguing hobbies to explore. He needed Mabel’s ability to multitask.

“Yeah Dad, Mom let me know. I promised her I’d apply myself more. I know it’s important.”

His father nodded, satisfied with the answer. “That’s good son, these years of your life are so crucial for your whole future.”

“Uh huh.”

“You don’t want to miss out on this part of your life, you have to be out there living it.”

“Sure sure.”

Dad let out a grunt, Dipper’s coy attempts to drop the subject were clear. He smiled wryly and tried a new topic. “How’s that girl of yours doing?”

Dipper blushed and spoke with a higher pitch than usual. “Can we not talk about that?” He pulled his hat down further over his face.

“Oh, come on son, I’m just curious. She’s a good kid that Pacifica, if a little snooty. It’s amazing you were able to… well.”

“Able to what?”

“Well, you’re hardly in her league.” Dad’s brutal honesty made him sink lower in the boat. “What I mean to say is that you’re very different, she’s so outgoing and confident.”

“That’s why I like her, Dad. Now let’s please talk about anything else!” He tried to focus on the journal again, but Dad kept talking.

“Just remember though, she’s not the only fish in the sea.” He chuckled at his own joke and nudged Dipper’s back.

“Ugh, that was worse than Mabel, Dad.”

“Hey, I make fish puns just for the Halibut! Get it?” Dipper groaned again at the joke and tried to refocus on his own line. “Speaking of Mabel… how’s her relationships going?”

Dipper clutched the pole tighter. “What do ya mean? Mabel isn’t going out with anyone.”

“Oh c’mon son, I’m not blind and deaf. Your mother might have missed the signs, but not me. Your sister’s about as good at hiding things as I am at rewriting long stretches of code. It only took us three days to find out about the tattoos, remember?” Dipper really didn’t relish talking about Mabel’s romantic life, especially given just how many partners she got through. Dad didn’t need to know all the gritty details.

“Mabel is… single right now.”

“Right now?”

“Yeah. At the moment.” Thankfully that seemed enough, and Dad stopped talking. Dipper re-cast
his line, a fruitless gesture to distract himself and try and be more attractive to any fish. The ripples from his cast were quickly drowned out by the heavy droplets cascading down from above.

However, he suddenly felt resistance from the line. He’d finally lured something with his bait. Flustered, he tried to slowly reel it in. The line went rigidly in the opposite direction, so he applied more force. Then, the line went slack. He shrugged, guessing that was the last action he’d see all day.

Then the boat rocked. Something beneath the water had just bumped them. That something must have been pretty big. “Woah, what was that?” Dad turned around; the bump had clipped Dipper’s side of the boat. “Did you see the fish?”

“No, I thought I’d caught something, but it got away.” Then there was another loud thump, and the boat shook again.

“Holy mackerel, that’s a big one! I think it’s time for my special ingredient!” He reached into his poncho, removing a small pink cake. “Your sister made this for me, drives fish wild I tell you!”

He hooked the cake on and hastily threw his line out to catch the large creature. Dipper saw a shadowy shape moving under the rippling surface. It was hard to focus on with all the rain, but he distinctly noticed that it was definitely not a fish. There were several long tentacles flowing behind the main body of whatever it was. And it was massive, some 5 feet across.

“Dad, I think you should pull in your line! Like, now!” Dad didn’t seem to hear him and was eagerly awaiting another pass from the creature. Their boat rocked again as it passed beneath them. Dad’s line went taut, and he ferociously began winding it in.

“Sweet Moses! Woah, she’s a monster!” Dad said this about most fish he caught, regardless of size. This time Dipper didn’t doubt him though. He was worried about this thing and didn’t want Dad getting hurt. He threw his arms around him to pull him and the line back. “Get off Dipper, you’re ruining my form! Fishing, ughh, is a delicate, ughh, art!” The hooked creature was proving very resistant to being pulled in.

Dipper was started to worry now, as a flailing tentacle broke the surface. If this thing really was dangerous, then he didn’t want his Dad getting hurt, or worse, finding out about his knowledge of creatures like this. He pulled harder on his father, trying to get him to snap the line. “You don’t know the first thing about fishing! You spend all day at a desk!”

“It’s the principle of the thing son! I’m not going to lose this one.” Another tentacle flew up, and Dipper tried loosening his grip instead.

“If you want it so bad, then you can have it!” He let Dad go, and the two of them fell apart. The fishing pole suddenly flew out of Dad’s hands, splashing down into the lake. Dad just sat there for a moment, staring down at the water without saying a word.

Dipper didn’t know how his father was going to react, so didn’t say anything. Eventually Dad huffed. “Let’s row back to shore.” Dipper wiped his sweat off his birthmark, glad to be getting away from the sea monster.

The wind picked up as they rowed towards shore, and they ended up beaching halfway up the lake amongst the trees. Dad resolved to recover the boat on a drier occasion. For now, they’d have to trek back through the mud to get to the car. Dad wasn’t saying much, clearly annoyed by the loss of his pole and catch. Dipper just trudged along besides him, staring down at the mud. It was quite a quagmire to traverse, but at least the trees provided some cover from the unceasing rain.
He finally piped up to his father. “I’m sorry Dad, about the fishing rod. I didn’t mean for it to go over, I was just worried it was gonna pull you in.”

There was a heavy sigh from up ahead. “I just wanted to have a day out with my son, was that so much to ask? Even when we’re alone in a boat you don’t want to talk to me.”

Dipper knew he was right. He didn’t want to drift away from his father, but he knew that with all the secrets he was keeping they could never have a truly honest relationship. “It’s just… I don’t know the first thing about your job, and you don’t know anything about what I do in my spare time…” He felt himself coming close to letting something slip about the paranormal. “We’re just two different people Dad.”

Dad grunted again, clearly understanding that Dipper was right. Maybe he should have tried connecting with him by doing something Dipper liked, instead of something he was trying to like.

A rustling of the branches above Dipper caught his attention. He watched as something darted through the canopy, it was glistening with water. He thought he spied several noodly appendages. “Uh oh. Dad, I think we should go faster, don’t wanna catch a cold out here y’know!”

He started shoving Dad, trying to get him to move faster through the mud. “Steady on Dip, it’s slow going. Plus I thought we were talking about stuff.” Another flash from the trees.

“HeyDadstayhereI’llbebackinasecond!” Dipper babbled wildly and ran off down a hill, following the creature. He lost sight of Dad, then tried to spot the slippery beast jumping about. He whipped out his heat-vision scanner goggles and picked up the trace of the creature, hanging high up from the trees, its tentacles merging with the branches. It dropped down, limbs splayed, and wriggled in the mud. It raised up to reveal a single pale green eye. Dipper and the creature both stared at the other, studying their new discoveries.

Dipper’s eyes widened, as he realised that he recognised this creature. The slimy mass of tentacles lying in the mud was Cycloptopus, a one-eye cephalopod that he’d seen in Gravity Falls. He was amazed to see it so far south, these things usually stuck to the northern parts of Oregon. Ford had written about them in Journal 2, apparently they were considered somewhat of a delicacy when made into sushi. Though given Dipper’s dietary choices, he wasn’t about to find that out for himself anytime soon.

He tried to approach the creature slowly, wondering if he could just get it to go away. It was a much bigger specimen than the one he’d encountered before. “I’m not gonna bite, it’s ok.” He raised his arms in a gesture of surrender.

The eye staring up at him swiftly transitioned then, splitting open to reveal an array of sharp teeth. It seemed that the creature intended to bite him. The Cycloptopus hissed up at him menacingly. Dipper stepped back but slipped in the mud. Losing his balance, he fell onto his behind. He pulled out Journal 4, sheltering it from the rain as best he could. Ford had dictated chunks of Journal 1 & 2 from memory for Dipper to make notes from, since there were no photocopies of the pages. There wasn’t a clear weakness, all he had written down was to watch out for the suction cups and teeth, followed by cooking instructions.

“Woah! That’s a gnarly looking thing.” Dad had ambled through the trees to find Dipper lying on his backside in the mud. He was rather taken aback by the tensed up ball of tentacles opposite him. Dipper’s heart sunk, there was no going back now, Dad had seen the creature. Immediately he thought that this was it, the journal’s secrets would be found out, he’d be barred from ever leaving the house again, he’d never go on another Mystery Hunt. But Dad just kept staring at the creature, a look of bemused curiosity on his face. His eyebrows had lifted in surprise, so Dipper could
actually see his eyes for once.

“Stay back Dad, it's dangerous!” He clumsily got upright, then tried to place himself between them.

“Was that the thing I tried to catch? Wow, what a find that woulda been.” He was taking this dangerous cryptid rather lightly. The Cycloptopus then lashed out, leaping towards Dipper. He covered his face with his hands, anticipating the clench of jaws around his arms.

He felt nothing though and looked up. The Cycloptopus was hanging on the edge of the spare fishing pole, as his Dad examined the beast. “Well, whaddya know.” He casually rotated the pole, watching the creature readjust to stay upright. It gnawed on the end of the pole, lightly chewing the tip.

Dipper just stood there dumbfounded. His dad had just saved him from being viciously attacked and was now treating a deadly monster as a mindless curio. “How are you doing that?”

“Doing what?” As far as Dad was concerned, this was just a particularly aggressive catch of the day. He reached beneath his poncho and tossed one of Mabel’s pink cakes towards the squid. The Cycloptopus eagerly leapt off the rod into the underbrush where the cake had fallen. It started happily nibbling the edges. Dipper watched, fascinated. “Told you it drives 'em wild, they can’t resist. I think it’s all the sugar Mabel puts in them, I’m amazed that she can just wolf them down.”

His dad knelt down besides the creature. “Now, this is only gonna hurt for a second.” Dipper noticed a dark crimson stain on one the tentacles, and something embedded in the leathery skin. It was a fishhook, must have been the one Dad had latched onto with. He watched as Dad pulled the hook out with a swift motion. The Cycloptopus hissed, but then went back to contentedly eating. “See, poor thing was just in pain, probably didn’t even wanna hurt you son.”

The casual way he was taking this wasn’t what Dipper had expected. Maybe this wasn’t going to end so badly. Deciding to run with this, Dipper nodded along with his father. “Yeah, what a crazy fish, right? Probably came upriver from the sea or something. Guess we should leave it be.” He gestured towards the path back to the car, but Dad didn’t budge. Instead, he crept over the squid with another cake in hand.

Dipper’s heart started beating fast again as he watched the Cycloptopus jump up on his father’s arm. Then it simply perched there like a falcon, greedily consuming Mabel’s sugary treat. “See, harmless little thing.” It hung there on his arm for a moment, but then hopped off, clutching half the cake still in its tentacle. Dad made to walk after it, and Dipper had no choice but to follow along.

Dad cleared some branches that the creature had passed through, showing a small clearing ahead. “Well, take a look see at that.” Dipper panned around the scene, there were two more Cycloptopuses writhing in the clearing, as well as a clutch of eggs in a small nest. The first ‘fish’ gave the remains of the cake to his fellow squids, who ate heartily.

Not wanting to miss this rare opportunity of study, Dipper frantically pulled out his journal, and started writing down details about the creature. “Is now really the time for writing in your diary Dip? It’ll get ruined in this rain.” Dipper sheepishly closed the book.

“Sorry, it’s just kinda awesome. I’ve never seen any so far away… I mean, I’ve never seen anything like this before. Just wanna keep a record, you know?”

He saw his father slowly nod. “Like Mabel and her scrapbooks.”
“Yeah, just like that! Only more ‘scientific’.” The creatures wriggled and nibbled at the cake in the clearing, their attention was thankfully not on the two humans watching. “Come on, I think we should leave them alone now.”

Dad pursed his lips and nodded again. “Aye, let’s leave nature be.” As they made to leave, the first Cycloptopus jumped back on Dad’s arm. He flexed it to try and shake it off. “Go on, shoo. No more cakes for you. This is your plaice after all”. Dipper chuckled quietly at another weak pun. The Cycloptopus wriggled for a moment, but then crawled off. It darted away on its suction cups, looking back with its eye at them one last time, before disappearing into the undergrowth.

Making their way back to the car, Dipper was thankful that none of the mud had gotten under his poncho, and most was washing off in the rain anyway. He wanted to say something to his Dad about the creature encounter, it had been such a strange experience. Dad hadn’t panicked or been particularly startled by the squid-like beast, he’d just taken it in his stride. The finally emerged back at the parking lot and Dad started fishing in his pocket for his keys.

Dipper saw a chance to say something before the drive home. “Thanks for saving me, Dad, from the, uh, ‘fish’. Sorry if today wasn’t everything you wanted.”

“That’s alright son. I just don’t want to miss out on days like this, even if you didn’t have fun, it still means a lot just to do stuff with you. I hope your interest in me doesn’t start to flounder.” He gave an exaggerated wink, and this time Dipper couldn’t help but laugh out loud for real.
10 hours of driving were finally over for Mabel. She’d committed to the journey when she’d found out that Dipper would be busy with Dad this weekend. Deciding she didn’t want to chill about at home with Mom, she came up with a plan to visit Gravity Falls. She knew that all that journeying wasn’t really worth it for one weekend, with all the travel time she’d barely be spending any actual time there. But she wanted to see someone in particular, to help her out and give her a gift.

Passing the familiar pine trees gave an odd sensation. She wasn’t used to driving these roads herself, more used to long bus rides with Dipper. It was weird knowing that her Great Uncles wouldn’t be in Gravity Falls, the last they’d heard Stan and Ford were investigating claims of ‘Dwarf’ sightings in New Zealand. They wouldn’t be back until the next summer.

It was unusual too for her to be here outside of summer, strange to see all the slight differences a new season brought. Some of the trees still seemed bare from the Winter months, and the first tufts of Spring flowers were starting to blossom. She idly wondered if the town was ‘weird’ all year round, or was that seasonal too? Dipper would probably know; it would be just like him to have been mapping ‘weirdness’ levels in his spare time.

She cruised into the main street of the town, the familiar store fronts bringing back memories. There were few signs of tourist activity, March wasn’t really known for that sort of thing.

She’d have loved to catch up with Candy and Grenda but knew that there wasn’t really time today to see if they were in town and available. Her plan for the night was to stay at the Mystery Shack with Soos and Melody. She had one person she was here to see first. Checking the address one last time, she drove through the main street to reach the home of the Northwest family.

The house was modern, a squat rectangular building, with the upper floor clad in wooden panels and the lower half a grey material. Situated in the middle of town, it stood out amongst all the older wooden buildings. It was a far cry from the old Northwest mansion, now occupied by Old Man McGucket’s mech workshops.

The house was surrounded by a fenced garden, but Mabel hopped over the outer wall with ease. Deciding to be tactful for once, she rang the doorbell. A few moments later, it was answered by a tall moustached man in a business suit. Preston Northwest, patriarch of the family fortune, looked witheringly down at her, his body still half hidden behind the door. “Yes?”

“Heya Preston, how you doin’?!” She grinned wildly, affecting an air of breezy confidence.

Preston looked left and right before answering. “Do I know you?” The brightly dressed stranger on his doorstep was wearing a blue sweater with a happy sun and clouds stitched on the front. She had
a backpack slung over one arm, affecting a laid-back stance. A pair of eyes stared up at him from behind glass, her pupils looking altogether too large due to the refraction.

Mabel let out a rather forced laughed. “Know me? Of course you know me! I’m Mabel P- just Mabel, yeah, that’s right, Mabel!” She bit down on her tongue so that she didn’t let her surname loose again. “I was around during all the ‘weirdness’ a few years back? Twice saviour of the universe? I make sweaters?” He sceptically continued to stare at her with a raised eyebrow. “Anyway P, I’m here to see Pacifica!”

His body tensed up at this. “I’m afraid she’s not available today, she’s studying.”

She waved her arm nonchalantly and blew a raspberry. “Pfft, I’m sure she has time to see her bestest friend.”

“Uh huh, really. She’s never mentioned you before.” He made to close the door, but a voice came out from within the house.

“Dad, who is it?” He rolled his eyes and sighed, before turning to address the voice.

“No-one dear, just a peasant trying to sell something I’m sure.”

Mabel’s brow furrowed at this perceived insult, and she crossed her arms. Before Preston could shut the door entirely, a figure came down the stairs behind him. “Mabel?!” A confused Pacifica came to the door and widened it back open.

“You know this… weirdo?” He half whispered the last word, but Mabel could tell she was meant to hear it as well.

“She’s my friend, Dad. She, uh, goes to my school.” Preston looked over Mabel again, seriously doubting that this girl could possibly fit into a prestigious academy.

Pacifica hurriedly glanced outside, checking that Mabel was alone. “What are you doing here?”

“I’ll explain later sis!” Mabel took this opportunity to slide past Preston into the entry hall. “Wow, plush place you’ve got here. Looks like garbage on the outside, but it’s pretty nice on the inside. Am I sensing a pattern?” She tapped her foot in mock study as she examined the room.

Pacifica awkwardly looked at her father, who was clearly disapproving of his new house guest. “I’ll, uh, take Mabel upstairs, so she doesn’t mess up anything down here.” She tried to show a smile, but it was plainly artificial. Grabbing Mabel by the collar of her sweater, she pulled her up the stairs. Mabel gave a small yelp but allowed herself to be dragged around.

They reached Pacifica’s bedroom, and Mabel couldn’t help but gawk. Even though the Northiests had lost a considerable fortune in the aftermath of 5 years ago, they were still possessed of considerable means. Pacifica’s bedroom was evidence enough of this. The walls were painted a stark white and taking up most of the room was a massive king-size four poster bed. It was supported by spiralling wooden columns that Mabel couldn’t resist running a hand over. On the opposite side of the room there were a pair of glass doors that lead to a balcony. To her left was a desk, on which was setup a number of expensive looking machines. This was Pacifica’s gaming rig, one of the few vices that her parents didn’t restrict her from. All in all, the room must have been bigger than both her and Dipper’s bedrooms combined.

“Wow, rich people really know how to live.” She continued to stare around the room as Pacifica sat down heavily in her desk chair, crossing her legs. There was a half confused, half irritated look on her face, which Mabel eventually noticed. “What’s wrong Paz?”
“Mabel, what are you doing here? My parents restrict my freedoms enough as it is, you think they’ll be happy with some person off the street coming in here and distracting me?”

“Hey, at least I’m not Dipper, amirite.” She winked, but Pacifica just blushed. “I mean, if he were here, they’d probably lock you up for good!”

She said this casually, but Pacifica didn’t see what was so funny about this. In a hoarse whisper she responded. “Exactly, if they ever found out about Mason, my life would be over!” She leaned back into the spacious chair. “Where is he anyway?”

“Dad took him on some boring fishing trip, wanted to ‘bond’ with him or some junk. Since he’s not around to take me on an adventure, I decided I’d have some time to myself.”

“Some time, like a 10 hour drive?!)

She dismissively waved a hand. “Ah, it’s fine, I had so much coffee last night. Leaving at midnight was pretty rough though. Definitely gonna have to rest it off in the Shack tonight.” Mabel was looking forwards to sleeping in the old attic, although it would the first time she’d be staying there sans Dipper. Seeing Soos and Melody would be an added bonus too.

Pacifica was still confused. “So why’d you come here? You’d really come all the way just for me?”

“Oh yeah, I nearly forgot.” She slapped her forehead, then spoke with mock seriousness. “I was too dazzled by the wonders of this magnificent palace.” Slipping the backpack off, she pulled another chair over and sat down beside Pacifica’s desk. The backpack itself was covered in ‘Mabelisms’, flashy stickers and badges from all over. She pulled out a long metal case from the bag and passed it to Pacifica. She unclipped the lid and found a collection of coloured pencils within.

“Mabel, is this for… drawing?”

Still rummaging in the bag, Mabel replied. “Yep, drawing, sketching, doodling when you’re bored. Dipper told me that you mentioned you wished you could draw better last time you spoke, so Mabel’s here to be your teacher!”

Pacifica shuddered slightly at the thought of Mabel trying to teach anyone. “You just came all the way up to Oregon to teach me to draw?”

“Oh of course! That’s what friends are for.” Momentarily taken aback, Pacifica then couldn’t resist bringing Mabel into a hug. “Aw, it’s fine Paz. Anytime.” They sat there in each other’s arms for longer than Pacifica cared for.

“Um, Mabel? I think that’s enough hugging.”

Mabel released her from the grip. “Sure thing partner!” She shot off some air guns. “Ooh, that reminds me, I have something else for you.” Mabel reached into the backpack and withdrew a book of some kind. Pacifica looked over, but paled when she saw the pink cover. Right in the centre was a golden llama.

“Oh my god, is Merak back, are the Council trying to end the world again?! We’ve gotta warn Mason, and go get backup, do you have any weapons, what are we gonna do, this is-”

She was getting all flustered, so Mabel grabbed her shoulders and shook her roughly back and forth. “Paaaaciiiiiiiiiiicaaaaa!” Pacifica stopped talking, and just sat there with her mouth flopping open. Mabel had a look of concern on her face, but then rolled her eyes. “Calm down sister!
There’s no future people running about. This is the new version.” She opened the book up to the middle, showing that the pages were all blank. “I made it for you, so you could have somewhere private to write down your thoughts or use the space for making sketches.”

Pacifica shakily took the journal, then re-composed herself. “Oh. Well. Thank you Mabel.” She rubbed her hand across the cover. It was a quality piece of work. As she was coming down from her panicked state and admiring the cover, she felt a sudden punch in her arm. “Hey!”

Mabel was smiling at her with a cheeky grin. “Sorry sis, that was hilarious, you overreacted like crazy!”

Pacifica crossed her arms and took a stern expression. “Well next time don’t frighten me like that.” Her expression then softened. “But thanks Mabel, this book is really cool.”

Mabel proudly beamed at her, giving people gifts and seeing their reactions was one of her favourite things. “So, I guess we should start by you showing me what you’ve done so far.”

Pacifica looked away. “Do we really have to? Can’t we just start from scratch?”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

Pacifica shrugged and opened a desk drawer. “If you say so.” She passed Mabel some sheets of paper. Most of the sketches were attempts at capturing various pieces of fashion, many clearly drawn based off designs she’d seen in magazines. For the most part, the clothes themselves looked fine, neat straight lines and even some decent shading. But as soon as the clothes ended and the faces of the people wearing them began… “Yeesh, these are terrifyi… I mean so abstract and daring.”

Pacifica raised an eyebrow. “Mabel, I know they’re crap. I just can’t get faces right, they always come out terribly.”

“Well, that’s where we need to start then, how to draw people and not have them turn out as nightmare fuel!”

For the next hour or two, Mabel tried fruitlessly to give Pacifica a tutorial in how to sketch human faces and bodies convincingly. Her own art style tended towards the ‘cartoony’, less detailed than Dipper’s style for instance. One area she was good at though was faces, capturing the many emotional details, regardless of how subtle.

Unfortunately, no matter how hard they tried, Pacifica simply could not emulate Mabel’s instructions. At the end of their first session, all they had was a page of unrecognisable scribbles. Pacifica threw down her pen in frustration. “Ugh, this is so hard! It’s worse than when Mason tries to teach me math! I’ll never be able to draw like you!”

Mabel held onto her arm. “You’re good with the clothes, and that llama you drew looked alright. If you stick with stuff like landscapes and buildings you’d be fine, maybe try architecture designs, no people involved. Or you could try construction lines on the faces, those used to help me out, though they take longer. You just gotta have patience Paz, that’s the number one rule of creativity.”

She slumped into a hand. “Well I’m not a very patient person. I was always taught that I could get whatever I wanted the moment I wanted it. I snap my fingers and whatever I desire would be provided. I’m no good at taking my time.” She fiddled with her lucky pink hair tie on her wrist,
trying to calm herself. A sudden wild look appeared in her eyes. “Hey, I don’t suppose you know any ‘magic’ ways to teach me to draw?”

Mabel tried to look away. “But that’s cheating, you have to develop your own art style.”

She took a commanding pose and stared at her friend. “Mabel, I’m rich. Like your brother says, I already cheat at life.” Mabel tried to steel herself but was cracking easily under the pressure. “Mabel. Mabel!”

“Oh, ok!” She threw up her arms in defeat, then reached into her backpack. “Maybe we could try this.” She brought out a wooden paintbrush. “It’s my magic paintbrush, you can go inside paintings and make them super detailed.” She passed it over to Pacifica, who examined it closely.

“That’s perfect then, no need to keep practicing anymore, we can just go in and make the art from the inside out.” She was eagerly grinning now, but Mabel felt hesitant.

“I don’t know if it’ll be that easy. But if you wanna try it, we might as well have a go.” She pulled up the sleeves of her sweater to keep from getting paint on them, revealing her assortment of tattoos.

Pacifica had forgotten about Mabel’s ‘goth styling’ from a few months prior. Looking down at the colourful patterns, she spotted something she didn’t recognise, a flash of gold. “Hey, is that a new one?”

Mabel, who was putting her long hair up in a ponytail, briefly looked down at her arm. “Oh yeah, got this right after the whole, uh… ‘future journal’ incident.” She raised her arm so Pacifica could get a better look. It was a small golden pine tree. “It’s sort of an in-joke, Dipper has that Pine Tree book, so I thought I’d get a matching symbol too, since we’re twins an’ all. Anyway, let’s do this then.” She grabbed a sheet of clear paper and used the paintbrush to draw a small doorway.

Pacifica made sure to lock her bedroom door, although she knew her parents had a spare key, before Mabel came over and took her hand. She led the two of them to the paper. Then she took a deep breath and dived towards the painted doorway. Pacifica felt a suction over body, then a falling sensation. The door on the page opened, and they fell through the frame.

Mabel landed on her feet, but Pacifica sprawled on her chest. Pulled up by Mabel, she looked around at their new surroundings. It was a white void of nothing. Behind them was the door, floating in the air. She realised that they were now on the blank sheet of paper. She looked over to Mabel and reached out a hand. “Gimme the brush then. Let’s do this quickly, I don’t want Mom or Dad walking in and finding us here.”

Mabel readjusted her glasses after the landing, then slowly passed the brush over. “Ok, but you have to be careful. With enough time, you can paint anything in here.”

“How’s it work then, do you just…” Pacifica waved the brush in the air in front of her. A swathe of bright blue suddenly sprung up against the white. “Woah, so cool.” She waved it in another direction. This time a splotch of green appeared on the ground.

“Looks like you’ve got the basics down.” Mabel stretched out and sat cross-legged beside the green patch. She sniffed out. “Ah, don’t you just love the smell of fresh paint? The promise of raw creativity.”

Pacifica wasn’t listening, instead she was creating more blobs of colour. “So how do I make more than just random bits of colour, I wanna draw a person.”
“I’m not sure that’s a great idea, you have to start small, maybe try drawing a room first, somewhere you recognise and can recreate well.”

Pacifica huffed at her. “Come on Mabel, this was supposed to speed up my training, I wanna try sketching…” She rubbed her chin for a moment. “Mason!”

“Wait, what?!” Pacifica had a focused look on her face and was trying to paint the shape of a body in the air. Mabel watched as the form of his red hoodie and jeans were conjured from the air. That part was seeming very accurate to the real thing. But then she started work on the face.

Pacifica’s look of concentration started turning to a frown, and then a look of revulsion. She halted her painting, and stepped back, letting Mabel get a look at the face. Instead of the normal way Dipper’s face was laid out, the eyes were at different heights, his lips were tilted at a 45 degree angle, and his nose was crooked. It was like a cubist’s fever dream.

“Ugh, that’s all wrong!” Pacifica stamped her feet. “I thought this would be easier, but it’s still awful!”

Mabel puffed out her cheeks, a common tic she showed when she was thinking. “I guess the magic all depends on the skill of the artist, huh. It could be worse, the body’s still great! It’s just the face that looks ‘sketchy’” She burst out laughing. “Ha, ‘sketchy’, that’s priceless!”

Pacifica wasn’t seeing the humour. “This isn’t funny, I’m never gonna be an artist!” She threw down the paintbrush by her feet.

Mabel stood up and tried to comfort her. “You just need more practice, no-one’s great when they start off. Sketchy over here’s just your ‘blue period’ work.”

Pacifica sighed. “Whatever, let’s just get out of here. I need a drink before we do any more drawing.”

“Ooh, it’ll be like when Candy and Grenda taught me how to play drunk Pictionary!” The two of them turned and made for the hovering door, but then Pacifica remembered the paintbrush. She turned to collect it, but saw that the Mason sketch, Sketchy as Mabel called him, was holding the brush in his hands.

“Hey, give that back!” He looked up with those freaky eyes, there was a look of fear and anger behind them.

A babble of strange guttural noises came from his wonky mouth. “Unghhh grrrrghh sharghh.” He raised the paintbrush and waved it around.

“Wait, don’t!” She reached out an arm to try and stop him, but it was too late. Coalescing before him was a swatch of purple and yellow blurring into a form Pacifica recognised. It was her own body, the same purple jacket and pink dress, with the long hair stretching down past her hips.

Once again though, the face was hideous mess, another botched creation. She recoiled in horror, and bumped into Mabel, who was also staring slack-jawed at the new Pacifica. “Maybe it’s time we leave, before your art decides it wants to paint over our faces or something!”

They ran towards the door, but a wall of bricks appeared in their path. Sketchy was painting a curved wall around them, to stop them getting away. Mabel just ran at the wall and vaulted it, but Pacifica didn’t know parkour, and more importantly was wearing heels.

Pacifica backed against the bricks as the pair of paintings ambled towards her. “Nyarghh shffley
dargssh.”

Crouching atop the wall, Mabel looked down at her. “This is why I only ever painted landscapes!”

“Not helping Mabel!” Sketchy and her doppelganger came up to her. She couldn’t back any further, as the two creations stared at her with curiosity. “Get back.” She tried to flap them away with her arms, but they just stayed where they were. A strange whine came from them, like they just wanted to learn more about her. She couldn’t take their horrible faces anymore so started hyperventilating.

The paintbrush in Sketchy’s hands was suddenly yanked away. Pacifica’s eyes darted up to see Mabel recoiling her grappling hook with a triumphant look on her face. “Quick Mabel, get rid of these two!”

The triumphant look vanished. “Oh wait, this thing doesn’t have an eraser.”

“What?!” She looked up incredulously.

“It’s just a paint brush, not a pencil with an eraser on the end! Hold on, let me try something.” Mabel waved the brush like a wand. First she conjured a wooden fence that pushed the pair of sketches back away from Pacifica. She breathed out a deep sigh, but Mabel’s next conjuring trick made her mad again. Swishing around the brush, Mabel painted a bag of popcorn, then started munching happily.

She was just sitting up on the wall now, legs dangling over. “Yum, painted food is weird, but does has a nice fruity aftertaste. Ok, time to deal with all this.” She gestured out at the fenced off creations.

Barely containing a seething rage, Pacifica cried up. “Mabel, what are you doing?! Help me stop these monsters!”

Mabel shrugged and tossed another piece of popcorn into her mouth. “They’re your problem sissis. I’m sensing some unresolved issues here, this brush can tap into the psyche. It’s no coincidence that you’ve drawn a weird distorted copy of your own relationship. This is what you get when to try to cheat yourself out of learning. Here, wanna piece?” She threw down a kernel, but Pacifica let it drop.

“Issues?! I’m just bad at drawing, I’m not messed up!”

“Woo boy, if that were true! I’ve seen inside your worst nightmares, remember, in the Ursus dimension?” She looked down with a sly glance, and Pacifica couldn’t help but look away, memories of a ringing bell starting to come back to her. “You just have to deal with this hangup about faces, then you’ll be able to draw them properly. Consider this ‘Mabel’s lesson Part 2: Amateur therapy hour!’ She smiled down, and Pacifica could almost swear there was a twinkle behind her eyes.

“Grr, whatever.” She turned back to face the pair of beings she’d brought to life. “What am I supposed to do, they’re freaky painted people.” The two of them were clawing at the painted fence, trying to break through. At one point, they briefly stopped to try and kiss each other, but with their mis-matched mouths it didn’t quite work.

“Ew, that’s gross. Hey, maybe try meditating. You have to be one with the universe, like a Zen master.” Then Mabel started humming loudly. “Omm! Omm!”

“Once again, not helping Mabes!”
Mabel spoke as she chewed on more popcorn, her cheeks puffed out. “Mmm, Pashifica, you just gotta be calm, try not to get so agitated.”

“Don’t tell me what to do!” Mabel’s cavalier attitude just riled her up more. Then she had to act fast, as the paintbrush came tumbling down. She only just caught it.

“Perfect, now use your weaknesses as a strength!”

“What?” She looked down at the brush, unsure what to do with it.

“You’re angry, use that to fuel your creativity. You suck at faces, so try to make the most hideous face you can. It’s like reverse psychology.”

Pacifica shook her head but raised the brush. “This had better work.” She stared at the twisted faces, then tried to think of something even worse.

Mabel eagerly munched down on the popcorn as a shape started to take form. It was like the Animal Spirit they’d faced together months ago. Instead of various animal body parts though, it was covered in more of Pacifica’s terrifying faces. “Woah, that thing looks so twisted!” The face beast then charged at the first two sketches, knocking them down.

Pacifica chuckled bitterly at the carnage her creations were getting up to. Mabel finally hopped down off the wall to stand beside her. “That was great Paz! Look at that thing!” She looked over to where her mass of faces was lazily chasing her painted duplicate.

“But it’s still gross and horrible, those faces look awful.”

“Exactly! It’s meant to be a terrifying beast, the faces work in this context.” Now that she looked back, there was a sort of effective creepy vibe about the monster.

She gave a long sigh. “Ok, maybe I do have a ‘thing’ about faces. Remember that time you had your face stolen because of me?”

Mabel clutched her chin, remembering back 5 years ago. “Oh yeah, that was so weird.”

“Yeah, well I think it’s cause of that incident why I can’t draw faces. It reminds me too much of seeing your body, and Mason’s too, with blank nothings on your heads all cause of my dumb vanity. I guess I really am just messed up.”

Mabel looked sympathetically at her, then stuck an arm round her shoulder. “All the best people are, Pacifica. I bet you’ll probably have issues drawing wooden people or golf balls too, huh? I’m sure you’ll get over it one day. For now, you just have to stick to drawing stuff like that.” She gestured over at the face beast, which was just finishing devouring Sketchy.

“What did those two paintings even want?”

“Maybe they just wanted you to ‘fix’ them? Poor things.”

Pacifica watched as the beast completed his rampage. Both of the painted clones were gone now. “Come on, let’s get out of here. Then I’m gonna tear this piece of paper to shreds and maybe burn it too.”

Back in the real world, Mabel had tasked Pacifica with sketching something just as nightmarish as
her faces. She tried to take her biggest drawback and turn it around into a positive. A short while later Pacifica presented the finished sketch to Mabel. It had been inspired by a creature that Dipper had led them to on a Mystery Hunt last summer, all teeth and tentacles. It had been a chilling experience at the time, but looking down at Pacifica’s sketch, Mabel was only feeling a sense of happiness for her friend. It was a horrific image, the wonky eyes in particular were deeply unsettling. But somehow, overall it worked.

“So, what do you think?” Pacifica was wringing her hands together.

Taking on air of suspense, Mabel rested a hand on her shoulder. “Paz. This. Is. Amazing!” She felt Pacifica relax and breathe deeply. “It’s so freaky and metal! I could get this design made into a sick tattoo! Oh wait, not a goth anymore, nevermind.”

“So you think it's decent?”

“Decent? It’s great! You could do a whole line of terrifying monsters. You’ve found your forte Pacifica!”

She folded the sketch away, resolving to stick it in her new journal later. “Yeah, well, you’re still gonna teach me to draw proper faces one day.”

“That’s a Mabel promise!”

“So now what, are you gonna head over to the Shack for a massive nap?”

“That was the plan, some glorious hours of sleep, then another solo road trip.”

“Well, forget that plan.” She was smirking now. “If you’re only here for the weekend, we might as well make the most of it.”

Preston Northwest leaned back in his armchair, glass of brandy in hand. He was sipping lightly, considering what had happened today. His daughter had asked to go on a sleepover with this strange newcomer, the one named ‘Maple’ or something. He’d tried to resist, but eventually he relented. Pacifica had argued that it was part of her new ‘less strict’ lifestyle.

There was something about the new girl though, something vaguely familiar. She remined him of someone, a boy he had nothing but animosity towards. But he took another sip, trying to drown those memories. At least Pacifica was happy right now. He wasn’t sure whether it was the right choice to make for her, but she seemed to have been more enthusiastic lately. Time would tell where the pieces would fall.

Chapter End Notes

After writing Season 1, I looked back and felt that I hadn’t done enough interaction between Mabel and Pacifica. Bar their team-up in Abducted, I mostly put Pacifica with Dipper. This chapter was the start of my attempt to rectify that, and to give the girls some time alone to play off one another.

The idea of Pacifica having a journal of her own is something I’ve not seen done before in any fics or fanart, so giving her one seemed irresistible, especially after I’d
hinted at the concept back in Season 1. It was a decision that ended up shaping much more of the plot further down the line than I’d anticipated.
“And through here… dun diddley dun dun dun! The attic! Home away from home for the Mystery Twins!” Mabel swept her arm over the triangular room. Stan’s fez sat lopsidedly on her head. “That concludes the guided tour of the Mystery Shack, you now both owe me $20.”

Following her into the room was a mildly annoyed blonde girl, dressed entirely in pink. “Mabel, I have been in before you know, even if it was only for a short while.”

“Oh yeah, during the whole, 'stolen face' incident.” Pacifica looked away, fearing recriminations for that act last year. Mabel recognised her apprehension. “Water under the bridge sis!” Mabel gave an exaggerated wink, and her tense shoulders loosened. “But seriously, fork over the money. I’m a ruthless boss you know!”

Pacifica just looked stone-faced, as a voice called out from behind. “This time you’ll be staying here properly.” Dipper came in behind them, a tight fur hat pulled down over his ears. “We didn’t really have time last year, everything went so fast. Ford was suddenly around, and the weirdness, then our birthday. We just didn’t have the time for sleepovers Pacifica. But like we promised, no-one else tonight, just the three of us. You wouldn’t believe how hard it was to get Mabel to not bring her friends.” He glanced over at his sister, who was shifting a spare mattress into the centre of the room, then winked back at her. “You don’t even have to worry about ‘sharing’ a bed.”

Pacifica wanted to be alone with the twins on this first night. She didn’t rate her ability to tolerate the equivalent of three Mabels in one evening straight away. Now she wanted to show her thanks to the Pines twins but didn’t know how. She bit her lip, tried raising an arm to touch Dipper’s, but it fell back down before either twin could notice. Instead she just mumbled out a quiet, “Thanks.”

She’d hung around the Shack gift shop all day, anticipating their annual return to the town. She was terrified that they’d have simply forgotten her. A whole year had passed since they’d last seen each other. For most of that time, Pacifica’s life had been torture. First there was the upheaval of leaving the only home she’d ever known. Sure, their new house was fine, extravagant by most people’s standards, but it was still a major change in her life.

Her parents had also become much stricter, aiming to stamp out any disobedient tendencies that had started emerging at the end of the summer. They hoped that without the ‘disruptive influences’ of the Pines twins that she’d return to normal.

Outwardly, she’d tried to throw up that façade. She performed well at her prestigious school, continued her retinue of activities, kept up the appearance of a perfect daughter. But inside she felt more and more hollow, very little bringing her any real enjoyment. A light at the end of the tunnel kept her going though. She knew that when the next summer came around, the twins would be back. She actually found herself missing the crazy adventures they’d taken her on. She was longing for Dipper to whisk her off on some mad quest in the woods, or for Mabel to surprise her with a new quirky fashion statement. Anything to break the tedium of her routine.

Once the twins arrived at the Shack, after meeting with their Uncles and friends (and oh, how Pacifica wished to be counted as one of those), she’d tapped on their shoulders. To her immense
relief, they were both glad to see her. Mabel was mildly amazed that she’d come out to the Shack all on her own with no limo. They’d both agreed to letting her stay over the next night, she wanted time away from her parents at last.

“Ok, mattress is all ready for you Paz-Paz! I’ll go get the sheets.” Mabel bounded out past her, still containing endless reserves of energy. She was alone with Dipper. The two of them stood there awkwardly, neither knowing what to say to each other after so long.

Though she never wanted to admit it to his face, she’d missed Dipper in particular, he’d helped open her eyes so much that past year. This time she committed, raising her arm and squeezing his. She still couldn’t fix her gaze on his eyes though, glancing away. “Hey, I just wanna say… thanks. Thanks for not forgetting about me.”

He smiled up at her. “I could never forget you Pacifica.” A light blush formed on her face and he coughed into his fist. “Uh, I mean, because you’d probably sue me if I ever forgot, haha.”

“Ha, yeah.” She still flashed him another quick smile, before Mabel inevitably returned. Inwardly she was picturing the brief look of openness he’d had when he said that he wouldn’t forget her. It was such a warm look; she’d barely seen anything like that in her life so far. After all the stress of the last year and the patient waiting today, she was finally starting to enjoy herself again.

March 2017

Cruising down Gopher Road was a battered old pickup, which fit in well with the run-down Shack up ahead. Mabel knew that the Shack’s weathered look was partly intentional, to add to the air of mystery. The S from the sign was still lying halfway down the roof, as it had done for 5 years now.

They pulled up outside the front porch. It was starting to get late, and most of the tourists visiting had already gone. There was a weird sensation as she looked at the Shack. Strange to be here outside of Summer, and knowing she’d be gone tomorrow. She pushed those thoughts aside though; she could dwell on her nostalgia in the morning. For now, she had a guest to entertain.

“You ready for the best night of the year so far sister?!” Climbing out the other side of the pickup, Pacifica lazily raised her arms.

“Woo, can’t wait for a night in a cold wooden room with no insulation.”

“You know you love it here really!” Pacifica looked away but had to agree. She really did love her sleepovers here and had visited many times over the last 4 years.

She perked up and headed towards the door. “Let’s get inside then, our first ‘girls night in’ without your brother.” She winked at Mabel.

“I hadn’t even realised that! It’ll be so cool, we don’t have to talk about all his nerdy stuff for once.”

They reached the porch, and before Mabel could just stride in as she usually did, Pacifica rapped on the door three times. They waited for a moment, before the door was opened by a large man wearing a tight black suit with a red bow tie. Sat atop his head was a red fez and he was brandishing a cane topped with a ball. His face was beaming from ear to ear. “Mabel!? Wow, what’re you doing here Hambone?”

“Soos!” Mabel ran at him, failing to wrap her arms all the way around her old friend, but hugging tightly nonetheless. “I’ve missed you so much, it’s great to see you before next summer!”
“It’s great to see you too. Sweet tattoos!” Mabel’s sleeves were still pulled up from earlier, showing off her colourful arms. “So how come you came all the way up here?”

Mabel’s smile dropped slightly. “I’m only here for the weekend, I came to see Paz, and now we’re gonna have a sleepover.”

The owner of the Mystery Shack turned to greet the other person standing on the porch. Pacifica did a neat curtsy. “Hello Mr Ramirez. How are you and Melody?” Pacifica had made an effort to visit the Shack at least once a month, to catch up on town gossip for Mason’s sake. She’d struck up a decent enough relationship with the Shack’s approachable owner, who was always happy to help a friend of the Pines family.

With an attempt to mimic her formal greeting, he bowed. “Doing fine P-dog. Why don’t you two ladies come in. I was just cleaning up, we don’t expect any more visitors tonight.” Before leading them inside, he glanced around. “A no-show from the Dipster then?”

“He’s doing boring stuff at home with Dad, it’s just Pacifica and me today.”

He led them into the Shack’s gift shop, and another wave of nostalgia hit Mabel. The Shack felt very empty, all the tourists had left already, and both of her Grunkles were halfway around the world. Wendy was only around during the summer, having moved to Portland a few years back. Sitting behind the cash register was Melody, Soos’ wife. Their wedding day had been one of Mabel’s happiest experiences, seeing two people she’d helped meet cement their bond of love.

Melody looked up and waved. “Hey Mabel, Pacifica.” Mabel watched as she struggled to stand. “Are you ok Melody?” She looked to be in some pain from the act of getting up.

“Sure, just gimme a sec.” As Soos helped her to round the desk, Mabel glanced down seeing a large bump.

“Oh. My. Gosh. You’re pregnant!” The happy couple smiled at her and nodded. “Yep, we’re expecting it sometime in June.”

Mabel ran over and rubbed a hand on Melody’s belly. Her eyes were wide, and her voice was barely above a whisper. “This is so amazing. There’s gonna be a Soos and Melody junior!”

Pacifica dragged Mabel away, she’d known about the upcoming baby for a while now. “Come on Mabel, let’s go get set up for tonight.”

Soos called up after them. “I’ll bring fresh sheets up for you two doods!”

Mabel was chattering aimlessly as they entered the attic bedroom. “And I know some great two player card games we can try. Ooh, plus we can share spooky stories without Dipper ruining all the endings!”

Pacifica just nodded along. Like when Mason un-winded after a Mystery Hunt, it was best just to leave the twins to get their thoughts out loud. She panned around the attic, remembering countless nights staying here. Though she wouldn’t say it out loud, there was a warm fuzzy feeling about being in here again.

She was jolted back into the conversation by something Mabel said. “And since Dipper’s not here you can have his bed for once!”
“Huh, what?” She glanced briefly at his bed laid out on the left wall. There were still fraying yellowed pieces of notepaper pinned above it. “I can’t sleep in his bed! Isn’t it kinda weird?”

“I mean, you are his girlfriend after all, it wouldn’t be so unusual.” Mabel waggled an eyebrow suggestively which made her blush.

“It still feels a bit… taboo. We haven’t done much more than kiss.”

“Oh come on, you’re not even sleeping with him. Besides, it’s not like it’s the first time anyway.”

Pacifica blushed again and shakily responded. “W-what do you mean Mabel?”

Mabel rolled her eyes. “You think I didn’t know about it Paz? That night a few years back? With all the hail?” Pacifica was mortified that Mabel had known about what had happened that night…

July 2014

Pacifica rolled over in her bed for the twentieth time, still unable to drown out the sound of the frozen pebbles clinking against the Shack’s flimsy roof. What was worse, she’d had to leave her comforter at home in the wash. The weather outside was frigid, and Stan’s infamously cheap nature meant that there was very little heating inside. She wished she’d had the foresight to wear more than shorts and loose pink nightshirt.

She groaned as she rolled over again, cold and unable to sleep without her usual soft bedding. Besides her, Mabel was lying on her back, snoring like a foghorn as she always did. Dipper was lying with his back to her, wrapped up under the covers.

The intensity of hail outside seemed to increase, and a gust of cool wind buffeted the Shack. She’d had enough, lying here shivering was no longer an option.

She got up and shook Mabel, trying to get her to wake up. She hissed, “Mabel!”, but her friend just kept snoring. Her sprawled body left no room for Pacifica to squeeze in. To be honest though, Mabel’s bed was notorious for being covered in glitter and other art supplies, as well as mystery sticky patches that no-one dared touch. She looked over at Dipper’s bed, briefly felt a wash of embarrassment, then composed herself.

Her relationship towards him had shifted somewhat last summer. They’d spent more time in each other’s company outside of life-threatening scenarios. While Mabel and her friends were boisterous full of energy, Pacifica found herself drifting more to the quiet, reserved Dipper. So when Mabel’s crew went out into town, she’d stay at home and chat with him. It didn’t hurt that they shared a number of nerdy interests. Now they were fast becoming best friends. Which is why it made Pacifica so embarrassed about what she was about to do.

Dipper was jolted awake by the touch of a cold palm on the skin of his arm. He rolled over to see who it was, nearly bumping into Pacifica’s face as he did. “Oh, Paz, why are you up?”

“My bed’s too cold, and I can’t sleep with this stupid hail. Can I… can I squidge in next to you?”

He gave a yawn, then drowsily started to move. “Oh, I guess. Here, let me.” He lifted up a side of the duvet and scooched closer to the wall. His body was still turned away from her. She was kinda glad that she didn’t have to face him right now, she didn’t like people seeing her beg for help.

She wriggled next to him and he dropped the duvet over them. It was immediately much nicer than the thin sheet she’d had before. Dipper’s body heat had also warmed up the bed. She closed her
eyes and muttered to him. “Good night dork.”

“Hmm, you too Paz.” He rolled his head back over and tried to get some back to sleep.

Pacifica tried to do the same, closing her eyes and trying to shut out the noise of the hail. She tried to focus on her breathing, anything other than the plinking stones on the roof. As she became more aware of the quiet of her own breathing, she started noticing Dipper’s shallow breaths as well. Lying next to him she thought she could feel the slight movement of his chest, rising and falling in time with the breaths.

It was weirdly intimate, and she suddenly felt more awake than ever. She tried to move slightly closer to the edge, but as she repositioned herself her leg briefly brushed his. It was warm against her cool skin and sent a feeling she couldn’t recognise through her body. She tensed up as Dipper’s body shivered from the touch.

She tried to stay motionless, not wanting to accidentally nudge him again. “Are you ok Pacifica? You’re not too cold right?” How was it he always seemed to know when she wasn’t fine?

She whispered back to him. “This is kinda awkward, that’s all. I don’t want to, like, roll into you and wake you up by accident.”

“It’s ok, I don’t mind.” Ugh, why was this guy always so… nice. “Just try to relax and drift off.” This was proving impossible, she just couldn’t focus on sleep with Dipper so close. She could practically smell the scent of pine needles in his hair.

She wrinkled her nose slightly. Why did she care so much about Dipper right now? Why couldn’t she just sleep? Another gust of cold air blew through the attic. She involuntarily shifted towards Dipper, hugging along his back tightly now. The thought of being pressed right alongside him made her blush.

Then Dipper rolled over to face her. He too was blushing. “Hey, if you’re still cold do you wanna… I don’t know, huddle together?”

“Huh?” She suddenly felt way too hot lying there, staring back into his eyes.

“Like penguins, for warmth?” An embarrassed look came over his face, then he gingerly reached an arm around her back. An electric sensation went through her body when she felt his palm on her back. “Um, this is a bit… weird, right?”

She smiled through the blushing. “Yeah, totally weird. Let me try something.” She rolled over, now she had her back to him. She nestled up against his chest, his arms lying across her stomach. This felt like it was a much better arrangement, she could feel the heat from his body now.

One of the arms gave a small squeeze to her hip. “Sleep well, ‘princess’.” It was a jokey nickname most of the time, but in that moment there was a tenderness in the way he said it that made her heart soar. Suddenly the awkwardness was gone, she relaxed her body in his grip, content to stay like that forever.

Since both their attentions were so hyper-focused on each other, neither of them paid any attention the clattering hail. Nor did they notice the absence of Mabel’s noisy snoring…

March 2017

“And here’s the picture I took of you two, isn’t just the cutest!”
“Oh my god, you have to delete that photo now! I can’t believe you watched us sleeping together!”

“What was I s’posed to do, not watch you two be adorable!? Besides, I already printed out a copy for my scrapbook.”

“But you were still snoring when we got out of bed, we thought you were asleep!”

“I’m a master actor sis!”

“Look, just don’t tell Mason that you know about this, you know how he doesn’t like to talk about this stuff. It makes him all nervous and sweaty.”

“I don’t know, maybe if I brought it up he’d want to sleep with you again.” Pacifica went bright red, and Mabel giggled. “I’m just teasing you Paz. Don’t you want it to happen someday though?” She looked away. “I don’t know what I want. I like things the way they are with Mason, we’re taking it slow.”

“Yeah, like snails! You’re missing out on all the best stuff about being a couple! I know that from experience. I know, let’s try something. Pretend I’m Dipper!” Mabel briefly ran downstairs, then came back with one of the blue and white pine tree caps from the gift shop. She removed her glasses, then bundled up her hair and stuffed it under the cap, before coughing. When she spoke, it was an attempt at a deep voice. “Hi there Princess, it’s me, Mason!” Then she made a kissy face. Pacifica just looked witheringly back at her. “I don’t think this is gonna work.”

“Your eyes are so deep and blue Paz, I wrote all about it in my journal. I just wanna get all lost in that blonde hair of yours, softer than a new-born puppy.”

“Mason really wrote all of that sappy stuff?” Despite her atrocious impression, Pacifica had to admit that, with the hat covering part of the face, her resemblance to her brother was uncanny. “Mabel, I just wanna do things my own way, ok? If that means taking my time, I’m gonna damn well take my time.

Mabel huffed and removed the cap. Her hair fell right across her face and her next words were muffled. “Fine fine, I’ll drop it for now. Now what do you say to getting this party really started!?”

The girls ordered pizza, then Mabel tried to teach Pacifica how to play Poker. She turned out to be much better at it than Dipper, subterfuge came to her naturally. They then spent some time chatting about school work, what they’d both been up to. Eventually the talk turned to reminiscing about past summers, the times they’d spent together out in the woods or at the lake. The small freedoms Pacifica had at the moment were nothing compared to when it was summer. They moved to talking about friends, both Mabel’s back in California and those here in Gravity Falls.

“And I can’t believe that Soos and Melody are gonna have a baby! I’ll be ‘Auntie Mabel’, so cool!”

“I’m sure Mr and Mrs Ramirez will make great parents, they already run things around here very efficiently.”

“Reminds of their wedding, that was such a great day, the dresses and the speeches and the schmaltz. I can’t wait till the next one.”
“Next one? Who else is gonna get married?”

“Oh, you know.” Mabel smirked at her. “It’s two people who I’m very fond of, and their names start with P and D…”

“Mabel, do you not know the meaning ‘taking it slowly’? We’re only 17, you don’t have to plan every detail of our lives yet. Besides,” she said with a smirk, “to me his name starts with M.”

“Oh, you and Mr super-serious and mature ‘Mason’ over here. Ol’ Stonecutter’s finally found someone he actually likes hearing that name from.”

“I still remember when he first told me, I thought he was about to faint from the stress, the goofball.”

“When did he actually tell you anyway? Most people never get that lucky.”

“It was a couple years back, I’d come over for the day. It was nice and sunny, so we were outside…”

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**August 2015**

“Tag! You’re it!” Mabel ran off in the opposite direction. Pacifica was momentarily stunned, then shook her head and ran after the others. She quickly spied Candy and made to jog towards her. The slender Asian girl darted through the trees though, knowing that Pacifica wouldn’t want to follow in her heels. Grenda was running towards the main drive, but she didn’t want to mess with that hunk of muscle if she could avoid it.

She whirled around, trying to find someone else to chase. She watched as Mabel shoved towards the Shack past Dipper, stopping him in his tracks. He was the perfect target. “I’m gonna get you Dipper!”

He spun round, seeing her determined grin. He giggled as he ran off towards the edge of the clearing. The rush of adrenaline she was feeling was a new sensation. She’d run before of course, she was an avid jogger, and monster pursuits were always good tests of stamina. But she’d never run for such innocent fun as this. As she closed in on Dipper at the edge of the clearing, he turned to look back at her. His eyes widened in shock, she was closer than he’d thought.

While he was distracted looking back, his foot caught a tree branch. He tumbled over on the grass, his lumberjack hat slipping off. She ran up and jabbed him in the side. “Tag, you’re it Dipper! No tagbacks either.” She tried to offer him a hand up, but there was a strange look in his eyes.

He reached a hand up to feel his hair. Suddenly, he flailed randomly up at his head, clutching where his hat had fallen off.

Pacifica was confused by his reaction. “What’s wrong?” She noticed now that his hair had been cut shorter than usual, revealing more of his forehead. “Have you got something on your face?”

“IT’S NOTHING!” Dipper practically screamed up at her, and she was taken aback. He scrabbled in the grass for his hat, then clamped it down over his head. He was panting fast and almost seemed to be holding back tears.

Pacifica gently held his arm. She tried to speak softly. “Are you ok?” He wouldn’t look towards her, his face half turned away. “Did… did you hurt yourself in the fall? It’s not that bad, maybe if I had a look-“
“No!” He pulled the hat further down his face, the light brown fabric covering all of his hair now. “I don’t want you to see it!”

Confusion written on her face, she tried to probe him. “See what?”

He tried to brush past her. “Let’s just go back, the girls will be wondering where we’ve gone.”

“Dipper!” She tried her sternest voice, which stopped him in his tracks. Then she tried a lighter touch. “I’m just worried about you, ok. You seemed really uncomfortable back there, I only wanna know why.”

Dipper turned around to face her. Their eyes were level, her heels making up for his slight extra height. “It’s just… I don’t want you to see it. I… I guess I’m paranoid about it. You’re usually so judgemental about everything… I care about you too much to risk losing what we have.”

Pacifica still didn’t understand what the fuss was all about. “Dipper, whatever it is, I’m sure it’s fine. Mabel showed me home video of you in a lamb costume for god’s sakes, surely this can’t be worse than that.”

He took some deep breaths. “Sorry, it’s just… I haven’t gotten self-conscious about it in so long, then the short haircut…”

“Just show me, you big dork. I don’t care what it is, you’ll still be the biggest nerd I know… and the kindest person anyone’s ever been to me.”

He blushed, closed his eyes, then swallowed. “Ok, I can do this.” He slowly removed the hat. Pacifica saw the conflict on his face, he was clearly thinking of all the ways this could go wrong. She was still just super unsure of what was even going on.

With the hat removed, he shut his eyes again, then quickly lifted what little hair remained off his forehead. “Here.” She peered up at the cluster of red spots. They looked a bit like pimples, only with faint lines connecting them. This was Dipper’s big secret?

“What am I looking at?”

“It’s… you don’t… you’re not repulsed?” Dipper seemed genuinely baffled by her reaction.

“No, should I be?” She reached out to tap one of the bigger spots but could see Dipper tensing up as her finger approached, so stopped. “Is it some sort of skin condition?”

“It’s a birthmark, I’ve always had it. You really don’t find it gross?”

She shrugged. “It’s not like it’s a big scar down half your face. Why are you so worked about it?”

He seemed to be studying her reaction for signs of doubt, not sure whether he trusted what she was saying. Then, out of nowhere, he blurted out a single word. “Mason!”

“Huh?” She cocked her head to the side. “You’re being really weird Dip.”

“Mason is my real name! Dipper’s just a nickname because of ‘that’. He angrily flicked a wrist up at his forehead. “You don’t recognise the constellation? The ‘Big Dipper’?”

“Oh, is that what that is? Huh. And?”

“And?! And isn’t it super weird and unusual?! Doesn’t it make you not wanna be my friend?!”
“Dipper, why would I care if you have some goofy lines on your face. I’m not quite that shallow.” She gave a weak smile, but it was enough for Dipper to suddenly collapse from his tensed stance.

“Oh, my gosh, I’m so dumb.” Now he slapped the space where his birthmark was. “I thought you’d hate it, that you’d criticise it like you do everything else. That’s why I hid it from you. It brought up old memories, I used to get bullied for this! Now you say you’re fine with it?! I need a minute to lie down.”

He looked about to simply drop to the floor, so she grabbed his arms to prop him upright. “Hey, it’s not important Dip. It doesn’t change who you are or… or how I feel. You’re still my best friend.” She wasn’t prepared for the hug he suddenly pulled her into.

“Thank you Paz. I’m sorry I acted so stupid about all this, I guess I have still some anxieties about it. I’ve never been as close to someone as you, I didn’t wanna lose that.”

“Forget it, it doesn’t change a single thing.” She slipped out of the hug and grabbed his hat. “Come on, Mabel probably thinks we’re kissing in a bush or some dumb sappy stuff like that.” She playfully winked at him as she put the hat over her own head.

“Yeah right, like you’d ever sink to that level. I bet you have your own ‘kissing parlour’ at home.” He clutched her shoulder and grinned. There was a sense that he wanted to say more but he looked away. “Anyway, let’s head back.”

“Oh, one more thing ‘Mason’. You’re it!” She shoved her hand on his chest, then pushed past him to run back towards the Shack, smiling as she heard his laughter again as he began his pursuit.

_March 2017_

The girls had dressed for bed. Mabel wore her old purple Floppy Disc sleep shirt, which now only came up to above her belly button. Pacifica had an elegant burgundy silk kimono that Mabel hadn’t seen before. “It’s cool how you can still look good even when you’re trying to sleep. Whenever I go to bed I’m too lazy to do anything but flop down.”

“Do you like the kimono? I got it a few weeks ago.”

“It’s pretty neat. I’m sure **Dipper** will love it!”

“Ugh, not **again** Mabel! I know you like talking about relationship stuff, but I’m too tired to talk about Mason anymore.”

“Fine, I know when not to anger the great Pacifi-saurus Rex! Rawr!” She mimed a dinosaur roar then leapt into bed. “I’m gonna need a major Mabel nap tonight.”

Pacifica sat on the edge Dipper’s bed, tentatively stretching her arms over the sheet. “And how do those differ from regular naps exactly?”

“More Mabel. That’s the secret ingredient,” she said matter-of-factly. “Ooh, I forgot the most important part of any sleepover.” She rummaged in her backpack, retrieving her phone. Then she jumped onto Dipper’s bed beside Pacifica, shaking the whole bed. “Say cheese!” She snapped the photo before Pacifica even had time to react. “Another one for the collection.”

Mabel showed her the screen, and her bemused and startled face shone back at her. “Do you always have to take such goofy pics?”
“Of course, it’s true to life, no ‘artificialness’! Least that’s what Dipper tells me, he’s such a photography nerd these days.”

“Oh really? He hasn’t mentioned it much.”

“I think he’s trying to get better so he can use it for your next birthday, like a photomontage of you two, or something hella romantic like that.”

“Aw, that’s sweet of him. Photography eh, is he gonna do that at college someday then?”

“Probably, he wants to major in Media stuff, always said he wanted to make his own tv show. What about you, you might not have any concrete ‘relationship’ plans, but what do wanna do after high-school?”

Pacifica had to think about this. What did she want to do with her life? For years she’d been expected to carry on the Northwest legacy, to take control of the family business. Her math ability wasn’t great though, and despite all the training her parents had tried to impose on her, she felt daunted by the idea of having so much power. But was that what she wanted, the life her parents had mapped out since before she’d even been born? Without that, what else did she have? “I dunno. I feel a bit… aimless.”

“Ah, I’m sure you’ll find a niche someday. Even if you end up in some crummy job, you’ll always have me’n Dipper to count on.”

Pacifica felt anxious all of a sudden. “Yeah… always…”

Pacifica turned over in the bed again. She couldn’t sleep, Mabel’s last words still stuck in her mind. Across the room, Mabel had built a ‘bed tent’ out of her covers, and a soft blue glow was coming from beneath the fabric. Tired of not being able to shut off her brain, she whispered over. “Hey, psst, Mabel? Can we talk?”

The covers flew off, revealing Mabel, who was browsing on her phone. “What’s wrong Paz? Can’t sleep?”

“Kinda. How are you even still awake Mabel, shouldn’t you be practically dead from exhaustion now?”

Mabel took off her glasses and rubbed her eyes, but cogently replied. “I’ve had to pull a lot of all-nighters. First there’s school work, which I’m always behind on! I know I can get it done, but I always put it off to the last second. Then there’s Dipper’s night-time excursions he loves to drag me on, I swear, I’m gonna dismantle his ‘anomalous energy scanner’ next time I get woken up at 4am. Plus I’m like crazy jacked up on sugar right now, I added extra to the pizza we ate!” Pacifica tried to imagine why you’d add sugar to a savoury meal, and what a ‘sweet’ pizza would even taste like.

“Well, I want to get some sleep at least, so could you not be using your phone? I keep hearing you giggling at memes.”

“Sure thing Paz. So, what did you wanna talk about?”

“The future, I guess.”

“Oh.” Mabel’s body visibly tensed. “If the last few months have taught me anything, it’s not to worry about the big old ‘f’ word. And I don’t mean the swear!”
“I’m just a bit nervous I guess. You and Mace’ll be going off to college, and I don’t even know what I wanna do with myself! You won’t be able to come and visit like this out of the blue. I don’t want to feel that loneliness again.”

“Paz, I know exactly what you mean. I felt lonely a lot recently, but I was being blind. Dipper was there for me, I just didn’t see it cause I was too focused on my own dumb problems which just made things worse. You’ll see, even if you have to live halfway around the world from us, we’ll still try to support you.”

“But I’m scared of being forgotten, you know how bad Mason is at juggling his responsibilities. If Mason goes off and makes a tv show or whatever, he won’t have time for me.”

“But Dipper promised remember. He said he’d always be by your side, no matter what.”

“Yeah, I guess he did say that. Maybe I’m just underestimating him. Guess I’ll see what happens.”

“That’s the only way to live sis, let the future come to you, not the other way around.”

“Good night then Mabel, hope you’re not too out of it tomorrow morning to say a proper goodbye.”

Mabel got back under her covers, drowsily pulling them tight around herself. “You can count on it Paz, Mabel’s always … on… the ball…” She was asleep the moment her head hit the pillow.

August 2016

“Your turn Mabel! Truth or Dare or Don’t!?!” Sat in a circle in the attic, the Pines twins, Pacifica, Candy, and Grenda, were all getting into the swing of another sleepover. They’d already eaten, and now they were starting to ramp up with games.

“I’m gonna go with… dare!”

Dipper stroked his chin, the first few tufts of brown hair poking up. “I dare you to… eat another one of Paz’s ‘cakes’!” For this sleepover, Pacifica had offered to bring some home-made cakes of her own devising. They were as solid as bricks, she didn’t exactly have much baking experience.

Mabel pulled a horrified expression. “Oh no, I wanna keep my teeth thank you very much! Guess I’ll have to do a truth instead. Hey, Pacifica, since I wouldn’t eat your terrible cakes, how about you think of a truth?”

“Huh, what. Sorry, I wasn’t listening.” Pacifica was currently in a sour mood. It was one week before the twins’ 17th birthday. The day after that, they’d be leaving for California. Leaving her alone again. Every year there was the same cycle, months of agonising waiting, putting up with her parents, then a few months of pure bliss in the summer. The end of each summer was the worst, the longest time before seeing Dipper and Mabel again. This year had hit her particularly hard, she’d had so much fun since Dipper decided he wanted to actively start working on his journal again, and she couldn’t bear the thought of him going off on adventures while she sat around at home. The reaction to her cakes hadn’t helped, there’d been a lot of gentle teasing, but today those words felt harsher than usual.

“Earth to Paz-Paz!” Mabel was snapping her fingers in Pacifica’s face. “You gotta ask me a truth!”

“Oh, ok. I dunno. How much will you miss me once Summer’s over?”

“That’s an easy one. I’ll miss you sooooooooo much, just like every year! I know Dip’ll miss you
“You choose, I never know what to pick.” She was feeling kinda forlorn at the moment, thinking too much about next week.

“Ooh, I’ve got a great dare. I dare you… to kiss my brother!”

“What!?” She was suddenly very much aware of the present situation. Grenda let out an ‘ooh’ sound, and Candy giggled to herself.

Dipper, who’d been drinking some cola when Mabel gave her dare, started choking. “Mabel, you can’t ask her to do that! The rules are: No dares that involve other Sleepover Buddies.”

Pacifica tried to cover up her small blush. “Yeah, you have to give me a different dare. Besides, it’s not like I’d do it anyway.” There was an odd look on Dipper’s face at this statement.

“Alright, fine. I’ll ask you a truth then. If you were stuck on a desert island and had to choose one person to share it with, who would you pick?”

Pacifica mulled this over for a second, before answering simply. “I don’t know. Nobody, I guess.”

This was not the answer Mabel had been expecting, and her eager grin dropped. “Nobody? There’s no-one in the entire world you’d wanna be alone with?”

Pacifica just quietly nodded. There was an uncomfortable air in the room. Dipper had that odd look again, different from his usual ‘puzzled’ expression he often had when decrypting codes, it felt more disquieted. She tried to shrug it off. “I’m alone most of the year anyway, wouldn’t be any different from that.”

More silence followed. She knew this kind of silence from before, when she’d first started coming over to the Shack. She’d make fun of Mabel’s weird friends or give an insult that cut a little too close to home, and no-one would say anything because of the awkwardness. Those moments had stopped a few years ago, with Pacifica integrating into the group and shedding her more self-centred tendencies. But right now, she wanted the silence to linger, for them to feel as uncomfortable as she did.

Grenda finally broke the silence with a deep throated cough. “Anyway…”

Mabel nodded. “Yeah, anyway, uh, it’s your turn Dipper. T, D, or D?”

“Truth? I suck at doing dares.”

“Alright, I’m make it a tough one though. So, say you had to choose between going off exploring with your journal, or visiting Gravity Falls in the summer. Say you had to choose one or the other. Which would you pick?”

Pacifica felt her heart stop in her chest, waiting for Dipper’s answer. She didn’t know either way which he’d choose.

“Hmm, well, after this summer, I guess I’d go with the journal.”

“What!”? Pacifica couldn’t help but shout out the word.

“Well, I mean, after all the training Ford’s given me, I feel so much more ready for Mystery
Hunting on my own. I wanna show him I can do it just as well as he can. That way when I do eventually come back to the Falls I can show off my new skills. So there, that’s what I’d choose.” Pacifica felt bile in the back of her throat. She so wanted to hit something right now. No-one else seemed to notice her current discomfort.

Mabel blew a raspberry. “Blah, you and your nerd book Dipper, I bet you’d choose that thing to take to a desert island over any person.”

“Ha, maybe. Though there is one person I wouldn’t mind sharing it with…” Pacifica knew who he meant, but the words felt hollow after his previous statement.

“Well tough luck dork, I wouldn’t wanna be on an island with you if you were the last person on Earth!”

He looked crestfallen. “Pacifica, I don’t understand. Why are you being so… so…”

Pacifica finally exploded. “So what? Spit it out Pines! Why am being such a bitch tonight?!” That silence from before returned. She found herself relishing the looks of shock on everybody’s faces.

Dipper looked like a deer caught in headlights. “What did I say Paz? I don’t… why… please explain.”

“Are you really so dense!? Maybe if you weren’t in love with that precious journal you’d actually pay some attention to real human beings!”

“I didn’t mean to say anything bad! I don’t even know what I said, I just wanna know!”

She got her feet, getting right up in Dipper’s face to escalate the argument. “If you actually cared one jot you’d already know! But noooooo, ‘Paz is just acting crazy’!”

Anger finally replaced the confusion on Dipper’s face. “I didn’t say that! Calm down! You’re being totally spiteful!”

“I’m the one being spiteful?! Now I see how little you really care! I’m so done with all of this… this bullshit!” Pacifica stormed out of the room, slamming the attic door behind her. She stood out on the landing, taking deep breaths and willing herself not to scream as loud as she could. The door to the bedroom opened and someone stepped out. She didn’t turn to look at whoever it was but rolled her eyes when she heard his voice.

“Pacifica, what’s the matter with you!”

Layering as much sarcasm as she could, she replied to him. “Why nothing Dipper, everything’s perfectly hunky dory and fine! I couldn’t be better!” She found herself gritting her teeth on the last line.

“Just talk to me like normal, dammit! Why are you being…”

“Being what?!” Dipper shouted out at the top of his lungs. “Being a Northwest!”

She gasped, taken aback by what he’d said. He seemed to realise it too, his mouth flopping open. “Paz I didn’t… not like that…”

Through tears she angrily continued. “Well maybe it’s because I am one! Prissy, narcissistic rich
girl who only cares about money right?!” She turned so that she didn’t have to face him anymore.

“Pacifica, why are you being like this all of a sudden? What did I do wrong, just tell me and I’ll try and fix it! I don’t wanna see you this way.” He actually found himself cupping her cheek, moving her face to stare into her eyes. He could tell how upset she was at him right now. “Hey, it’s ok.” His thumb crossed her cheek, rubbing away a stay tear. With a quiet tone, he tried to get to the bottom of this. “Please, Paz, what’s wrong?”

She placed a hand over his, squeezing it tighter to her cheek. “You don’t care about me. Not really. Nobody does.”

“Pacifica, that couldn’t be further from the truth. I…” He briefly paused to swallow, “care very deeply about you. You’re my best friend. And if I’ve hurt you, I want to know what I need to do to make it better.”

She stared back at him, seeing the honest concern written large in his face. She grabbed him into a hug, throwing her face into his shoulder. “Ugh, why do you always have to be so… you!”

He gave a light laugh, still treading carefully. “Should I take that as a compliment or not? So, you wanna try talking to me now?”

She pulled herself out from his shoulder, still keeping her arms wrapped around him as if it would somehow keep him in Gravity Falls permanently. “Dipper, what happens in one week’s time?”

“Um, me and Mabel turn 17? There’s gonna be a party I think?”

“And after that?”

“Uh, we’ll be another year older?”

“Ugh, for someone so smart you can be such an idiot sometimes.”

“You think I’m smart?”

“Not important. What happens after your birthday, every year?”

“Oh, we get the bus home to California the day after.” He now had a look of bare confusion.

“Exactly! You leave. You pack up everything from your summers, and you go away. You always leave! Every time! And I have to stay behind.”

His face paled with a sudden realisation then he slapped his forehead. “Oh my god, I’ve been such an idiot.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice.” She noticed something different about Dipper now, something she’d missed ever since last year somehow. When he’d gone to put his hand on his forehead was when it had occurred to her: He wasn’t wearing the hat. Before this year, he’d worn that thing every time he saw her, it was a constant feature on his head. She realised now that it had been absent this entire summer. She glanced up at his forehead, seeing the traces of his birthmark behind his hair. Instinctively, she reached out and put her palm on his forehead, lifting the hair to rest her hand there.

“So all the stuff about me wanting to make my own way the journal back home. That stuff with Mabel’s stupid game, I never meant it to make you feel bad. Oh, and then when I said I wanted you with me on an island, I must have made you think I was mocking you!”
Pacifica found herself rubbing her palm back and forth over his birthmark. “It doesn’t matter anyway. You’ll be gone next week whatever happens. You can go and make your journal in peace, won’t have to worry about me being a pain in the ass.”

“No, forget the journal. I’m gonna have to go home, I can’t change that. But I can do more than just leaving you alone for months on end. Look, there’s video chatting, or we could play that game you like online, the shooting one.”

“Battlestorm of Honour?”

“Sure! Anything you want! Just because we’re separated physically doesn’t mean we have to be emotionally. I’ve been seeing it from my way, I always pine for the adventures and seeing you in summer, and I never even thought of what it would be like for you once we’re gone.”

“It won’t be the same. I want you here, all the time. I can’t put up with my parents anymore, not on my own.”

“I wish I could stay, I really do. But with school, and my parents, and Mabel, I have to go back. But I promise you Pacifica I’ll be there if you need me, every night you can call me or ask me for help.”

“You’re serious? You’d do that for me?”

“I promise. Every single night.”

“Woah, you two have certainly turned things around!” Mabel’s head was sticking around the door grinning at them. Pacifica roughly shoved Dipper out of the hug, a massive crimson glow forming on her cheeks. “First you were screaming, and we thought Paz was gonna totally kill you Dipper! But now I find you in a lover’s embrace! Such chemistry!”

They both started protesting. “Mabel, that wasn’t a ‘lover’s embrace’, Paz just needed some support!”

“Yeah, Dipper was helping me get over my issues!”

Mabel just gave them a sly glance. “Oh yeah, for sure. I’ll leave you two alone again then, I’m sure you won’t mind.” She closed the door, and her faint laughter could be heard through the wood.

Pacifica found her throwing her arms around Dipper again, the desire to be close to him was overwhelming. “Totally not a lover’s embrace.”

Dipper grinned slyly and nodded. “Yeah, totally.”

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March 2017

Once she heard that familiar snore coming from across the room, she suspected that Mabel was finally deeply asleep. While she had this chance, she decided to inaugurate her Llama Journal. It would do her good to chronicle her thoughts like this. She opened to the first page and wrote ‘Property of Pacifica Northwest’.

First, before she wrote about today, she wanted some kind of overview at the start, something to decisively mark this book as hers. She looked around the room for inspiration.
The room itself gave her an answer, years of experiences flooding back to her. ‘A brief history of her friendship with the Pines’ would be her first journal entry. She scribbled on the page, dredging up her memories and drifting ever closer to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Originally I only planned to write the 2017 frame story as a lead-in to Chapter 8’s main plot. In the writing process I massively expanded that section, then decided to spin it off into its own separate chapter and added the flashback sections.

This was the first attempt to experiment with different writing styles, in this case the short vignettes and a more laid-back ‘non-magic’ plot. I also wanted to expand my roster of characters, so bringing in Soos and Melody was part of that.
Nostalgia

Mabel was up relatively early, just before dawn. She couldn’t keep herself asleep, there was a nagging desire she wanted to sate. Copious amounts of coffee and sugar were going to be needed before the drive home. She reluctantly got out of bed, careful not to wake her guest.

Pacifica was still asleep but lying open on Dipper’s bed next to her was the Llama Journal. Mabel glanced over, seeing that Pacifica had recounted the events of the day, there was even a rough drawing of the hideous monster she’d created with the paintbrush earlier. On the next page she’d glued in her finished creature sketch, as well as written a detailed account of the sleepover. Seeing an opportunity whilst Paz was still dozing, Mabel dived into her backpack. There was a specially zipped compartment near the base of the main section. She opened it and retrieved a small object. She held the small smooth stone in her hands for a moment. Then, she slipped the necklace over her hair, and buried it under the neck of her sweater. She was about to use the Ursus stone again.

The twins had first found this black stone sphere in an impact crater a few months ago. At first it had appeared completely mundane, but the next day Mabel had discovered that it allowed her to tap into other people’s neural impulses and read their minds. Initially she’d stowed the stone away, too dangerous and immoral to use. Later issues in her life drove her back to using it, leading to a lot of trouble down the line.

After the Alignment event in February, she’d told Dipper that the stone was now inert. That had been a lie, but she’d vowed to never again use the necklace to spy on Dipper or anyone else’s thoughts. She was determined to stick to that rule, she’d learnt the hard way about not trusting in her brother.

But just for today, she wanted to use another aspect of the necklace’s power. She panned around the attic, taking the whole room in. Then she focused her mind, thinking back to the many times she’d spent here. The first thing she picked up though was Pacifica’s sleeping mind. *Mason no, don’t buy me a panda, Mabel will be jealous. Let’s just cruise in the Atlantic instead. Then Mom and Dad will have to accept your birthmark.* Dreaming brains often gave weird mental traces, Mabel couldn’t focus properly without the semblance of logical thought.

She shook her head, she wasn’t interested in Pacifica’s thoughts right now, and it was indecent of her to pry anyway. She tried to find the right emotions within her that would conjure what she was after.

Ghostly outlines appeared in the two beds. On her bed she saw a vision of her younger self, bouncing up and down excitedly. On Dipper’s bed, superimposed over Paz’s sleeping body, was an echo of Dipper himself, focusing on writing in his journal. Perfect, this was what she wanted, not to peer into other’s minds, but to relive some of the events that had taken place here.

The memories started tumbling back then, and she heard a bevy of voices, moments from her past. She stood back and watched dozens of faint traces from the last four years stream through the room.

*And there’s a goat on my bed... Trust no one!... Mabel’s not here, she’s in Sweater Town... You’re telling me there is not a wizard in this closet... There’s something huge going on right under our noses... Alright Author, who are you?... Goodnight stupid... Northwests are naturally good at lying, it’s hard to turn off... Well it’s a horrible opportunity for me!*
She had to stop, the flow of memories overwhelmed her. She’d been looking to rekindle her nostalgia for the Shack, she wanted to focus on the happier times. While she re-focused herself, a replay of her and Pacifica from last night appeared, showing them happily munching on the pizza in the middle of the floor.

She quickly threw on her blue sweater and started heading round the rest of the Shack. In the living room she saw the countless overlapping echoes of her friends and family all sitting round watching the tv, a very common occurrence. The gift shop gave her memories of working for Stan, including several vivid reminds of her time as ‘boss’ of the Shack.

Her wandering through the Shack eventually brought her downstairs, past the gift shop and behind the vending machine. Someone, most likely Ford, had messily spray-painted a ‘Blind Eye’ symbol on the basement elevator door, warning of the dangerous stuff kept beyond. She pushed on regardless, she knew the risks and didn’t care. The eye split in half as the door slid open and she rode down to the basement.

The control room was laid out as she remembered, but the space beyond that had held the portal was very different now. The triangular skeleton was all that was left of Ford and McGucket’s work and piled up in the room were numerous large wooden crates. This was a repository for all of Ford’s ‘dangerous’ artefacts. Stowed here were things like the cloning photocopier, the remnants of his Quantum Destabiliser, vats of Alien Adhesive, salvaged equipment from the bunker. All the stuff that shouldn’t fall into unwary hands.

Mabel went to the back of the room, staring up at the portal frame. Clutching her neck once more, she relived one more memory, one of her most important.

Pacifica tossed in her bed, then woke up suddenly. She felt less rested than usual, and quickly remembered why. She was in the attic bedroom, not her own four-poster. A small strip of sunlight was shining on her face through the triangular window. She scrunched up her face. “I guess I won’t be getting anymore sleep this morning”, she resignedly thought.

Though this bed was much narrower than what she was used to, she had a strange tug of desire to be sharing it with Mason. She let out a sigh, then called out to Mabel. “Guess you were right about me missing your brother after all.”

No reply. And no sound of snoring either. She rolled over and saw that Mabel’s bed was empty. She’d have thought that Mabel would still be sound asleep; of the two of them she’d been awake for much longer yesterday. She crawled out of bed and checked the time. They’d gone to bed around 3am last night, it was only 8am now. Surely even Mabel needed more rest than that, she’d gotten up at midnight the previous night.

She quickly got dressed, then went off to look for her friend. Mr and Mrs Ramirez were fast asleep in their shared bedroom, leaving her alone to roam the halls. She checked the living room and kitchen but found nobody. In the gift shop though, she saw that the old vending machine was ajar. She stopped by the door, reminded that she’d once been given a lecture by the twin’s Great Uncle Stanford. During one sleepover he’d told everyone staying that they were not to go in the basement, that there were unsafe objects down there. So why was somebody down there now?

*The Author of the journals… my brother.*
Mabel stopped the replay for the third time. She’d watched herself floating in the air before the portal, seen Dipper and Soos’ confused reactions, Stan’s fear, and then the emergence of Ford. The place where he’d arrived was now covered by a crate, so only half of him was visible.

She’d brought up her old conflicted feelings about the incident, whether she’d made the right choice or not. That got her to thinking about her more recent mistakes, all the fuss this necklace had caused. She was trying to shake the thoughts away, told herself everything was sorted and fine now. But they kept spinning round like a loop, the feelings of guilt never quite fading.

A clatter came from control room, some old components went rolling on the floor. “Huh, who’s there?” A head poked up from behind a crate. The blonde hair meant it could only be one person.

“It’s me Mabel. What are you doing down here, it’s supposed to be a ‘no-go’ zone?” Pacifica looked sceptically at the bare earth walls of the basement.

“Uh, nothing, just… rearranging this pile of old junk! Yep, looks totally neat and orderly now!” Pacifica pursed her lips and stared directly at Mabel, who easily broke under the pressure. “Ok, ok! I was… reminiscing.”

“Mabel, don’t lie to me.”

“It’s true!” She wondered whether she should just admit that she was using the necklace and get this over with. “Just gimme five minutes then I’ll come upstairs.” She still felt unresolved, like she wanted to deal with her jumbled thoughts once and for all.

“Nuh uh, this stuff’s dangerous. You’re coming up now.” Pacifica grabbed her arm and started dragging her back to the control room.

“Wait! I’m not done!” She pulled against Paz’s grip, but then the two of them bumped into something propped against the wall, some kind of tall cylinder. Suddenly it fell on them, unravelling as it did so. There was a moment of shock, then a sudden bright flash.

She opened her eyes, finding herself lying on top of a blue wool carpet. At least that’s what she thought it was, her vision was blurred. She got to her feet unsteadily. There was an odd feeling about her body, maybe she’d hurt herself in the fall. As she stood, she got a good look at her tattooed arms- wait. She frantically turned her arms over, eyes gaping at the tattoos. Some hair fell into her line of sight. It was dark brown. She noticed that she was wearing a bright blue sweater. A panic hit her in that moment. She was in Mabel’s body!

“What the f-”

“Hey, don’t go giving me a potty mouth!” On the other side of the carpet, Pacifica saw herself standing up, Mabel’s voice coming unnaturally from her lips. “Woah, this is the total package. Dipper’s right, you do have a firm butt!” Mabel was spinning round, trying to get a good look at her new predicament.

“Mabel, what’s going on!?” She felt decidedly uncomfortable being this way. She could feel the residual traces of all the sugar in Mabel’s system from last night, it made her feel lightly dizzy. There was an odd urge to go rolling around in the grass to burn off the excess energy. “This can’t be happening, you have to fix this!”

Mabel had finished ogling her new form and was now running her hands down her body. “Relax sis, I’ve done this before. Although the results this time are way better, Dipper’s body was like a
sweaty cage, you feel so much fitter. Such well-toned legs, all that jogging you do pays off. And
another plus, you have great eyes!”

Pacifica realised that was why her vision seemed blurry. Mabel’s glasses had fallen besides her.
She put them on, trying to get used to their presence on her face. “That’s my body you’re walking
around in! Don’t damage it!” She ran her tongue over Mabel’s teeth, feeling where they’d once
been straightened years ago by her braces. She wanted to fiddle with her lucky hair tie but just felt
bare skin on her wrist, before realising the tie was on Mabel’s wrist now. “This is so weird, fix this
now!”

“I don’t know, we could totally prank Dipper with this, he’d go nuts…” Mabel noticed that
Pacifica was fuming now. “Ok ok, don’t get my hair in a twist! It’s because of this.” She gestured
down at the carpet, then took a wobbly step forward on her fur boots. “How do you walk in these
things? This is gonna kill my ankles.”

“You need grace and poise.” Mabel looked anything but graceful, stumbling wildly on the heels
and waving her arms around for stability. “Anyway, what is this carpet then?”

Finally coming to a stop beside Pacifica, Mabel tried to balance herself. “Let me introduce
Experiment 78, Grunkle Ford’s Electron Carpet! It lets you trade electrons or something like that.
You just shuffle your feet then it switcheroos your brainwaves around with the next person you
touch.”

“So we just have to shuffle back again, ok, good. Let’s do it then, I don’t wanna spend another
second in your body. No offence.” She was about step onto the carpet when she clutched her
forehead in pain. “Agghh!”

“What’s wrong Paz?”

“Ah, it feels like a million people are screaming out in my head!” Mabel saw that from under the
sweater’s turtleneck there was a bright orange glow.

“Oh! It’s working for you now! Try to focus on just my voice.” Guess this is one way for her to
find out.

“Find out what? Ah, I think the pain’s fading.” Oh crud, she’s gonna be so mad.

“Mad, why would I be mad. Wait, your lips didn’t move when you said that!”

“Uh, I’ve been practicing ventriloquy?” It would be just like Mabel to actually be throwing her
voice for a joke, but she could tell this was another lie. Maybe I should try ventriloquy again, bust
out some of the old sock puppets or Bear-O?

Pacifica threw a hand over her mouth. “Those were your thoughts! I was reading your thoughts!”

Mabel clapped sarcastically. “Well done Paz. 10 points to Northwest!” Pacifica finally noticed the
glow shining from the top of the sweater. She blushed as she reached down, not wanting to brush
Mabel’s more private areas. Mabel, to her chagrin, was happily unperturbed with exploring every
inch of her new body.

Pulling out the glowing stone, Pacifica’s eyes went wide in recognition. Then she looked at Mabel
and put on a stern voice. “Mabel? Is this the unfathomably dangerous necklace that nearly caused
the end of the universe?”

Mabel tapped her fingers together and guiltily looked away. “Yes.”
“And is it still functional despite you telling us it was dead?”

“Yes.”

“And were you ever planning on telling Mason or me?”

“No.”

“Right then, glad that’s all sorted out.” Pacifica considered the stone around her neck. She hadn’t thought much about it at the time, everything had come out so fast, then they’d jumped from one situation to the next. She didn’t like the idea of someone seeing her innermost desires, but both she and Mason had known that Mabel was going through a rough patch. It was hard not to sympathise with her reasons for donning the necklace so often, even if it had almost led to disaster. She’d thought that would have been the end of it. “I’m disappointed in you Mabel, after all you went through!”

“I can explain! I swear, I was only using it to look at the past, I didn’t want to read your mind!”

*Please Paz, I know you’re reading my mind right now, you gotta believe me!* Pacifica sighed. “Mabel, why were you using this thing, isn’t it dangerous?”

“I just wanted to use it to remember the good times, to see all the great moments I had here. Then I got side-tracked down here in the basement.” *I am so done with lying, guilt sucks.*

Pacifica looked at her friend, seeing the remorseful look crossing her own face. “Ok Mabel, I think I understand. But you’ve gotta remember how risky this thing is! It almost tore you and Mason apart.”

“I know, you’re so right! I just got wrapped up in the past.” She squared her shoulders. “You’re right, I’m done with that thing. As soon as I get home, it’s going away in my puzzle-box, no more telepathy of any kind.” Pacifica wondered if she could tell whether Mabel was lying by sensing her thoughts. She still could only skim the surface of her mind, not having any experience using this power. But there was an aura of genuineness around her thoughts.

“All right Mabel, that’s a promise. You’d better not break it again.”

Mabel eagerly nodded in agreement, which sent her long hair flying around. “Whoops, not used to having so much hair. Washing it must take ages.”

“Tell me about it, it takes work to look that good.” She rubbed a tentative foot on the Electron Carpet, feeling the small static charge beginning to grow. Something about that action triggered a reaction from the necklace, and its light changed from orange to purple. “Mabel, what does this mean?”

She examined the light coming from the stone. “Maybe it’s recalibrating, since you have my body and your brain, the device must be trying to compensate. I guess cause your brain chemistry’s all different to mine. You’re lucky it’s still working though, my body must be giving you a boost.”

They both knew that Mabel was the only person who could trigger the necklace’s abilities, something about her bubbly and outgoing personality synced up with the necklace, granting the power to tap into the mental fields. Pacifica was now getting a small taster of that same power.

As she watched the purple light pulsate, a vision of silvery light began appearing before her in the shape of a tall person. It wasn’t anyone she recognised, they wore a hood and flowing robe. A rope curled across her body, holding a bunch of gems over her hip. Most incredibly, *seven* eyes stared...
The vision spoke without moving her mouth, as Mabel had done. *Help me, I must have physical form.* Then the light faded, and she lost sight of the figure’s outline.

“Woah, where’d she go?”

“Where’d who go?” Mabel spun around the room, once again losing her balance on the heels.

“There was someone here, like a ghost. She called out for help. I think she was an alien!”

“Woah, really?!"

“I mean, unless your eyesight really is that bad, and I was just seeing heptuple.” She tried concentrating, quieting her mind as Mabel had once instructed. She caught flickers of the figure moving about, unable to quite get a good glimpse. “Maybe we should switch back, you’re better at this psychic stuff.”

“No, I think this is cause of you. The necklace is, like, tapping into a different frequency than usual, I’ve never seen aliens that talk back to me before!”

A faint whisper came to Pacifica’s ear. *Need a body to manifest. You two possess the means.*

“She says she wants a body so she can ‘manifest’.”

Mabel scratched her chin. “Hmm, well we don’t want her to take over one of us, that might get ugly. I almost got overwritten by Dipper once, it was horrible. Wait, I have an idea!” Mabel hobbled over the side of the room, where the old photocopier was sitting. She clambered up on top and stretched out her body. She was just about able to squeeze all of Pacifica’s body over the scanner. “Hope there’s not a paper jam.”

“How is photocopying a picture of my backside gonna help us?”

“Trust me, Dipper showed me how to use this thing once.” The scan completed tracing over Pacifica’s body, and the machine whirred noisily as a sheet was ejected from the side. Pacifica picked up the massive piece of paper, seeing a black and white image of her body from behind. The paper rippled in her hands as the image flickered into colour. Stepping free of the paper was an exact copy of Pacifica.

She let the empty paper frame drift away as the duplicate turned around to face her. “Woah, your face is actually decent too, way better than the last copy of myself I met.”

The clone looked over Pacifica’s current form. “Woah, weird seeing my body from the outside. Wait, my body?”

Mabel hopped down of the machine. “Oh, I guess you have the body of Paz and my mind, for good now.”

“Coolio, all the awesome personality plus an upgrade in the looks department!”

“Hey, focus you two!” Dealing with two Mabels was going to make things extra tricky. Pacifica didn’t know how much longer she could take before snapping and strangling them both.

“We should give you a name… hmm, how about Pacifi-cabel!”

The clone considered this and nodded. “Sounds great! Pacifi-cabel Pines-west!”

“Great, you named her, now can we sort this out before I do something you’ll regret to this body?!”
“Fine fine.” Pacifi-cabel cupped her hands around her mouth and called out at the air. “Yo, mystery 7-eyed alien! Got a nice juicy brain for you to manifest in! All you can eat buffet-woah!” The clone suddenly collapsed on the floor, creasing her legs slightly.

Mabel ran to her side, pressing a hand to her shoulder. The recreation of Pacifica’s jacket felt coarser than the real thing. “Pacifi-cabel, are you ok!?”

The clone looked up at her with a blank expression. “Perfectly fine Miss Pines. Feels good to have solid limbs again, even if this paper is rather fragile.” The clone stood back up. Pacifica noticed that she was noticeably more balanced on the heels than Mabel had been. “Four years I’ve been stuck in that liminal state, what a drag. I must really have a word with Stanford at some point, the man’s a menace when it comes to mopping up his problems.”

“You know Great Uncle Ford? Who are you?”

“Give me a moment.” The two girls watched as the paper form of the clone began flexing and shifting. Her forehead creased, then five more eyes split open on the face. The long hair began receding, and the clothes morphed into the simple robes. Once it was done, the echo Pacifica had seen was standing above them, 8-feet tall. “Much better. Where was I?”

“Well that was weird. Guess I’ll have to ask Ford about this at some point. Poor Pacifi-cabel though, alas, we hardly knew ye.” Mabel bowed her head in a dramatic pose for a moment.

“Where’d she go? Just crumpled up and disappeared? That was a first though, I guess, never met an alien before.” Pacifica put her hands together. “Now, can I please have my body back?”

“Sure Paz, I miss the old girl anyway.” Mabel shuffled her heels on the carpet, then clicked them together. “There’s no place like home!” A spark shot up her body, ending on the tip of a finger. She reached out and tapped Pacifica on the nose. “Boop!”

There was another flash, then Pacifica looked down at her body. To her relief, this time it actually was her body again. “Oh thank goodness, this is so much better.” She delighted in being able to squeeze her hair tie again, her minor compulsion satisfied once more.

Back in her own body, Mabel was looking at the necklace. The purple glow was fading back to orange. She took it off from around her neck. “Like I promised, no more necklace. Even if it did help out that alien lady. Paz, maybe you should take it this time.” She handed over the stone. “Need to go cold turkey for real.”

Pacifica examined the now black stone once more. It didn’t seem to ‘speak’ to her anymore, Mabel’s thoughts were gone for good. “I’ll keep it safe for you… just in case.”

“Thank sis. Oh, and don’t tell Dipper. Not because I wanna lie to him again, I just don’t wanna bring all this junk back up.”
Pacifica smiled sympathetically. “Sure Mabel. My lips are sealed.” She mimed a zipping motion over her lips, which made Mabel grin widely. This was followed by a bone-crushing hug, but she didn’t mind at that moment.

“Ah, it’s great to be back in my sweet old body, crummy vision and all! I suggest we celebrate by leaving the basement and vowing never to return!”

Just past midday, Mabel was sat behind the wheel of the pickup, revving up the engine. She’d already said her goodbyes to Soos and Melody, who were now busy with the daily stream of tourists. It was just Pacifica seeing her off. “Sure you don’t want a lift back to your place?”

“Nah, think I’m gonna hang out here for a bit. That little extra thing to annoy my parents, right? Hope you have a safe trip home. Did you have a good time here?”

“Of course, any time spent with you is a gateway to guaranteed fun. Plus, thanks for helping with all the necklace junk. Feels good not to have to worry about it anymore. See ya round Paz.”

“Oh, before you go. Just tell Mason that I… love him.” She said the last part with a blush.

“Can do sis-sis, I’ll tell him you’re ready to take things to the next level!”

“No, don’t say that!”

Mabel started reversing the pickup. “Sorry, can’t hear you, already gone, bye!” Mabel drove off the edge of the clearing, giving a last wave back. The truck started to trundle along the dirt track away from the Shack. She was secretly looking forward to Mabel talking with Mason. This sleepover last night had brought back a lot of fond memories and feelings of their relationship. She decided that maybe she was ready after all.

Another thought occurred to her. She was going to have to go and sketch that unswerving Oracle they’d met, write down all about body-swapping and the full outline of day in her new journal. Rather than feeling like a burden, it felt like a challenge. She’d show Mason that she could make a journal as detailed and thorough as his. Smiling at the thought, Pacifica watched the pickup disappear down the drive, heading off for Mabel’s long journey home.
The metal beast stormed through the doors, entering another room stacked with crates. Dipper was hot on his tail though and darted into the room after him. “Stay away Pines! You won’t stop my plans!” There was a metallic buzz whenever he spoke, which Dipper was sure was just to annoy people.

“Not so fast, Magna-taur! Your days of charging into people or throwing cars around are over!”

“But behold! I am unique in all the world, half-magnet, half-bull!”

“Wouldn’t that be half-magnet, one quarter-bull, one quarter-man? Get your percentages straight dude.”

The cyborg scowled at him, flaring the horns on its floating head upwards. “Fear me boy, I have slain hundreds of- eh, what’s that?”

Dipper had removed a chunk of rock from his hoodie. “Why, it’s a big ol’ chunk of meteorite. Has some very interesting magnetic properties, should be just enough here to neutralise your whole operation.”

Manga-taur lowered his head and snapped his spindly hands at Dipper. “Which do you want first, the horns, or the pincers?!”

“Neither!” Dipper started to run at the cyborg, but he clamped a pincer together, sending out a wave of energy. Dipper suddenly found himself unable to take another step forward.

“Ha, there’s just enough iron in your blood for me to hold you in place!” Dipper struggled fruitlessly as Magna-taur approached him on his four legs. “No more distractions.”

The cyborg was suddenly jolted to the side. Mabel had collided into him. “Mabel, catch this!” He threw the meteorite at her.

“Got it bro! Time to grab the bull… by the horns! YEAAHH!” She leapt up on Magna-taur’s back, trying to slam the meteorite against his hovering head. Dipper still couldn’t break free, but as Mabel finally connected Magna-taur’s head to the rock, he was rocked backwards by a wave of energy. As he fell back, his hoodie flew open, sending the contents of his pockets flying. His camera and journal landed behind a stack of carboard boxes.

He got to his feet, only to see Mabel standing atop a hunk of deactivated metal, clutching Magna-taur’s head under her arm. “We did it bro! Success!”

The head grumbled in her grip. “Oh shoot. There goes the deposit on that robot body.”

“Nice work Mabel, couldn’t have done it better myself. Now where did it get to…” He rummaged around in his pockets, trying to find Journal 4. Mabel hopped down off the body and joined him.
He spied his camera behind the stack of boxes.

Bending over to retrieve it, he didn’t see his journal, but he did notice a small business card. “Huh, what’s this?” He read what was printed on the card. “Mr Plutonica’s virtual auction house has… repossessed your artefact! What the heck!”

“Someone stole your journal! But it was right there!”

“Oh, no no no! I can’t lose that journal!” Both twins knew how important the book was, the knowledge it contained had saved them countless times, and was an irreplaceable chronicle of their adventures.

The head of Magna-taur buzzed again. “Oh yeah, the Plutonica auction, I know all about that place. It’s virtual reality auction house, the guy sells rare mystical stuff, top quality.”

Dipper furrowed his brow. “Hmm, VR eh? Alright Mabel, once we’re done delivering metalhead here back to his own dimension, you and me are gonna go get my journal back. No matter the cost.”

A hasty rewiring job on the VR connectors Dipper had excavated from an alien crash site allowed them to tap into the same virtual server that hosted the auction. Mabel hesitated before snapping the horseshoe shaped device onto the back of her neck. “You sure we aren’t gonna have to fight your cat-girlfriend this time around?”

“Positive Mabel. We just get in, retrieve the journal, then get out. Hopefully all before Mom and Dad get home and find us spaced out in my room.” He took a deep breath, then flinched slightly as the device clicked onto his neck. Then his bedroom faded away, replaced with a grid of white lines.

“Woah, where are we Dipper? It’s so clean and eye-hurty.” She had to remove her glasses to try and lessen the glare.

“Just give it a sec Mabel, we’re still loading in.” Beneath their feet a dull grey floor began appearing as a crackling circle of light spread out. The circle spread, bringing more and more of the world into clarity, until a large blocky building was set out in front of them. The edges of the simulation were left as blank grid, not needing to be rendered. “This is it, the auction house. Looks like the modifications I made worked. Time to- woah.”

A crackle of energy waved in the air and a human-sized mosquito appeared in the virtual space. He buzzed a couple of times at the twins, though they couldn’t understand if he was trying to communicate with them in a language they didn’t know or was just hungry for blood. The mosquito shook its head, then flew off into the building.

“Guess he’s another visitor to this place. Must get some weird customers at auctions like these.” The twins headed over to the entrance, which had a pair of ‘saloon’ style doors. They passed into the interior and were amazed by what lied within.

Species of all different types were sat at tables arranged in front of a stage against the far wall. There were beings that were clearly extra-terrestrials, a myriad of supernatural creatures, even a small posse of gnomes. Several of the ‘people’ closest to the stage were standing up and shouting up at a purple alien standing there. “Woah, this place is amazing! So many species! I could spend days writing about all of them!”
As Dipper and Mabel gawked at the room, the mosquito from outside pushed past them and buzzed loudly at the purple alien. Dipper studied the alien, he was almost cylindrical, with three arms on each side of the body and a pair of very short legs. He was dressed in a specially fitted tuxedo. The alien looked at the mosquito with his one bulbous eye. Weirdly for an alien, he spoke in a southern drawl.

“That’s seventeen Sh’nargles for our latest product on offer! For newcomers, there’s still time to have a chance to win this rare planetary destructor sphere. It’s a quality item, only used twice so far! Step right up, do I hear a raise of 250 Grotzits? That’s it, we have a new price, 250 Grotzits to beat!” The crowd surged as the customers started heckling each other, trying to get their offers in. “Am I hearing- oh yes I am, I think that’s done deal. Sold for five shards of polyarch bone from the Quaridenes cluster!”

Mabel’s eyes were wide, taking in the chaos of the auction floor. She noticed the mosquito that had come in with them angrily punching the floor after losing the auction. “This place it nutso Dip! How are we ever gonna find the journal here?”

As if on cue, the purple alien made an announcement. “Alright people, our next lot is coming out now! Lots of juicy stuff for sale here, we’ve got a complete set of Necronomicon scrolls, the official peace treaty of Gaardon-Klax war of 1499, and a compendium of rare Earth anomalies. What a treat this is for the impassioned scholars among you.” He closed his one eye, in what Mabel assumed was a wink gesture.

“This is it Mabel, the journal’s in this next auction. I’m gonna go up and haggle, you see if you can find another way in case I don’t win.”

“Got it bro, I’ll blend in with these kooky folks and mingle for information.” Mabel looked around shifty, then backed into the crowd. Dipper headed over to the stage, shoving his way through the crowd of bizarre visitors. He’d have loved to chronicle each and every one of them… in his journal. He shook his head; he wasn’t going to let one of these guys get their hands on his life’s work. He spied the golden glint of the journal’s cover on a table at the back of the stage, alongside all the other parchments and books being sold.

He approached the purple salesman, who was in the middle of selling some kind of space cookbook. “And that’s sold, to the Tribe of Skull Moon, for the price of seven of their captured warriors. On to the next item then-“

“Hey you!” Dipper angrily pointed up at the stage, and the alien gave him a quizzical look. “You have something that belongs to me!”

The alien just smirked. “Son, I don’t think you know who you’re dealing with. I am Tarvin Plutonica, richest man in cyberspace. And you’re questioning the quality of my merchandise?”

“I got a card, it says you repossessed my journal!” Dipper pulled out the card with a flourish and handed it up to Plutonica.

“Hmm, says here the object was repossessed, fair enough. But can you prove that you’re the legal owner of this here artefact?”

“What?! It has my name on the first page! It has my handwriting! It’s my journal!”

“Well, how do we, fine folks, know that you’re really,” he quickly pulled open the journal to check the name, “Mason Pines, hmm? You could be anyone, an imposter! And handwriting can easily be forged. Sorry, but I’m gonna need more substantive proof.”
Dipper’s words came out in a rambling torrent. “But you stole that, it’s my book! You can’t just sell it!”

“My word’s final boy. Unless you wanna take it up with my security.” He snapped his fingers, and a pair of heavysset alien bouncers materialised at his side. “I’m sure we don’t wanna cause a scuffle here. You can always try and buy back your precious book. Now, I have other items to sell first.”

Dipper huffed and stormed to the back of the eager throng. He reached up for his neck, briefly disconnecting himself from the auction house. Mabel was still lying on his bed, eyes closed and mouth gaping open.

He went over to the secret compartment in his drawer. He was going to need everything he could find to sell in exchange for the book.

Mabel was perusing the busy crowds at the auction house. There was a food serving area set out along one wall, and most of the patrons in that area were enjoying the finest virtual cuisine while waiting for more interesting auctions. She also learnt that there were 7 other auction halls in this building, there were hundreds of sales in any given day.

Now she was trying to figure out a way to nab Journal 4 without being spotted or taken down by security. There weren’t many options, this place was so busy that a stealthy approach was impossible.

As she was lost in thought, mindlessly browsing past the tables, she suddenly heard a noisy laugh. It was a voice she recognised from somewhere. She panned around the room, spotting one of the tables in the corner. There were two people sitting there, one was a large round blue alien, and the other was a human, the first she’d seen in here. Unfortunately, it was a human she wasn’t particularly happy to see.

With that unmistakable eyepatch and muscly arms, Morbid the Huntsman was here at the auction. Instead of a simple VR connector like she was wearing, he had a round port drilled in his neck, with a cable dangling out. The cable ended a short way from his neck, the full length not being displayed in the simulation.

She strolled over to him, affecting a casual walk. As she approached, Morbid noticed her and dismissed his companion. “Well, if it isn’t little Miss Pines. Fancy seeing you here. Nice sweater.”

Mabel was wearing a light blue sweater with a mouse pointer on the chest. She crossed her arms and grumpily spoke. “Thank you. You got over your crazy drug trip then?”

“No thanks to you or your brother. I spent 2 weeks in those caves. You cost me my prize.”

“Oh, boohoo. I’m so sad. NOT!”

“Laugh it up girl, I’ll have my chance one day.” He grabbed an enormous leg of meat from his table, and took a massive bite out of it, aggressively chewing a piece off. “Wanna bite?”

“Ew, that’s disgusting! I’m a vegetarian.”

He rolled his eyes. “It’s not real meat, it’s virtual. No animals were harmed in the making of this food, ya know?”

“Oh. Well, in that case…” Mabel grabbed the meat and copied his large biting technique. “Om
nom nom. Ooh, spicy. So,” she spoke over mouthfuls of fake meat, “why are you here?”

“Just browsing, looking for rare stuff that might help me out, new hunting equipment. I need to replace the goggles you stole from me. It’s worth it to put up with all these freaks.” He gave a disdainful look around the room. “What about you kid? I’d thought you and your brother would stand out in a place like this.”

“We’re after Dipper’s nerd journal, it has some important stuff so we wanna get it back.”

“That journal, huh? The one that leads to all those weird things you’ve uncovered?” Mabel warily nodded. Morbid abruptly got up from the table and headed off. Mabel quickly lost him in the throng of people. “Excuse me, I need to go check something out.” Stroking her chin, she ate another bite of the meat. Something was definitely suspicious about Morbid.

Frantically reattaching the connector, Dipper made it back to the auction house just as the next item was being called out. “Now, our next item is a new acquisition.” Plutonica held up the journal, showing off the golden Pine Tree and the black number 4. “This book is a catalogue of the weird and strange, a perfect guidebook for anyone visiting the planet Sol 3. I know it’s not as renowned as some of the other items in this lot, but I reckon that it’ll only appreciate in value. Shall we start the bidding at, say, 100 Schmeckles?”

“I raise that bid with this… enchanted roll of film!” Dipper brandished the film above his head, grinning and hoping for an easy win.

Plutonica smiled, but his eyes were narrowed. “Very well Terran, I accept your cursed film as a decent trade. Anyone got a better offer?” There was no response at first, not many patrons seemed interested in Dipper’s journal.

But then someone pushing their way through the crowd spoke up. “I raise the bid with this quantum engine crystal!”

Plutonica nodded. “Accepted, that’s a unique piece of kit.”

Dipper knew the voice of the new bidder and groaned as he turned. “Morbid the Huntsman? What do you want with my journal?!”

The hunter just shrugged. “Think about it, all those monsters and creatures you’ve found, I could have a nice handy guide to track down each one and finish them off.”

“Ugh, that’s horrible. Well, then I raise my bid! I’ll throw in…” He quickly rummaged in the bag he’d put together, “this blood amulet! Summons a hail of blood rain, could be a useful party trick. Plus, you get a nice Viking dude to chat with too, I dunno.”

Morbid came over and poked a finger in Dipper’s chest. “I raise you this banshee heart, pulled from a live specimen. If eaten it grants the consumer 10 extra years of life!”

“I raise this height-altering flashlight, change your size at will!”

“This mystic tooth of wisdom can make you immune to dental decay!”

“A key that unlocks any door in America made before 1877!”

“The egg of the last dodo bird!”
“My sister’s magic paintbrush!”

“Ten of the finest potions brewed by the pixies of Colombia!”

“These heat-vision goggles!”

“You stole those from me you little twerp!”

“ENOUGH!” Plutonica shouted down at Dipper and Morbid, who were now right in each other’s faces. “You two need a time-out, this auction’s getting out of hand. I will need to verify each and every one of your bids to ensure their quality and worth. For now, this book’s going in maximum storage. Ugh, Terrans.”

“No, wait!” Both Dipper and Morbid called this out at once, then scowled at each other.

“You cost me my journal, you sicko!”

“The things I could do with that in my possession!

“Get your own, man!” Morbid roughly shoved his shoulder, then stomped away. “Dick.” Dipper watched him leave despairing for what came next regarding the journal.

“So, how’d it go?” Mabel sidled up besides Dipper, making him jump.

He gestured at the huntsman, making his way through the crowds. “Ugh, this guy just cost us both the journal, Plutonica’s taking it away to storage. If only I had some way to verify I owned the stupid thing.” He cursed how helpless he felt without the journal.

“Wait, that’s all you need? I think I have an idea!”

“Mabel, I already tried everything. He wouldn’t believe I was the real author, and I couldn’t buy him out.”

“Just trust me bro, I’ve a got a trick up my sleeve. Hey, purple dude!” She waved at Plutonica, who was about to hand off the journal to one of his bouncers.

“Eh, what do you want?”

“I want you to give me my journal back! I’m the author!”

Dipper stared open-mouthed at his sister. Hissing under his breath, he tried to get her to stop.

“Mabel, you’re gonna make things worse!”

Plutonica crossed four of his arms and looked over Mabel. “Oh really? You’re Mason pines?”

Mabel nodded eagerly. “Uh huh, I totally wrote that book. Plus, I have proof. Take a look at this!”

Mabel grabbed the sleeve of her blue sweater and dramatically pulled it up. Dipper saw her collection of tattoos, before his eyes fell upon a specific one. When he saw it, he realised what she was doing, and his eyes lit up.

Plutonica squinted at her arm, and Mabel pointed at the specific golden tattoo. “See that, it’s a pine tree, same as on the cover of Dip- I mean, my journal. This is my signature, it shows that the book is mine. Snap!”

“Hmm.” Plutonica scratched his head for a moment, considering Mabel’s claim. Then his face turned into a grin “Seems legit to me, here’s your book back Mason!” He casually handed the book
to her.

She smiled at the purple alien, then heard a screech from beside the stage. It was Dipper screaming in joy. “Mabel, you’re my hero!”

Before she hopped off the stage, she asked one more thing of Plutonica. “Oh, hey, I have a feeling you’re gonna get an uninvited visitor to your storage room soon, so could you do one small thing for me?”

“I’m all ears! Well, not literally, though I do have thirteen.”

The twins decided to relax at the back of auction house, paying only a distracted attention to goings on at the stage. They both ate a delicious meal of virtual sushi from some distant water planet, sitting back revelling in their victory. Dipper idly sketched some of more outlandish creatures present in the hall, treasuring his journal more than ever. “Thank you so much Mabel, I don’t know what I would’ve done without this.”

“I do, you’d have started again. That’s the secret Dipper, it’s not just the book, it’s the Author. When you lost Ford’s journals, did you give up? No, cause you’re awesome bro!”

“Aw, thanks. Still, I’m glad you saved it, imagine if Morbid had gotten it.” He shuddered. “I hope we don’t bump into him again in the real world, once was enough.”

“Do you think he’ll be mad when he finds out we played him?”

“Oh, totally. Shame we have to miss that.” He raised a glass of green liquid and winked at his sister. “Cheers ‘Mason’! To the journal!

Mabel clinked hers to his. “Cheers ‘Mabel’! To the Pines!”

The small storage room was disturbed as a charge blew out the hinges on the door. As it fell away, Morbid stepped into the cramped chamber. “Piece of cake. Now to claim my prize.” The security drones in his path had proved little challenge to overcome. Plutonica would never even know he’d been here.

The book was sat on top of a shelf. He rested a palm on the cover. “At last, now I can rid the world of so many monsters.” He picked it up and turned to a random page.

Instead of a description of some hideous creature, he found a photograph of the Pines girl stuffing gummy worms up her nose. “What the!”

He closed the book and read aloud what was written on the cover. “Mabel’s scrapbook, age 7-8! What!”

There was a small post-it note attached to the cover, reading “Ha, you just got Ker-prank’d!”

“NO!!!!!” Morbid’s howl of anguish was heard by no-one. This was the second time he’d been outsmarted by mere children. He would make sure it was the last time.
Since publishing the last chapter, I actually have some fanart of the series to share!

These sketches of the death of the animal spirit from Season 1 Chapter 8, and a Rosetta from the opening two chapters of this season were done by BaKaiju: https://bakaiju.tumblr.com/post/186279725358/from-darkspine10s-gravity-falls-fanfiction

From CIS Droid, we have a sketch of the Intelli-Spores from Season 1, along with a Kochab: https://imgur.com/a/yEaAtKP

I’m grateful to both artists for taking the time to sketch these designs for me, it’s incredible that my fic has inspired that level of creativity, I never expected it :)

Both CIS and BaKaiju are also doing some additional sketches that will be used later in this season for Chapter 22, which is something I’m very excited about.

Mabel and Dipper looked up at the flowing red spire of a massive billowing tent. A travelling circus, Mr Alcor’s Constellation of Amazements, had sprung up out of nowhere in Piedmont, and they’d just had to go and have a look. There were many delights on display, from burly tattooed strongmen, to delicate trapeze artists, to exotic creatures.

This kind of place reminded the twins of the Mystery Shack in a major way. They both highlighted the strange and unusual, even if the twins knew that a lot of the exhibits were likely fake or staged. It gave them both a strange nostalgia, and they knew they were gonna have a good time here. They’d even managed to convince their parents to come, it would be nice to give them a small taste of how ‘weird’ their lives usually were.

They got their tickets as a group, then passed through the tent flap. Mabel poked her brother in the side. “Last one to the big top has to buy the cotton candy!”

“Deal.” Dipper made a curt nod, then the two of them ran through the crowd to secure their victory, their parents shaking their heads and trailing behind. Mabel ended up winning, her parkour manoeuvres helped her weave through the crowd better than Dipper.

Once they were all seated, they prepared to enjoy the main show. It was a bonanza of effects and performances. There was a dramatic trampoline act, as well fire jugglers and even a real elephant. Dipper was impressed, the funds the circus had must be big for them to pull off such a show.

Mrs Pines led the family back out of the central tent. “That was delightful, we really must get out to do more as a family. Kids, where do you wanna head next?”

The twins scanned the available options. There was one that caught Mabel’s eye. “Dipper, look. ‘Weird and Wonderful Creatures! It’ll be just like the Shack!’”

He grinned as they passed under the tent flap. Most of the exhibits were laid out in a large circle round the edge of this tent, with a few gathered together in the centre. Their parent’s sceptically...
looked at the collection of seemingly fake cryptids and mutants.

“This is what Stanford’s Shack is like?” Mom questioned concernedly.

Dad patted her arm “Now dear, it’s fine. Stan did always like a bit of fun on the side. It’s creative at least.”

Dipper nudged his father. “Yeah Dad, it’s like that weird ‘fish’ we saw.” He winked, making his father lightly chuckle. Mom shook her head, she still didn’t believe the boys had seen anything out of the ordinary on their fishing day. “Oh, and don’t forget Mom, it’s Stan/ey, Ford is the sciencey one.”

“Oh yes. Right.” Even after a few years she still wasn’t quite used to the fact there had been two Stans all along.

Mabel had left the others in the dust, already cooing at what a sign called a Cat-astrophe, a litter of six kittens taped together by their backs. Dipper strolled around the room after her, enjoying this brief echo of a place they both loved. He bent over to examine a skeleton that was supposedly from a Hydra. “Pfft, I’ve seen the real thing, this is way off.” The next exhibit surprised him though, by being something he recognised. Fluttering around in a small bird cage was a creature made up of a pair of wings attached to an eyeball. “Hey, I know you. What are you doing so far away from home little Eye-Bat?” These creatures rarely left the confines of Gravity Falls.

“Ugh, that’s just disgusting.” Dipper spun his head round to see what his father was so repulsed by. He left the curious Eye-Bat behind and headed over to his parents. He’d expected some piece of gruesome taped together taxidermy. What he saw instead was much, much worse.

Lying in the middle of a cage was the body of a four-legged creature slumped over on one side. It was completely motionless. Its skin was translucent silver, giving a clear view of the organs inside, which slowly bubbled and flowed like liquid. Surrounding the body was a cluster of green mould, and there was a horrible stench coming from the cage. “Mabel! You’d better get over here and see this!”

Mabel could hear the horror in his voice, and hurriedly came over to his side. Her mouth dropped when she saw the body. She whispered to her brother, not wanting to be overheard by her parents. “Is that what I think it is?”

Dipper solemnly nodded. “It is Mabel. It’s a Kochab.” They both looked down at the pitiful specimen in the cage. They’d seen a creature identical to it a few months ago. It had come through a rift in space-time at the high school. It was an extension of the will of the mighty Ursus Intelligence, which they’d since vanquished for good. “I never expected these things to stick around. I guess I thought all the remains would just be, I dunno, sucked up back through the Alignment.”

“At least it’s dead, without the Intelligence guiding it. It can’t hurt anyone.”

Dipper shook his head. “I’m not so sure. See there, that decay around the body. The stuff it’s made of doesn’t react well to normal matter. I think it’s causing an increase in entropy, we have to get this thing properly secured, maybe buried underground or something.”

“What are you two kids whispering about?” Their mother had noticed their quiet conversation.

Mabel threw up an impressive grin to cover her tracks. “Nothing! Dipper was just telling me a rude joke he got from Stan!”
“Yeah, you wouldn’t wanna hear it Mom.”

Mom frowned dismissively but turned back to the Kochab. “This freaky thing makes me uncomfortable. I think it’s giving me a headache just looking at it somehow.”

Dad nodded. “It’s like one of them ‘Magic Eye’ thingies, you have to cross your eyes to make a pattern appear.” Mabel and Dipper couldn’t help but laugh at their father’s attempts to squint his eyes.

Dipper gave one last whispered message. “Mabel, take Mom and Dad away from this thing. I’m gonna find whoever’s running this place, find out where he got the Kochab, then I might be able to convince them to deal with this thing.”

“Got it bro, Mabel’s on distraction duty.”

Dipper spoke up and addressed his parents. “Hey, Mom and Dad, I’m gonna go find a bathroom, think some of these gross creatures are making me a bit nauseous. I’ll catch up in a bit.” He walked off as fast as he could before either of them could question him further. “Alright, Mr Alcor, time to get some answers.”

He found the manager of the circus on stage in the middle of the big top, introducing another load of visitors to the show that was about to start. He skulked at the edge of the tent, watching Alcor intently. The man was dressed in a red suit, with a top hat perched on his head. He was putting on some kind of exaggerated Russian accent, that Dipper was convinced was just to make him sound more ‘exotic’ for the tourists. His performance was much livelier than any tour Stan had ever given at the Mystery Shack. Maybe come summer he could try and get his Grunkle to set up a show like this, it’d be easy money. Then again, Stan had a hatred for any kind of tents after all the stuff Gideon had pulled over the years.

He waited for the show to end, then followed Alcor out of the tent. He tried to stay relatively subtle while tailing the man but felt conspicuous since he was moving against the flow of people. He briefly lost sight of his quarry in the crowd but saw him dart out of a tent flap.

Outside the busy noise of the tents, Dipper made his way to a small caravan set up at the edge of circus. There was a sign on the door that said ‘Mr Alcor: Do not disturb’. “Oh yeah, well I’m about to disturb! No sign tells a Pines what to do.” He ripped the sign off and opened his way into the caravan’s small space. “Hello? Mr Alcor?”

A door to his left opened, revealing the circus manager. He got a closer look at the man’s face. He had a neatly trimmed curly moustache, and a serious expression. “You should not have come here”, he intoned in that thick accent. He turned away and started removing his outfit, placing his top hat town on a desk. There were a trio of mirrors, so even though he was sat away from him, Dipper could still see his face.

“You can drop the act, Alcor, I’m here about one of your creatures. It’s very presence here is putting people in danger. It’s a big silvery thing in your cryptid section.”

Alcor slowly nodded, taking in what Dipper had said. “Ah yes. The Kochab.”

“Yeah, exactly. Wait, did you say Kochab?” Alcor continued to undress, throwing his jacket onto a coat rack and starting to unbutton his shirt.

“I should have known you’d find me eventually. Suppose I shouldn’t have been so brazen with that
exhibit.”

Dipper grew more confused. “How do you know what a Kochab is? No-one alive on Earth should know that name.”

A brief look of malice crossed Alcor’s face. “Why, I learnt the name from you. I learnt so much from you Mason Pines.”

Dipper watched in bewilderment as the circus manager pulled open his shirt, revealing his bare stomach. “Who are you? How do you know my name?!”

“I read it in a book.” The man gave a weak chuckle. “You’re so talented dear boy, such an effective… Author.”

Dipper gasped as the man peeled the flesh of his stomach away, exposing a bubbling cavity below. Alcor spun around in his chair. “You… you’re from… Polaris!”

“Not just any grunt either. I was once a Brother in the Council of Ursus itself.”

Dipper backed away. “But you’re dead, I… I killed you, blasted you into space. You can’t be here!”

The man laughed. “Oh my boy, but I am very much here.” He gestured down at his stomach, as his floating brain came into view behind the glass case. “In the flesh. It is an honour to bask in the presence of the great author.”

Across the circus, Mabel was keeping her parents distracted by touring some of the booths occupied by the strange people employed by the circus. She pulled her parents past a man lying on a bed of nails to gawk at a woman covered in tattoos from head to toe. Her eyes widened, and she pulled up her sleeve to show the woman her own tattooed arms. She flashed an appreciative grin down at Mabel, happy to see someone who appreciated her artistry.

Today Mabel was wearing a purple sweater with a bee stitched to the chest. There was a speech bubble saying, “Bee proud!”, and instead of black and yellow stripes, the bee was decked out in all the colours of the rainbow. She’d made the sweater for a San Francisco pride parade the twins had gone to last year, but felt it was appropriate for showing her appreciation of the people at the circus too. Too often those at the edges of society were vilified for their differences. Mabel wouldn’t have any of that, in her mind everyone deserved the same amount of love and respect.

She continued round the tent, entranced by a woman covered in two dozen snakes. “Hey, Mom, do you think a snake would get along with Waddles?”

Her mother shot her a disapproving look, then ruffled her hair. “Honey, I don’t think you can have a snake as a pet. I’m pretty sure your father has a phobia of most scaly creatures anyway.”

“Aw, Dad’s just a wimp.” She reluctantly started leaving the snake charmer behind, but a stray thought came to her. “Hey, I really like all those cute snakes you have!”

The woman smiled and spoke back in an eastern European accent. “Thank you my dear. So few people appreciate snakes as I do.”

“So, I was wondering, since you know all about these animals, do you have any knowledge about the Weird Creatures exhibit? I kinda have a question.”
“I know a little, I care for some of the reptiles over there. What do you wanna know kid?”

“You wouldn’t happen to know anything about a big silvery thing that has a smell of death would you?”

A dark look crossed the woman’s eyes. Before she could answer Mabel, the woman with the tattoos spoke up. “Oh yeah, that’s the boss’ pride and joy, he won’t let anyone go near it. Us circus folk all hate it though, the thing’s diseased or something.” Her voice had a strong New-York accent.

“Yeah, my brother thinks it might be dangerous, like, uh, radioactive! He’d fit in with you guys, he’s weird too! He has this totally rad birthmark on his forehead!” Years ago, Mabel had dreamt of running away to the circus and using Dipper as her first attraction. Looking back, it was kinda mean of her to think Dipper would ever want people gawking at his forehead.

The two circus workers looked concerned on hearing about the Kochab’s potential danger. “Dangerous? You think there’s a big risk?” The Snake-Charmer queried.

Mabel nodded as seriously as she could, knowing exactly how deadly a Kochab could be, even a dead one. “I assure you, we saw one of those things in the wild. They’re more dangerous than you could imagine.”

The tattooed woman shared a look with her friend. “You think we should get Alcor to get rid of that thing? Everyone working for him hates it, we’d have a lotta support.”

The Snake-Charmer seemed to agree, but before Mabel could secure their help, she felt a hand on her arm. “Hey, wait!”

“Not now Mabel, there’s some event in the big top your Mother wants to see. Come along.” Her father dragged her away from the circus workers, and she hoped that her words would motivate them to assist her.

Dipper stared down at the shell of a man sitting in the chair, who had once been known as Mizar. His eyes were inexorably drawn to the chest cavity, where Mizar’s brain was contained in a cocktail of fluids. When he’d last seen the Russian, his appearance had been very different. Since then, he’d lost the greying beard, and seemed to have fewer wrinkles. “But how can you be here?! You were lost in space, destroyed like your space station! You should be floating around in orbit. Like discarded space junk!”

“I’m made of hardy stuff, you see.” The Russian knocked on his wrist, giving a clunking sound. “The exosuit was tough enough to keep me alive. Lost most of my limbs colliding with the debris field though and burnt off the skin covering in the re-entry.”

“This must certainly be a weird lateral career move for you, from space technician to low-rent carny. Why a circus?”

“Why not? I can’t create a new world, but I can still give the common masses a taste of the strange and outlandish. A bit of bread and circuses to occupy them whilst I while away the centuries.”

“So what’s with the new name? ‘Alcor’?”

Mizar shook his head ruefully. “I’d have thought someone with a constellation plastered on his face would know more about stars. Mizar is technically a ‘double-star’, two stars close together
that appear as one. Alcor is the fainter companion to Mizar. Alcor, it’s Arabic - The ‘forgotten one’! Heh.” His laugh sounded like he was trying to spit out some phlegm. “It felt appropriate. When we last met, you told me I’d been sent up in space because the Council wanted me out of the way, abandoned and left to rot. I guess you were right. Now my brothers and sisters are gone, the Alignment was a failure. At least I was able to salvage something of my former glory.”

“I wondered how you were able to fund such an impressive circus.” Dipper glanced out the window of the caravan back at the large complex of linked tents. “The last of your Polaris investments paid for all this then?”

“Exactly. I couldn’t return to the Institute directly, the government had all our assets on lockdown. Luckily, I knew about a small survival cache a few blocks away from the tower. All I found was one spare exosuit, and the preserved body of a Kochab. One of Alkaid’s leftover specimens. Useless now of course, with the connection to its master gone there’s no point trying to study it. How did you do it, child, how did you tear down everything we’d built?”

Dipper smirked. “It was easy, just did it with a little help from my sister. We confronted the Ursus and crushed it with our minds. Then we swept out our arms and turned your brothers’ and sisters’ bodies to dust.” In all honesty, Dipper couldn’t remember any of this. His memory of the Alignment after he and Mabel had absorbed the Ursus was very hazy. Most of what he knew was based on what Pacifica and Merak had told them about. “Merak took the other brains back to your home time period. You’re stuck here all alone Mizar. Sorry, not sorry.”

Mizar glared up at him, whilst his chest cavity intensely bubbled. “You took everything from me Pines.”

Dipper stroked a finger down his cheek in a mock crying motion. “Boo hoo, that’s so sad. I mean, I gave you everything in the first place anyway, it’s only right that I came full circle.” He pulled out Journal 4 from his hoodie. “Books like this gave you your start. You wanna know what we did with Journal 9 once the Alignment was over? My sister burnt it to a cinder.” Mizar screwed up his face in disgust.

Dipper felt immense satisfaction laying all this out to this pitiful man. “Remember when Pacifica got blasted who knows where? Cause I do. You didn’t care an inch for her life. You’re just lucky she survived, or else right now I’d be doing much worse than taunting you.” He felt a strange anger in his chest of a kind he’d never felt before, like a righteous fury.

He tried to calm himself down. “Look, Mizar, since you’re not technically hurting anyone with this whole circus business, I might be willing to let all this slide.”

Mizar’s eyebrow raised quizzically. “You’d let me go? Walk away scot free?”

“Maybe. First you have to get rid of the Kochab, lock the body away somewhere no-one can ever find it. It’s a danger to entire fabric of our reality, everything around it is already starting to break apart. Merak was right, you guys really never saw how much damage those things do just by existing here.”

Mizar seemed to consider Dipper’s proposition for a moment. “No.”

“What? No?” Dipper blurted out.

“No. I will not remove the Kochab.”

“You don’t understand, if the decay spreads people could get hurt. I’ve seen what someone looks
like after they’ve been killed by a Kochab, it’s not pretty.” A memory of the drained school janitor flashed in his mind. “Any direct contact could be fatal!”

Mizar smiled with an irritatingly smug grin. “You think I care about that? The Kochab is my secret weapon. Interesting little fact, the body of that creature generates a very low-level psychic field. You probably felt disoriented looking at it.”

Dipper thought back to how illusive the Kochabs always seemed, like you couldn’t quite focus on them properly. “Yeah, isn’t that a side-effect of the non-matter they’re made of?”

“Probably. But it has an unintended consequence. If I say the right words up on stage, the Kochab’s effect can boost people’s reception. It makes them pay that little bit extra attention to the circus, gets that little extra profit.”

“I don’t believe this, you’re using an unfathomably dangerous object to nickel and dime tourists!? My Great Uncle would probably like a word with you.”

“Anyway, it has been fun ‘bantering’ with you my dear, but I really must be going.” Mizar stood up and sealed up the skin over his belly. “Have one last parting gift from Polaris.” Before Dipper could react, he tossed a small metal sphere, which rolled over to Dipper’s feet.

A deafening wave of sound erupted from the ball, causing Dipper to collapse onto his knees. “Ahh!”

Mizar strolled past him and gave a jolly wave. “Dasvidaniya, Mason Pines!” Dipper barely heard him over the auditory onslaught. That metal ball was a sonic grenade, and the whole caravan started to shake from the shockwaves. Dipper tried to crawl towards the door, but the overwhelming sounds were too much for him to bear. He wriggled out of his hoodie, then threw it over the sphere. The blaring noise was muffled now, but still painful.

He picked up the bundle and tossed it out of the caravan. With more open space, the sonic blasts were no longer as effective. He pulled his hoodie away, then crushed the ball with a foot. The sound drained away until it was gloriously silent once more.

Checking his ears for lingering aftereffects, he broke into a pursuit of Mizar, who’d fled off back into the tents. He couldn’t be allowed to continue this whole operation, not with so much at stake. The Kochab had to be removed at all costs.

Mabel and her parents had found some good seats in the central ring. Mr and Mrs Pines were eagerly awaiting another show, but Mabel just felt anxious. If she could get the other circus employees on her side, maybe they could convince this Alcor buddy to give up the Kochab. Then Dipper could figure out what to do with the body.

“Where is your brother Mabel?”

“He’s gonna miss the best part.”

Mabel put on a grin. “I’m sure he’s just… taking his time… you know Dipper!” Her parents looked unsatisfied with this, but then a drumroll started up. The lights in the tent went out, plunging the stage area into darkness.

The drumroll ended and a single spotlight switched on, illuminating a platform on top of a wooden stilt. Someone was standing on the platform, shielding their eyes from the light.
“Wait, is that… no, it can’t be!” Dad seemed incredulous at the figure’s identity.

“It is! Look!” Mom pointed up at the person and Mabel squinted through the darkness to see who they meant. The person standing there was wearing red flannel, with a mop of messy brown hair.

“Oh no! I mean, wow, it’s Dipper!”

Dipper had chased Mizar through the network of tents and found himself following him up a ladder in a darkened room. He reached the top of some platform, then was blinded by a light. A sudden noisy cheering filled the tent, and he looked down. Everyone was watching him, including his family.

He looked up to see another spotlight reveal Mizar, standing on a similar platform across the room. He swept his arms out to address the cheering crowd. “Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls! My volunteer will now walk… the high wire!” The lights shifted to show a thin tightrope bridging the gap between the two platforms.

Dipper gulped, he was at least 50 feet off the ground, and his balance was bad enough standing on flat ground. The eager crowd clapped, and he no choice but to accept Mizar’s stupid challenge if he was gonna catch him. He closed one eye and stepped out onto the rope.

From the crowd down below, he heard the faint call of his name. His family must be seeing this whole thing. He took another step forward, now both feet were on the rope. He had to react quickly as a pole was thrown at him. Mizar winked from the platform. “Let’s make it a good show for them, my boy!”

Mabel’s mouth gaped open in shock. Why in the world was Dipper doing a tightrope walk?!
Though the crowd was still happily cheering, she could tell that Dipper was wobbly on his feet. At one point he lurched uncomfortably to one side, before righting himself. She felt her own heart leap several times as he made his way across.

“He’s got his mouth open, is he trying to say something?” Dad cupped a hand to his ear, trying to make out what Dipper was saying, but the crowd was too boisterous.

As he took another cautious step forward, Mabel thought she knew exactly what he was saying, or rather, screaming. Feeling her stomach constrict some more, she watched, helpless, as Dipper lost his balance, mouth still open wide.

“AAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHH!” Dipper’s feet finally lost their balance, and he toppled off the rope into the blackness below. This was it, he’d never survive the fall. The crowd still kept on with their incessant noise. What he’d give for some peace and quiet.

He closed his eyes and spread out his arms, prepared for the worst. Instead of the hard sawdust lining the floor of the tent though, he felt material stretching out beneath his body. Just as unexpectedly, he was thrown back up into the air. In his upwards flight, he saw that he’d landed on a trampoline, concealed in the dark.

He flew up over the rope and tried to straighten himself in the air. The crowd finally went quiet, anticipating his next move. To his intense amazement, he landed square on the tightrope. He
paused, trying to calm his racing breath, but was jolted by the sudden roar of the crowd.

Determined to finish, he pushed forwards towards the platform. Mizar however was gone, having left during Dipper’s fall and recovery. Breathing a sigh of relief, he finally stepped back onto solid ground. He tried to ascertain where Mizar had fled to, when the floor fell out from under him. He’d been standing on a trap door and was now hurtling down a slide of some kind. This was getting ridiculous, what next in this madhouse?

Studying his exasperated expression, Mabel tried to figure out what Dipper had found out from the manager. He’d slid down and landed on a unicycle, now he was juggling balls that been thrown at him. And were those alligators nipping up at his toes? Mom and Dad loved the performance, laughing at every one of Dipper’s frantic reactions whenever one of the beasts got close.

“Well, I’m impressed. Guess that’s why Dipper ran off so quick, he wanted to surprise us.”

“How thoughtful. Good thing I was filming too.”

Mabel couldn’t help but giggle, she was gonna love showing this to all her friends later. Whilst Dipper was occupied with entertaining the circus-goers, she needed to check on the Kochab. She silently excused herself from the tent, hoping her parents wouldn’t notice her absence.

She hurried over to the creature exhibit. Inside, she found a group of people huddled around the Kochab cage. They were the circus workers she’d met in the other tent. It seemed her call to action had worked.

“Where’s Alcor?”,”We should’ve complained sooner!”, “Get rid of this thing!”, “Calm down!”

Mabel tried to edge her way through the throng of disgruntled employees, checking that none of them had got close to the Kochab. To her relief, they were all still outside the cage. “Hey, kid.” It was the Snake-Charmer. “You seen our boss? We’ve gathered everyone here to give him a piece of our minds!”

“He was on the main stage, doing some show with my brother.”

“Blah, that man, always hogging our limelight! We should just dump this hideous thing and be rid of it.” She started shaking the bars of the cage. Many of the other circus workers joined in, rocking the cage back and forth.

Mabel squeezed her way between them, crying out for them to stop. “Don’t do that! You’ll only make things worse! It has to be removed carefully.” She turned to look at the body. It was a sad sight, even though she knew it was dangerous. It was just a tool of the Ursus, now discarded. She wondered if the Kochabs and their ilk ever had thoughts of their own, or were they simply nothing more than vessels for the Ursus to move around in.

That got her thinking. If the Ursus was strong enough to extend its will across dimensions and puppet this thing around, maybe other minds could control it too?

Dipper was getting sick of parading around like a trained monkey, so finally threw down his juggling balls. “That’s it, I’m done with your dumb games Mizar!” There was booing and hissing from the crowd, but he didn’t care. He hopped over the alligators, who were thankfully quite uninterested in him.
At the edge of the circus ring, Mizar had his arms crossed. “Really Mason, you’re not giving your audience what they want!”

“Enough games! Get out of my way and let me deal with the Kochab!”

“Nyet, boy!” There was a fury in his eyes now, making Dipper slow his approach. “If I have to wait a hundred centuries to be reunited with my brethren, I will! No boy, even the Author himself, will stop me!”

“Funny, that’s what Brother Dubhe said right before we stopped him! Look Mizar, that thing you’ve got caged up won’t rot, won’t decay. It’ll outlast the Earth and the Sun. And everything that comes close to it will wither away and die! You have to get it away from all these people before it’s too late!” He ran at the circus manager, who sprinted off. Dipper tried to get him to run towards the creature exhibit, maybe if he could get Mizar to actually see the damage the Kochab was causing, he could convince him.

His plan seemed to work, and he caught up to Mizar standing outside the exhibit’s tent flap. “Think about this my boy. We could become partners; I rake in a strong revenue here! Perhaps you could let me borrow your journal. All the wondrous creatures within would make excellent sideshows at the circus!”

“Sorry, I’ve had enough of my journal being stolen recently.” Dipper took a determined step forward.

“Then it seems I’ll just have to take the Kochab and start again.” He backed through the flap, and Dipper hastily followed.

“Mizar! Come back here right—“ Dipper halted on his feet as he saw the chaos in the exhibit. There were people, freaks from the circus, running away, and some of the ‘creatures’ had escaped their cages. He ducked as the Eye-Bat flew past him out the tent.

Mizar was trying to corral his employees back in line, but they just scampered away from him. Dipper strained to see what was causing all this commotion. Then he spied Mabel on the far side of the tent, smiling wildly. Of course, he should’ve expected her to be the centre of all this upheaval.

He ran over to her, still unsure of what exactly she’d done to cause all the mayhem. “Oh, hey bro, you got here just in time. Kochy’s been such a riot!”

Dipper’s mouth dropped open. “‘Kochy’? Mabel, you’re not telling me that the Kochab is alive somehow?!”

Mabel nodded simply, and his jaw widened. “Relax Dipper, it’s not the Ursus. Least I hope not, that’d be awkward. I’m the one controlling Kochy, look.” She pointed over to a mass of twisted metal bars. Squirming around the middle was the Kochab, very much alive now. It’s skin was now shimmering gold instead of silver. “Turns out that my mind’s strong enough to manipulate her. All that training with the necklace makes me pretty good at mind stuff.”

“I don’t believe it. You took control of a super-dangerous being from another dimension… just like that?!”

“I know, isn’t it awesome?! I never thought before, but she’s kinda cute, even with the razor claws and all.”

Dipper shook his head, then put his hands on Mabel’s shoulder. “Look Mabel, we can’t keep this thing as a pet, cause I already know that’s what you’re thinking.” He watched her smile drop.
“Think about it, that thing’s damaging the fabric of the world remember. Any minute it spends mobile is a chance for it to hurt someone, or to risk splitting atoms and making an even worse mess.”

“You’re right, I know. I think I can command her to keep away from people and animals. She’ll tuck herself away in a cave somewhere and hide. Is that good enough?”

“That’ll do Mabel. Sorry, I know how you get with keeping animals.”

“Nah, I’ll get over it. Like I was telling Mom, I’ll get a snake to be Waddle’s sister. It’s ok.”

“NO! It’s not ok!” Both twins’ heads snapped around to see Mizar pointing angrily at Kochy. “Get that thing back in the cage, now!” He was gesturing at his remaining employees, but none of them budged. “DO IT!” They stayed still. “FINE! You want something done, you do it yourself.” He clambered over the bars and tried to edge Kochy into the corner.

Dipper tried to stop him. “Wait, Mizar! Get back, if you touch it you’ll cause a chain reaction!”

“Eeeeyyyaaaah!” Mizar covered his face as Kochy suddenly darted towards him. Dipper grabbed Mabel and dived to the floor. As Kochy collided with Mizar there was a sound like a crack of thunder. Shards of metal rained down over the twins. They got to their feet and looked over.

Where Mizar had been standing, now there was just a pile of warped metal and torn clothing. Kochy had ripped through part of the tent and run off. Right in the centre of the debris was the glass case containing Mizar’s brain. Dipper, Mabel, and several of the circus workers crowded around the brain.

“He… this is Alcor?” It was the tattooed woman.

Dipper turned and pushed the crowd back. “Your boss is nothing more than another freak! He was using that ‘monster’ to scam people.” He briefly glanced at Mabel, hoping that his use of ‘monster’ to refer to Kochy hadn’t upset her too much. Luckily she seemed to be more focused on Mizar.

“Woah, he’s one of the Council! How’d he end up here!? I thought Merak…”

“I’ll tell you all about it later Mabel. Did you make Kochy run at him like that?”

“I think so, kinda. I didn’t like how he was shouting and trapping her there.”

“You did good, I’m sure Kochy will be fine wherever she ends up. Now we just have to deal with this.” He picked up the brain case, which started to bubble furiously.

“Release me! I demand you release me! I am the master of this circus! Let me go!”

Dipper looked down at the case, wondering if Mizar could even see him without any eyes. “This is it Mizar. You’re going back to Merak, the long way round.”

“Nyet! I will resist! The Council is forever! Ursus! Ursus! Ursus-“ His screeching voice was cut off and there was a brief spark as Dipper pulled out some wires from the side of the case. The bubbling continued, but Mizar was silent now.

“Phew, pulled out his vocal circuits. He won’t be giving anyone orders ever again.”

The gathered circus employees started muttering to each other. The Snake-Charmer grabbed Dipper’s shoulder. “Who’s going to run things around here now!? Alcor might have been a lousy
boss, but he handled all the finances."

Dipper looked honestly sad for the circus. “Oh, sorry, I hadn’t thought of that. I’m afraid you’ll have to muddle through, your boss isn’t going to be doing anything more than angrily bubbling for the next few hundred or thousand years.”

“We’re really super-duper sorry! Trust us though, your boss was a nasty piece of work. He tried to kill Dipper and our friend once!” Mabel implored them to see their point of view.

Thankfully, the circus folk seemed to understand. The tattooed woman looked sceptically at the brain case. “We’ll make sure this one is given his proper punishment.”

“There you two are! Dipper that show was amazing! Woah, what happened in here, like a hurricane came through.” The twins’ parents entered the creature tent. Dipper realised he’d have to somehow explain his stage routine to them, and why he was holding a brain. Instinctively, he tossed the brain case up in the air and juggled it.

“Yep, I’m just a natural showman!” He missed the next catch and the case fell on the floor. “Don’t worry about that, just a bit of junk anyway.”

After the Pines had left, the circus employees got to work fixing the creature exhibit, before the whole circus would be moving on to a new town. Some of the live creatures had got free, they’d need to be replaced with new exhibits. Repairs would be needed for some of the taxidermied creations too.

At least they had one new item to display. Sat atop a plinth was a glass case. At most hours of the day, it was filled with an endless view of bubbles. But sometimes, behind the water and glass, a teeming organ could be spotted. A simple plaque on the side of the plinth labelled this freakish object as ‘the forgotten one’.
Standing atop a crest of rock, Mason took in the sweeping sight before him. Enclosed by mighty cliffs was a valley of shining emerald trees, which contrasted with a vast lake of shimmering blue water. He even thought he could spy a small rainbow near one of the waterfalls hugging the cliffs. He breathed the mountain air deeply and sighed. This was his kind of place, open and teeming with possibility. Who knew what mysteries were hiding amongst those trees.

“Goddamn twigs!” The angry muttering from the path brought him out of his appreciation of the natural beauty. Emerging along the path behind him was a very annoyed looking Pacifica. For once she’d gone completely against her normal wardrobe, wearing a dark green tank top and a pair of black short shorts. Despite dressing the part, she was still caked in her normal purple eyeshadow. She was sweating profusely and looked like she was ready to give up already. “Finally. There you are, don’t wander too far ahead.”

“Sorry Paz, I forgot that my pace is a lot faster than yours. At least you don’t have to carry such a heavy pack.”

“Yeah, I guess you are good for something. Ugh, I feel all hot and gross. How do you cope with stuff like this?”

He lazily shrugged. “Hygiene is the first casualty of adventure.”

Pacifica wrinkled her nose. “That explains a lot then.” She came up beside him on the rock and bumped his side. “Least the view’s good.”

“Can’t it elicit just a little more than ‘good’? I mean, would you really rather be spending your Spring break anywhere else? The fresh air, wide-open spaces.”

Pacifica swept her eyes over the majesty of Yosemite National Park. “A 5-star hotel maybe?” This time there was a playful smirk on her face.

He smiled back. “Tell me you don’t love this as much as I do.”

“I can tell you I love you as much you love me.” She pecked him on the cheek then headed cheerily along the path. “This way to the monster, right!”

He jogged to keep up with her new pace. “Yep, reports seem to suggest it’s pretty deep into the interior of the park.”

“And you’re sure you wouldn’t rather have Mabel tag along too? You two are like joined at the hip… well, metaphorically. Wait, you weren’t actually conjoined once were you?”

“God, I hope not. But no, Mabel promised to give me some time alone with you. She seemed to want to ‘give me some space’ to ‘explore’ our relationship. Whatever that means.”

“Ha, yeah… crazy Mabel eh.” Pacifica was tight-lipped all of a sudden, but Mason didn’t notice the signs.

“I’m sure she’ll be fine, I think she’s gotten over the whole ‘loneliness’ issue. One week at least won’t be too much for her to handle. Think you can handle a week out here in the sticks, Princess?”

With a determined look, Pacifica replied. “Oh, that’s a promise Pines, Northwests never do
anything by halves.”

As the shadows began to stretch they found a small clearing and Mason got to work setting up their small triangular tent. “Sorry, it’s a bit tight. Then again, you could have brought your own tent if you’d brought a bigger backpack.”

“And have to lug it around all day while we walk? No thank you.”

“Ah, but it’s fine when I do it?” Mason grunted as he bent one of the tent poles into position.

“Of course, you’re the expert in camping after all. My, that is gonna be a tight squeeze. Sure you can handle being wrapped up so close next to me?” She sat down on a log and started removing her hiking boots. “My feet are killing me. I’m gonna be sore for weeks once this is over.”

“Trust me, by day three you’ll have forgotten the pain. You’ll see, the more you hike, the more you enjoy it. If you’re just sitting around, could you set up a campfire? It’s gonna be dark soon.”

Pacifica reluctantly got up and started gathering wood for the fire. Her attempts to rub two sticks together to make a spark were ineffective, so Mason had to come over and help with that once the tent was finished. By then the sun had dipped below the treeline. A spark finally leapt from the twigs, and in seconds they had a sizable fire. Pacifica reached out and started feeling the heat on her hands, but Mason put an arm out to lightly push her back.

“Wait, just gimme a sec.” Before he let Pacifica near the fire he pulled out a small vial and sprinkled some dust over the flames. The fire shot up and briefly turned bright blue, before slowly fading back to orange. “Just checking for Scampfires, they can be a menace if you don’t catch ‘em straight away.”

“I thought those dumb things only stayed around Gravity Falls?”

“Just a precaution. Lately I’ve been seeing more and more creatures that used to stay within the town’s borders way further south than usual. Even ran into a Cycloptopus with my dad, that was a close one. It feels like the weirdness is ‘spreading’. I dunno, maybe it’s just selection bias, I already know about the crazy stuff that goes on, so I’m more inclined to notice it.” He started mumbling as he tried to get his thoughts out.

He shook his head then started scribbling in his journal, recounting their activities. He would often shut out the world to pay full attention on his writing. Well, tonight Pacifica was gonna give him a taste of his own medicine.

He sat beside him and pulled out the Llama Journal that Mabel had given her when she’d come to visit. Mason didn’t seem to notice at first. She glanced over his shoulder and started writing a similar passage, but from her point of view. She tried to mimic his sitting position and the way he’d mutter to himself from time to time. Eventually it got his attention and he turned to look at her.

“What are you doing?”

“What does it look like? I’m writing up the day’s events in my journal.” She smirked at him and he showed a wide grin.

“Oh wow, that’s… really hot.”

“Huh, if I’d known that all I needed to turn you on was this book I’d have started keeping a journal
years ago.” He watched her as she continued to write her notes. She glanced up quickly, then started doing a sketch on the next page.

Mason took another peek at her work, seeing that she was doing a sketch of him. He thought he detected a familiar touch when it came to the face. “Mabel’s been teaching you, hasn’t she.”

“Yes, I can finally do the faces right. Or at least to her level.”

“It looks good.” He did a quick sketch of his own, doing a doodle of Pacifica. “Snap.”

The little cartoon of herself was in profile, and it effortlessly captured her features. Her work by comparison was slow, and still seemed a little off. But at least it was an improvement over her old drawings. “So tell me what we’re out here looking for again? You didn’t say much before, just that it was ‘big and scary and probably really cool.’”

Mason flipped back in his journal to show her the creature. There was a sketch of a feral looking beast covered in hair and sitting in a canoe, rowing along a river. The title said that it was a Hyper-Coyote. She read from Mason’s notes. “Coyotes are renowned as tricksters in Native mythologies… looks like a beast, walks like a man… So what, this is some wild little jackal jacked up on sugar or something?”

“Kinda, these things are supposedly pretty intelligent, I’m told they like to steal little objects to annoy people, or slash tires. Trickster spirits are usually annoying.”

“You sure this is what we’re looking for? Couldn’t it just be a regular coyote?”

“Well, as long as it doesn’t end up as another Chupa-labrador. Those things are just ridiculous. Tomorrow we should get near to where the first sighting was, hopefully we can pick up a trail then.”

“Sounds super. You got a plan for when we find it?”

“I have this!” He reached into his backpack and pulled out a small circle made of wicker. There was a spider’s web of string crisscrossing the middle.

Pacifica raised a sceptical eyebrow. “Is that a dreamcatcher? Really Mason?”

“I promise, this thing can knock out a Hyper-Coyote in seconds. Least, that’s what my research suggests. It’s imbued with cactus milk that the Coyote is allergic too. Tap it on the forehead and the beast’s out cold.”

“Then what? We just drag it to nearest dog pound?”

“Nah, the reaction will probably make the Coyote stay away from humans for a good long while, it won’t wanna get close to more of this stuff.” He tucked the dreamcatcher back in his pack. “That’s for tomorrow at least. How about today, how’d you find your first day out in the wild?”

She hesitated so she could consider it. “It’s… different.”

“Good different, or…”

She vigorously nodded before he could finish the sentence. “Good different, yeah. It’s nice to be able to spend time with you alone. And no stupid parents out here I guess.” Pacifica idly fiddled with her lucky hair tie, as she seemed to do whenever the thorny topic of her parents came up.
“Do you… do you wanna talk about that?”

“Not really Mace. Home life sucks, but I’m coping with it. It’s times like this that keep me going.” She squeezed his hand and laid her head on his shoulder. “Maybe one day it can all be like this.”

“I’ll always be here for you Paz. You know that, right?”

“So you’re my ‘knight in shining flannel armour’?”

“If that makes you feel better.”

“Promise me you’ll never forget about me Mace.”

“Huh? Of course Paz, you know I’ll always be there for you.”

“Even if you have to go to some fancy college to do photography?”

“Hey, how did you… Mabel.”

“Mabel.”

“But yeah, we’ve been apart before and managed to handle it. Who knows, maybe we’ll even end up going to the same college someday.”

“I never thought of that. Thanks for always being there Mason. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

They spent the rest of the evening roasting marshmallows and chatting. Mason tried to teach Pacifica some general wilderness camping tips, though she quickly got bored of that. As the stars came out, they took turns making up names for the elaborate constellations and looked for their personal favourites (Andromeda and the Big Dipper). After that, they simply watched the fire together, feeling the warmth of each other’s presence.

“Pacifica. Pacifica. Come on, it’s time to get up.” He lightly poked her side with his fingers but got no response. She was still deep in sleep. He had a cheeky idea and lowered his fingers to lightly stroke her stomach.

This time there was an immediate response, a giggle followed by Pacifica grabbing hold of her pillow and swiping him with it. “Hey, no fair! What did I tell you about tickling?”

“I know, I know, but I had to! You were so sleepy I thought I’d never wake you. Plus your over-reaction was kinda hilarious.”

Pacifica sat up and rubbed her back. “My back aches so much. I think I slept on a root. How does anyone manage like this? I miss my soft bed.” She rubbed her eyes and looked out the tent flap. The clouds above were light grey and there was a soft fog clinging to the ground. “What time is it?”

“7am, we have to be up bright and early if we wanna make enough progress!”

Pacifica fell back in her sleeping bag. “Wake me up in about 3 hours dork.”

“Come on Paz, I’m not a human snooze button. Let’s get up and at’em!” He roughly pulled the sleeping bag off her.
“Bleh, 5 more minutes.”

“Fine, I’m gonna clear up the campfire and make sure I’ve packed everything. I need to put the tent down too, so 5 minutes or you’re getting packed up too.”

“Woo, free piggyback ride from Mason!” Eventually Pacifica did crawl out of the tent, blearily wiping sleep from her eyes. “You owe me a better night’s sleep tonight. I’ll sleep on top of you if it’s softer than the bare ground.” Mason blushed but mumbled a quiet ok. She took his hand and started leading him out of the clearing. “Monster hunting time!”

They hiked across more of the National Park, passing few other hikers. Most of the time they were alone with each other, enjoying the peace and quiet of the forest. Pacifica turned out to be better at hiking than it first appeared. Her parents had always insisted on a regimented exercise routine, which kept her slim figure and gave her a decent stamina. She was way better than Mabel at least, who was good at sprinting, but got fatigued and tired easily over long distances.

At around midday they reached the first sighting location. There were few obvious signs of any creature activity, one muddy indentation that might have been a footprint, a few disturbed trees that could have been damaged intentionally. But none of it was conclusive enough to point to the Hyper-Coyote, nor were there any leads to where it might have gone. Not even Mason’s scanner goggles could detect anything.

They continued to trek onwards to the next site where the creature had been spotted. As the day went on, Pacifica grew more and more despondent that they would ever find something. Though physically she could handle the rigours of the walking, her impatience quickly got the better of her, which sapped her spirit to continue. They still had while to go before reaching the second site when they made camp for the night.

Mason set up the tent once more then sat by the campfire, while Pacifica paced back and forth. Her face was lit intermittently by the flickering fire, but he could clearly see how irritated she was. “Thie is so frustrating! Two days and we haven’t seen a thing!”

“We will eventually Paz, I’m sure of it.”

“I just can’t stand this waiting. I’m used to snapping my fingers and having my every desire delivered on a silver platter.”

“Just have a little faith. Tomorrow I’m confident we’ll find something.” He distractedly poked the fire with a stick and watched the sparks float up.

“Tomorrow, it’s always tomorrow! ‘It’ll be soon, you’ll see’, ‘just wait it out’, ‘maybe when you’re older’.” She sat down next to him with a thud then let out a long sigh. “Sometimes it feels like my whole life is gonna be ‘tomorrow’.” She stared into the fire with a wistful look. Mason didn’t know what to say, he just sat there, idly poking the fire. Then she quietly spoke up again. “My parents are always gonna be there, hounding me, keeping me in. The day when I can finally be independent seems so far away right now.”

Mason put a hand on her chin and lifted her face up. “It’s ok. Right now we don’t have to worry about any of that. You see any restrictions out here?” He waved a hand at the forest. She shook her head as a small smile started growing. “Exactly. You and I are free right now. That’s all that matters.”
The two of them held their gaze into each other’s eyes, just soaking up the moment. Then Mason seemed to make a snap decision.

“So, I know it’s not your birthday for another month, but since we’re together I have something I wanna give you. Could you close your eyes for a sec?”

She replied with mock pomposity. “Aw, do I have to? Northwests are infamous for being impatient you know.”

“Ha, it’ll only take a moment, I promise.”

She did as he said and shut her eyes. A moment later, she felt Mason’s hands brush past her neck. It made her feel a flutter of excitement. She felt him attach something around her neck, then his hands receded.

“Oh, there’s something else too, watch this.” Mason reached into his backpack and pulled out a small lump of glowing rock. As he moved it closer to Pacifica, the necklace started spinning around. “I enchanted it, took a hell of a lotta trading with gnomes and other contacts in the underworld. I made it into a simple ‘weirdness detector’. You have to get in close, it only works at really short range. Now if you ever encounter something and that thing starts spinning, you’ll know it’s serious.”

Mason pulled the rock away and the necklace was still again. She simply continued to stare at it, honestly amazed by the sincerity of his gift. It was a beautiful reminder of their relationship, as well a sign that he trusted her just as much as his sister. The amount of work he must have put in astounded her. She’d never received such a personal present. She could hardly put her emotion into words.

Mason however took her silence as a show of disappointment. “Oh, no, you don’t like it. Arghh, I knew I should have tried to get a gold pendant! I’m so stupid, you probably have tons of jewellery at home that’s way better. I’m sorry I didn’t-“

She stopped him rambling by planting a big kiss on his lips. “Shut up dork. It’s perfect.” She felt his body loosen in her embrace, the tension over now. “I’m never gonna be able to get something to match this for your birthday.”

“Money’s always nice. Ah ha!” A quick jab to the side was Pacifica’s response to his little joke. “Ooh, hold on, let me get a quick photo.” He grabbed his bulky camera and the two of them smiled up at it. “Say Mystery Trio!” They both cheerily said it, then were blinded by the flash. He pulled out the printed photo but wasn’t happy with the result. “Wait, I think my face looks a little rumpled, let’s do another.”

Pacifica rolled her eyes. “You’re worse than Mabel, just go with the first shot, it’s more ‘authentic’, right?”

Mason finished setting up the camera again. “Ok, one more time. Ready?” He held the camera
aloft again, but as he pressed the button Pacifica jumped on him, playfully knocking him onto his back.

She giggled as she lay on top of him and gave him another kiss. She decided that this was the perfect time to broach an important subject. She attempted a slow seductive drawl. “Maaasoooon, I love you.” She twisted a curl of blonde hair around in her finger, then cheekily winked at him. “This necklace you’ve given me is awesome, but I want a little extra tonight.” She squeezed her body as close to him as she could.

He looked at her dumbly. “What do you mean Paz?”

“I wanna take things… to the next level. Physically, I mean.”

Mason swallowed and turned a brighter red than she’d ever seen. Then he started babbling. “Oh my gosh, this is so crazy, out here in the wild? Are you sure we’re ready, I mean it’s only been a few months, but then again we’ve been friends for nearly 5 years, and Mabel said I gotta have confidence and- umff”

She gently stroked a fingertip over his lips. “Shh Mason, let’s just do this.”

“Oh… ok… and what do you wanna do exactly?”

“Well, you got me all ‘hot and sweaty’ today on our hike. So now, I’m gonna get some payback. I’m gonna get you so hot… and sweaty…” She pulled her top and bra over her shoulders, letting her hair fall across her bare chest.

Mason looked anxious and was sweating from the pressure. “You’re sure you wanna do this?”

Almost impulsively she blurted out her next line. “I wanna see your Big Dipper!”

The two of them froze for a moment, then both burst into laughter, any awkwardness suddenly punctured. Surprising her with his daring, Mason grabbed a hold of her butt and pulled her in closer. As he started exploring her body with his lips and tongue, she stared at his hazel eyes and chocolate curls, feeling contentment like she’d never known before.

When Pacifica awoke she found herself lying beside Mason in their tent. He was still asleep, his mouth gaping open. She had to restrain herself from ‘doing a Mabel’ and taking a photo of his goofy face. She sat up and realised that she was wearing Mason’s hoodie… and nothing else, beside her new necklace.

It hadn’t been the smoothest first time ever for either of them last night, the rough ground and their inexperience saw to that. But it was still something they both treasured, and neither of them had any regrets by the time they’d fallen asleep.

She wanted to just lay beside Mason, but when she got close she smelt his body odour. Neither him nor herself had had a proper wash for the last two days. She grabbed her shorts and quickly and quietly pulled them on. Not wanting to disturb Mason, she zipped open the tent flap and went outside to take in the morning air. She made sure that the hoodie covered any sensitive parts.

Outside the air was cool, and she was grateful to get some fresh air. She’d got up to a lot of ‘tiring’ activities last night but was looking forward to another day of hiking. It looked like it was going to be another beautiful day. She glanced back at the tent, seeing Mason’s stretched out body. If every day could be like this, she pondered, she’d never need to worry about her parents again.
As she brought her attention back to their small camp, she looked down at the smouldering remains of their campfire. The fire might be long gone now, but the warmth she felt for Mason still burned brightly within her.

As she stared aimlessly down at the soot and twisted logs, she noticed something odd. Mason had dropped a marshmallow into the fire last night, it had overcooked and burnt. But now she saw that there was a chunk that had been torn off the marshmallow. It almost looked like teeth-marks…

Her eyes widened and she rushed back into the tent. “Mason! Get up now!” This morning it was her turn to get him out of bed. There was no time for gentle prodding, she just grabbed his shoulders and started shaking him.

His eyes opened and he tried to groggily address her. “Paz, wha’s wrong?”

“I think the creature was here last night!” With that he was instantly awake. He pulled the sleeping bag draped across his lower half away, only to quickly cover himself back up in shame.

“I’m naked! Oh wow, last night…” He only now seemed to remember what had happened the night before. He had a big happy grin on his face now. “You look cute in my hoodie. Ahem, nevermind, gotta get up.” He grabbed his underwear and went out to examine the chewed up remnants whilst Pacifica got changed in the tent.

When she emerged, he was knelt down by the fire, the burnt snack perched between two fingers. “I found some tracks too, it was definitely here. Must have been spooked away by our…” he coughed into a fist, “’nightly noises’.”

He stood up and tried to look serious. Pacifica couldn’t help but stifle a laugh, since he was showing off so much of his thin frame. She composed herself before continuing. “So, you think today we’re gonna finally catch our target?”

Mason nodded and tossed the marshmallow in his mouth. “I guarantee it. Ew, this tastes disgusting!”

Unfortunately, their third day of hiking yielded limited results. After leaving their campsite, they found a few more scant tracks leading away, but those quickly disappeared. They marched towards the second reported sighting spot, but that proved even less helpful than the first, with not a single clear trace of the Coyote.

After that annoyance they hunkered down for another night together in the tent. It gave them a chance to forget their worries and enjoy being with one another. But the next morning, a light rain covered the whole park. It made for a miserable day of walking, particularly for Pacifica, whose clothes were meant for warmer climes. She wore Mason’s hoodie most of that day.

At the next creature site there was again nothing. Any chance of a trace was being rapidly swept away by the rain. As they trudged through yet more muddy terrain, Mason came to a decision. “Ok, so far we’ve found nothing, no signs except some really faint tracks and one bite mark. I think it’s time we head back.”

Pacifica replied mix of shock and stubbornness. “What, no way! We came all the way out here to find it and you just wanna give up?”

“I’m just trying to be realistic. Spring break’s only two weeks long. Do you really wanna spend it walking in circles out here? If we walk fast we can get back to the pickup around 10pm I reckon.”
What do you say Pacifica?”

She crossed her arms, but there was a softness when she spoke. “It’s just like that dumb bat at the lighthouse. I hate feeling defeated like this.”

“I know but look around.” The rain and grey clouds made the surrounding environment seem dull and uninviting.

“You have a point I guess. Let’s go back then. There probably even wasn’t a creature after all.”

“Yeah, like I said, might be selection bias. Maybe it was just a beaver that ate that marshmallow.”

“Ugh, we wasted this whole trip.” Mason hugged her, then held her pendant up to the light.

“Doesn’t look like a waste to me. Pacifica, I don’t care if we didn’t find some mythical beast out here. You matter to me more than any of that.”

“Away, stop with the schmaltz, you know I can’t resist.” They shared a passionate kiss, before turning on their heels and heading back down the trail.

By the time they reached the pickup it was dark beneath the trees. Mason had a little clip-on flashlight on his backpack’s shoulder strap to show them the path ahead. Luckily the rain had finally ceased, which was one small upside to the day. They came into the small gravel parking lot at this edge of the park. The reliable red pickup was the only vehicle here.

They gratefully dumped their backpacks on the rear bed. “So good to be back. Hey, maybe if we have time later in the week I can give you another driving lesson in the pickup.”

“Sure, as long as Mabel doesn’t try to help. I’m surprised though, I would’ve thought she’d have given this old hunk a nickname by now.”

“How about you do the honours, since you’re officially part of our trio now.”

Pacifica cradled her chin in a mock sign of deep thought. “Hmm, how ‘bout the Mystery Machine?”

“Nah, I think we need a dog for that one.”

“The Death Trap?”

“It’s only called that when Mabel drives.”

“Alright, I’ll do a serious one. Let’s call it… “ She gave a look over the battered old truck. She supposed it had ‘experience’ at least. Her eyes crossed the flatbed and over to the cabin. There was something off about the dents on the cabin door though. “Wait, those scratches are new.”

“Huh, that’s a weird nickname.”

“I’m being serious dork.” She bent to examine the pattern of scratches. Three sharp lines were carved into the metal of the door. “These definitely weren’t here when we started hiking.”

Mason now came over to have a look. “Are you sure? This truck’s pretty beaten up.”

“I’m sure, I’m good with spotting when things are slightly wrong. Blame my parent’s insistence
that everything be perfect. These scratches are new.” She ran a hand along one of the indentations. “And deep too.”

Mason did the same and his eyebrow went up in shock. “Hey, you’re right. There aren’t many predators in California that could do this kind of damage. Wait… oh no no no.”

“What is it?” Mason ran to the back of the truck and dragged his pack over.

“I think I know why we never saw any signs of the creature. I don’t think we were hunting it; I think it was hunting us!”

The two of them felt a sudden dread as there was a rustling from the tree-lined path into the park. Pacifica slowly backed towards Mason. She spoke in a whispered hiss “Is that likely, it’s just an animal. We’d have seen it, surely!”

“I told you these things were intelligent. They probably know how to stay unseen. If it followed our trail back here… then it could prepare an ambush.”

“Then let’s get in the pickup and go!”

“The keys are buried in my bag somewhere!” There was another menacing rustle from out of the dark. “Here, take this.” Mason shoved something into Pacifica’s hands. It was the dreamcatcher.

“Are you crazy, you wanna face this thing?!”

“New plan, I go around to the side. When the coyote jumps out, you come out from behind the pickup and charge it. Aim for the forehead.”

Before she could argue with him, Mason ran over to the other side of the path than where the pickup was parked. Recklessly he shouted into the woods. “Hey coyote! I’m over here!”

Pacifica ducked down behind the pickup, peeking over the side to get a glimpse of the elusive creature they’d spent the last four days searching for. The first thing that appeared in the strip of light from Mason’s flashlight was a single paw. Razor sharp claws jutted out from the paw at weird angles. Then the full might of the Hyper-Coyote stepped into the light, taller and bulkier than Mason could ever hope to be. The fur was tangled and messy. Jagged teeth flashed beneath its large jaw. The eyes were the worst part, shining bright and yellow, with a crazed glint. The coyote looked totally feral, like it could pounce on Mason at any moment.

It took another slow step towards him, slobbering and clearly eager for a kill. Mason just stood his ground. That dumb idiot was gonna get himself mauled. “You wanna taste of human?! I’m nice and juicy! A bit stringy though probably.”

Pacifica tried to creep round to the front of the pickup, so she’d have a clear run at the beast when her chance came. As she poked her head round the hood of the truck, the coyote’s neck snapped towards her. She felt paralysed by those staring eyes, like they were the gateway to some horrific madness.

Mason tried to stop the coyote from moving towards her. “Get away from her!” The coyote lashed out with its claws, slashing Mason across the chest and shunting him into the side of the pickup. There was a sickening cracking sound when he hit the metal.

“Mason! Are you ok?!”

Mason tried to uneasily stay on his feet, clutching his right arm. “It’s fine, just a… just a flesh
wound.” It was clear from the expression on his face that he was in much worse pain. His breathing was noticeably more ragged as well. At least the slash hadn’t broken the skin, merely torn his shirt up.

The coyote broke into a sprint and aimed for Pacifica. She edged back around the pickup to try and hide, but it just jumped onto the flatbed and stared down at her with those terrifying eyes. Before it pounced, the creature’s whole body curled upwards, and it pointed its jaw skywards to let out a piercing howl.

While it was briefly distracted, Pacifica saw Mason climb up onto the flatbed unsteadily. Without any care for his injury, he leapt onto the coyote’s back and let out a shout. “Stay away from her!” The coyote tried to shake him off. Mason rolled over the creature’s head and fell before it. The coyote raised itself above him, then dove downward with one of its claws. Mason raised his left arm to try and put up some meagre protection. This time the claws broke his skin and he screamed out in pain.

That was when Pacifica finally stopped cowering behind the pickup. “Hey you, ugly! Over here!” The coyote grabbed Mason by the slashed arm and tossed him out of the way onto the gravel. Pacifica winced as he landed with a thud. She had to stay focused, now wasn’t the time to panic. She put both hands behind her back.

The coyote jumped down off the truck and eyed her up. “Here big doggy, Pacifica’s got a treat for you.” She was inwardly praying that this haphazard plan would work. The coyote went down on all fours and began running towards her. “Yes, just a little closer.” She felt her resolve slipping away as those massive teeth, bared in a crazed grin, barrelled down on her. “Not yet, closer! Last second.”

The coyote was going rip her to shreds with those jaws, she wouldn’t be nearly strong enough to resist. As it roared out at her and closed the last ground between them, Pacifica shot one arm out in front her. The creature continued to charge at her, colliding head on with her outstretched arm.

She felt the mass of fur crash into her, knocking her over in the gravel, then rolling over onto its side. She hastily checked her exposed arms and legs, thankful to find only small scratch marks. The coyote laid unconscious beside her. She got up and kicked it with her boot. It was out cold.

The dreamcatcher in her hand had just saved her life. “That’s why you never mess with a Northwest!” She put her hands on her hips and stared down with a smug grin. Despite the terrifying encounter, she was buzzing with adrenaline.

She went over to Mason, who was still lying in the gravel. “I did it Mace, coyote’s all taken care of! You can get up now, it’s gone.” There was no response from him. She rocked his shoulder lightly. “Mason? He’s gone, we can leave now.” Still nothing. She rolled him onto his back. She had to throw a hand over her mouth to cover her shock at what she saw.

His eyes were shut, and his breathing sounded intermittent. His right arm was bent at an unnatural angle, and there was blood oozing from the long cuts on his left arm. She tried to rock him again. “Mason?! Wake up!” He was still unconscious, and she felt tears brimming up. “Come on! Don’t do this! I need you Mason! Come on, wake up, please!”

They were all alone out here at the edge of the park. No one would be coming to help them for hours. Mason was injured, possibly dying, and she couldn’t do a thing to help him.

She had to focus, despite the tears. Now wasn’t the time to panic. She got her arms under his armpits and picked him up. She had to take things one step at a time. Hefted him into the pickup,
that’s a start.

Pacifica didn’t know what she was going to do after that. Whatever happened, she couldn’t let herself give up now.
Consequences

Everything about that night was a blur for her. She remembered sitting behind the wheel of the pickup, Mason lying out on the flatbed. Driving in the dark past flashing lights, trying desperately to stay on the road for both their sakes. Then when she arrived, countless voices, shouting instructions, rushing them to and fro. The bright white of the waiting room, unbearable. Then she was led inside. Mason was lying in a hospital bed. A nurse was telling her something about him, but she didn’t take any of it in.

Pacifica just stared vacantly at his wounded body, covered by a pale gown. She should’ve protected him, and now he was in a coma. Suddenly the fatigue of their long day caught up on her. She found a seat by his bedside, then drifted to a restless sleep, plagued with dreams of hideous faces and deranged beasts.

“Pacifica? Pacifica? Hey, you gotta wake up now.” She felt a flurry of pokes to her side and tried to wave them away.

“Not now Mason, five more minutes.”

“I’m not… it’s Mabel, Paz.” Pacifica rubbed her eyes and tried to remember where she was. The first thing she saw was Mason, still asleep in the bed. There was an IV lead in his left arm, and his right arm seemed to be in a cast. She panned around the room. Their backpacks had been dumped at the end of the bed. Standing beside her, wearing a teal sweater with a ball of yarn stitched to the chest, was the ever cheerful Mabel Pines. Only, she didn’t look so cheerful today.

“Mabel, what’re you doing here?” She gave a long yawn after saying that. She barely felt like she’d got any rest at all since last night.

Mabel slung her sticker-covered backpack down, then came to sit on the plastic chair next to her. “So. Dipper really got into some trouble this time?”

Pacifica felt a wash of guilt run over her. “I’m so sorry Mabel, I did everything I could! The creature was so fast and dangerous, I couldn’t-”

“Hey, I understand. It’s not your fault.” Mabel rested a hand on her shoulder. “The hospital called us this morning, luckily I was the one who got the call, Mom and Dad would’ve freaked out! I told them you two are staying in some swanky hotel for now.”

Pacifica ruefully looked around the cramped one-bed hospital room. “Yeah, real 5-star place.”

Mabel got up and rummaged in Mason’s things for a moment. “Do you know where Journal 4 is?”

Pacifica came over to help, finding Mason’s torn hoodie. “In here I think.” She pulled out the Pine Tree book and passed it to Mabel. “Why do you need it?”

Mabel flicked the book open and browsed to the Hyper-Coyote page. “This was the thing that attacked you guys?” Pacifica nodded, then Mabel scoffed. “Dipper really needs to come up with better names. I mean, ‘Hyper’-Coyote, that’s terrible!” She went over to Mason’s side, shaking her head. “Oh bro, why’d you have to go and be such a hero?” From within the folds of her sweater she pulled out a small glass vial containing a blue liquid. She placed the vial to Mason’s lips and made him drink it.
“What is that?”

“It’s a serum, should bring him out of the coma. I reckon a few hours, maybe a day. You can relax now Paz, he’s gonna be fine.”

Pacifica didn’t feel relaxed in the slightest, as she watched Mason’s chest rise and fall beneath the clinical hospital gown. Mabel could see her friend’s worry, and she hugged her tight. “It’s ok, Dipper just bit off more than he could chew this time. I’m sure he’ll be right as rain soon. Come on, you need to get some rest too.”

Pacifica wriggled free of Mabel’s grasp. “No! I’m not gonna leave him here! Not until he wakes up.”

Mabel frowned, but then Pacifica saw a mischievous look in her eye. “I thought you were gonna say that. That’s why I brought this.” She went over to the backpack and showed Pacifica the contents. “Some backup clothes, you probably wanna change.”

Pacifica looked down at herself, only now realising that she looked awful. She hadn’t had a chance to shower in four days and had been wearing the same clothes the whole time. There was sweat from their days hiking, and scuff marks from the coyote fight.

She almost felt more tears coming as she took the clothes from Mabel. “Thanks, I think I need this.”

“You go change, I’ll watch him till you get back.”

Pacifica nodded and went to find a bathroom to change in. A mirror showed her how terrible she really looked, her makeup was smeared, and her eyeshadow had run terribly. She washed it all off, she wanted to feel clean again. She eagerly took her hiking gear off, then checked over the clothes Mabel had brought. It wasn’t really her style, there was a green skirt and some white socks, and a blue t-shirt.

At the bottom of the bag was her llama sweater, which she was happy to put on. She ran a hand over the soft wool, the first nice texture she’d felt in ages. It felt less tight than when she’d last worn it. There was a slight change in the colour of the wool near the bottom, Mabel must have knitted an extension. The fact that she cared enough for her to do a little thing like that made her feel even more grateful towards her friend.

Before she left, she remembered that she was wearing her new necklace. She made sure it was hanging over the sweater’s turtleneck, then took the pink hair tie from her wrist and put her hair into a ponytail. When she got back to Mason’s room, she found Mabel eagerly chatting with him, despite the fact he was still fast asleep. “…and then she drove you all the way here! Can you believe that! Pacifica behind the wheel again! Crazy right?”

Mabel heard Pacifica enter, and left her brother’s side. “Are you ok Paz? You didn’t get hurt did you?”

“Nothing too bad, just mental scars.”

“Those are the worst, am I right?”

“Totally.” She sat back in the plastic chair and pulled it close to Mason’s bedside.

Mabel stood by her. “How was the hiking anyway? You two have a good trip before all… this?”
Pacifica tried to muster up the energy to have a proper conversation, she still felt exhausted. “It was enjoyable, nice landscapes, Mason makes for good walking company.” A small smile crept back onto her face. “We had some fun evenings.”

Mabel had a knowing look. “Oh, I know what that means. You go girl! Spill the beans then, you gotta tell me everything!”

“Really? Now’s not exactly the best time. And besides, no. I’m not gonna talk about that with anyone but Mason.”

Mabel blew a raspberry. “Boo! What are girlfriends for if not to talk about relationship biz!? I’ll get you to talk later, I’m sure.”

“Whatever.” Pacifica slumped into her arms which rested on the side of the bed. “I feel terrible Mabel, we were supposed to be a team, and I let him down. Maybe my parents were right, and this all some cosmic judgement nonsense cause I disobeyed them. The nail that sticks out gets hammered down.”

“That’s baloney! You should be allowed to be as free and unique as you like! Don’t let other people wear you down and tell you what to do! You think I care one jot what people think of me, huh? Besides, your nails are really pretty when you wear that purple gloss.”

“Mabel, it’s not that kinda nail- nevermind.”

“Regardless, you shouldn’t let those poopheads called your parents ruin every aspect of your life. Dipper wouldn’t want you worrying yourself thinking like that, would he.”

“No, guess not.”

“Then that’s settled. Just try not to worry, if I’m right, he’ll be perfectly fine once this is over. You didn’t let him down at all, you saved him Paz!” Pacifica tried to turn away, still feeling responsible for Mason’s condition. “Hey, what’s that?”

As she’d turned, Mabel had noticed her necklace. “Oh, Mason gave it to me for my birthday. It’s a little pine tree, see.”

“Aw, seems Dipper can be sweet sometimes. And look, we match. Snap.” She pulled up her sleeve and lifted her arm so that the golden pine tree tattoo was next to Pacifica’s necklace. “Guess he really loves you then.”

“Yeah, and I love him.”

“Aw, you guys!” Mabel lightly shoved her arm. “This is too adorable. Ah, wish I didn’t have to leave. Should probably be going now.”

“Going? What, you’re not staying here?”

“I have to go get something else, a backup in case his condition worsens. Don’t worry! He’s probably gonna be fine. But I have to head home, tell Mom and Dad you two are alright, then I’m gonna follow up a lead from this.” She tucked Journal 4 into her sweater pocket. “Don’t stress too much when I’m gone. Dipper’s a big boy now, he can look after himself.”

Before Mabel could leave, Pacifica called out. “Mabel. I just wanna say… thanks, for everything. I don’t know what I’d do without a friend like you.”
Mabel smiled warmly. “I told you, that’s what friends are for. See you round Paz.” Once she was gone, Pacifica leaned her head back on the plastic chair. She could tell it was going to be a long day.

The hours ticked by slowly in Mason’s room. Occasionally doctors would have a look in, but none of them stayed long. Mabel had given them all of his medical history when she’d popped in, his condition was perfectly stable now. Yet she still felt anxious the whole time. She just wanted him to wake up now, to tell her he was alright himself. She wrapped herself up in the yellow sweater, trying to calm herself down.

She found herself fiddling with her new Pine Tree pendant, as she’d often seen Mabel do with her old Ursus stone. She used to do the same thing too with her ‘lucky’ hair band, the one that she’d used when in space with Mason. It was in her hair right now, just one of dozens of small connections to the boy lying in front of her that she’d started accumulating. She thought how odd this whole thing would seem to her younger self, 5 years ago she’d have barely even looked at Mason if he passed her in the street. Now he was her entire world.

Wondering back, she tried to recall the first time she’d ever encountered Mason. The first time she met ‘Mason’ of course was two years ago, that day they’d played tag. She even had a neat description of that day written down in her journal. But of course, before that he was still just Dipper.

It was the summer of 2012, that was when she’d first met him and his sister. She remembered the party at the manor, but that was just the first time they became friends, not their first encounter. There was the golf match with Mabel, he’d tagged along and not made much of an impression. Before that was Pioneer Day, he’d told her that her family history was a lie. It had seemed like a spiteful act at the time, but now it just seemed like it had opened her eyes for the first time.

But before even that, she remembered the first time she’d ever even laid eyes on him. That old miser, Stan Pines, had thrown a party at his Shack. Normally she wouldn’t have bothered to go, wouldn’t deign that crummy establishment with her presence. But it turned out to be a big event, and she wanted to show everyone in town that she stood on top of the social ladder. There she’d run into the impossibly enthusiastic Mabel, who’d she’d taken pride in knocking down. Was she really so petty back then?

She never even spoke to the ‘friends’ who’d followed her around back then anymore, they’d only been interested in her money and prestige. The moment the Northwests lost their manor, they barely wanted anything to do with Pacifica.

She focused on when she’d first seen Mason. She’d gone to the bathroom, stressed out at Mabel’s stupid little dance competition. When she came out, he was there with that redhead, Wendy. Wendy had left to go to the bathroom, then she was alone with him for a moment.

There wasn’t much to base a first impression on. He’d looked happy in that instant, laughing at whatever he’d just been talking about. A dumb clip-on bow tie was his only attempt at dressing up for the event. She’d just stormed past him back to the main dance floor, not giving him a second thought. By the time he’d returned there she’d already left for the afterparty. Strange how such a fleeting encounter had led to so much further down the road.

All these thoughts of Mason were making her anxious, so she tried to focus on something else. She reached in her backpack for her Llama Journal. She skimmed over her notes from the last few days, not really focusing on the words. There was a little sketch of the dreamcatcher, the intricate lines
had been easy for her to replicate. That was the kind of thing she liked drawing, geometric shapes, not having to match emotions perfectly or worry about subtle nuance. She started to feel a little less worried about the situation, letting the book distract her. She continued to flip through the pages.

However, she stopped when she reached her sketch of Mason. It wasn’t a perfect sketch by any means. But it still meant a lot to her. Waves of emotion bubbled up inside her. A lone tear fell and splattered on the page besides the drawing. This was all too much for her, so she slammed the book closed and shoved it beneath the chair.

It probably wasn’t a good idea to just sit here and stew in her thoughts, but she couldn’t concentrate on anything with Mason lying right there. She felt deeply drained from what they’d been through. Rummaging around in the bag Mabel had left her she found a few snack bars and wolfed them down. They were overly sweet and sickly, but better than nothing. The last thing she’d eaten before that had been a shared loaf of soggy bread with Mason, standing under the cover of some trees to try and get out of the rain.

She couldn’t help but stare at his injuries. The cuts on his left arm were covered by bandages, and his right had a plaster cast covering most of it. She guessed it must have been broken when he hit the pickup. Her eyes drifted over older scars, remnants of injuries he’d picked up over the years of Mystery Hunting. One arm had odd scars in groups of three, like he’d been stabbed with a fork. There was a relatively recent wound on his neck, with what looked suspiciously like teeth marks. There were many small cuts and marks all over, from countless adventures.

He looked so fragile in the gown, nothing like his normal self. Since she’d got to know him 5 years ago, she’d observed that Mason had two states he usually fell in. The first was a confidence he possessed whenever dealing with Mystery Hunts or school work, he was the kind of person who’d found a niche in life and was happy whenever he could stay there. His other state was a kind of clumsy awkwardness, that he usually had whenever he had to deal with most people.

Interestingly, she’d noticed recently that he’s started acting more like the first state when she was around. His confidence regarding their relationship must have been rising. It made her glad that he could feel properly happy around her now, there was less of his anxiety and fretting.

She tried to imagine how he’d react if their roles were reversed, if she was the injured one. He’d probably try to stay calm at first, panicking wasn’t logical... then he’d probably break and down and cry like a baby anyway. She let out a weak chuckle at the thought. She wondered if he’d stayed composed when he thought she’d been blasted into atoms up in space.

Too many thoughts of death were swirling around, and she tried to shake them off. Mason was gonna be fine, that’s what Mabel and the doctors said. Nothing to worry about, she repeated to herself. It didn’t stop her worrying though.

Pacifica was idly brushing back Mason’s hair, examining his birthmark in detail, when something finally started to happen. The weird contours of his forehead markings had never made her uncomfortable, as Mason had once feared, she just found it a minor curiosity, one more little neat detail about him. She was feeling drowsy, just sitting around turned out to be extremely taxing. She looked up at the clock. It was about 5pm. She’d been here all day, and nothing had changed.

Then, from outside the room, she heard raised voices. It sounded like one of the doctors was arguing with someone. She perked up her ears, it was better than the silence she’d endured the rest of today. “I’m sorry, I can’t allow access to the room, it’s simply policy.”
“Policy!? I can overrule any rules this place has! I demand to be let in, post-haste.”

“I can’t allow that, please sir and madam, you have to go.”

“Don’t talk to me that way, I am your better! Now let us in!”

There was the sound of a kerfuffle from outside, then the doctor was pushed into the room. He was trying in vain to keep the door shut, but the people outside barged their way in. Pacifica’s face paled completely when she saw who these intruders were.

Standing there, glaring down at her, was her father, Preston Northwest. Her mother, Priscilla, followed him into the room, and then hurried the doctor out, locking the door as he went. Pacifica leapt up off the plastic chair she’d been sat in for the last few hours. “Mom, Dad! What are you doing here?!”

Preston angrily pointed at her. “We could very well ask you the same thing! Out here, hundreds of miles from home, in some random hospital ward!? What on Earth were you thinking child!?”

Pacifica inwardly cursed that she’d been too distracted to message her parents. Over the last few nights she’d given them a quick message to assuage their doubts, telling them that she was ‘staying with a friend’. She’d declined to inform them who that friend was, or where’d she gone. She was amazed they’d managed to track her down over such a long distance.

She tried to find the words that could possibly fix this but couldn’t think of anything to say. She withered under the harsh glares of her parents. “I meant to text! I got distracted!”

“That’s not good enough missy! And what in the world are you wearing!?”

Pacifica looked down at her sweater, then indignantly shot back, “None of your business!”

While they argued, Priscilla looked around the room, trying to discern why Pacifica was here. Then she spotted the boy in the bed. “Oh my god! Preston, it’s him!” She spat the last word out with such bile and hatred.

Preston set eyes on the boy, and immediately his expression darkened. “Dipper Pines. We tried so hard to teach you the best values in life, and this is how you repay us.”

Pacifica knew that any attempt to weasel out of this would fail now. She couldn’t hide anything anymore, it felt like her whole life was crumbling around her. Well tough luck. She wasn’t going to grovel and beg forgiveness this time. She backed up to Mason’s side and clenched her fist. “So what? He’s my friend, he’s more than that! He was one of the first goddamn people who saw me as a person, not some trophy!”

“You will learn your place! This boy destroyed our family name, ruined our most prestigious party. Worst of all, he led to us losing our family home! And you defend him?!”

“Our family name ruined itself! If it wasn’t for him you’d still be frozen as part of a giant throne!”

“I’ve had enough of this!” Her father rubbed his eyes with his fingers, then pinched the bridge of his nose. “We’re leaving now. You’re coming back to Gravity Falls and you will never be allowed out of our sight again, do you hear! Come along, Pacifica.”

They expected her come to heel for them just like that? She stood her ground, not moving an inch. “No.”
Both of her parents began spluttering in outrage. “No?! You are our daughter, you will do as we say!”

“I’m staying right here.” She defiantly sat back in the chair by Mason’s bed, crossing her arms.

Her father started the next line of interrogation. “You listen here Pacifca, I’ve had enough arguing. I forbid you from ever seeing this boy again. He’s clearly a negative influence!”

“Nope, not happening. I am not moving from this chair.” She affected a disinterested tone, like her parents were barely a blip on her register.

“You’re acting like a child! Do you really intend to tarnish your entire life, to throw it all away over some hooligan!”

Her mother chimed in. “We’re doing what’s best for you Pacifca. Things will be better without him, you’ll see.”

“Talk about negative influences, you two are the worst I’ve ever had!”

Her parents were taken aback, and Preston angrily responded. “After everything we’ve done for you, all we’ve provided, the best schools, highest standards of living. We even tried being lenient recently, gave you a chance to exercise the freedoms we allowed. After all that, you dare insult us!”

She thought for a moment over whether she should be totally honest. She’d gone this far after all, couldn’t hurt to tell the truth. “Bull. Shit.” She took in her parent’s aghast faces, then continued. “All that stuff, it doesn’t make me happy! You kept me in line like a slave, expecting me to do whatever you wanted! Well too bad, I’m sick and tired of being your puppet! You don’t care about me at all! If you did you wouldn’t demand I leave the kindest person I’ve ever met! I hate you!”

Priscilla clung tight to her husband. “He’s twisted her mind! We have to get her away from him!”

Preston tried to question his unruly daughter. “Why all this, now?! We thought you’d put this Pine boy behind you! For years you’ve been our model child, why make this futile rebellion?!”

“You really don’t know a thing about me, do you!? What do you think I’ve been doing every summer? Seeing my ‘friends’? The only real friends I have are the Pines twins! Shows how much you know, I’ve been seeing them for 5 years and you didn’t even notice!”

Preston suddenly gripped her arm tightly, pressing his fingers down through the sweater. “I’m ending this, we’re leaving!”

“Let me go!” Pacifca tried to struggle free of her father’s grip as he dragged him towards the door. “Get the fuck off me! I’m not going with you, ever again! My boyfriend’s hurt, and I’m gonna stay with him! Woah!” Her father’s hand suddenly loosened, and she fell back onto the chair.

“B-boyfriend?! You can’t be serious?!” He glanced down at her, noticing the Pine Tree pendant for the first time. Pacifca realised that she’d finally crossed a line, there would be no going back from this. She was gripped by the terror of the idea that they were gonna drag her out of here by force, and that she’d never see Mason again.

There was only one course of action she could think of taking now. She reached over Mason and grabbed his left hand, squeezing it as tight as she could. “You heard me, now get out of here you bastards!”
She soaked up the horrified looks on her parents faces. It felt surprisingly good to defy them so openly. For so long she’d had to bottle this stuff up, now it was coming out in one massive burst.

Preston was seething with anger now. He was about to blow too. Priscilla just stared daggers at her daughter. They shared a brief look between themselves, then her mother spoke. “He’s obviously corrupted her!”

“You insolent little welp! We’ll cut off all your credit cards, just try surviving on your own without us!”

“You think this peasant can provide the kind of life you want to lead? He’s nothing, a nobody!”

She stopped listening - it was the same tired insults she’d put up with all her life. Every time she made the slightest mistake it was always the same. First the pleas for her to toe the line, then intimidation. None of their threats mattered anymore. She’d be fine if she never saw or heard from them ever again.

Suddenly she felt something tickle her neck. She looked down and saw her pendant, spinning around in a circle. She completely zoned out her parents as her eyes widened in shock. The pendant was only supposed to do that when it was in the proximity of something ‘weird’. What in this small hospital room was acting unusual all of a sudden?

“Are you even listening to us Pacifica! Do I need to bring out the bell??”

Pacifica’s eyes darted wildly around the room. There was nothing out of the ordinary, a potted plant in the corner, some more plastic chairs, their backpacks from the hike. Beneath her chair was her journal and a couple of leftover snack bars. Everything looked completely mundane.

Then she remembered that the enchantments only worked at close range, she had to be right up against whatever was acting ‘weird’. And who was she currently stretching her arm over?

Slowly, trying not to get any attention from her parents, she panned her eyes over to the hospital bed, and down at Mason. Her parents were still yammering away, but they weren’t important. She tried to keep calm as her eyes finally settled on Mason. She pulled her hand away in shock when she saw what was going on.

His forearms were covered in a new layer of brown hair. It was thick and had sprung up out of nowhere in the last five minutes. His face too, there were now mutton chops of hair stretching down. He was contorting his expression into some kind of growl, and there was a deep moan coming from his mouth.

She stood up, interrupting her parent’s diatribe in the process. “We gotta get back.” She still had her eyes fixed on Mason’s condition.

“DO NOT INTERRUPT US!” She felt another grip on her wrist, even tighter this time. The constriction was so tight she fell to her knees. “This ‘scum’ isn’t good enough for you!”

“He’s better than you!” A loud gasp from the bed turned everyone’s heads. Mason let out a hiss of air, then sat upright, grinning. Then his eyes opened. Pacifica covered her mouth when she saw them. They were yellow, like those of the Hyper-Coyote, he looked totally crazy.

She roughly broke free of her father, who was captivated staring at Mason. She scooped up her journal, then dragged both of her parents the back of the room, as far as she could get from him. Her father pushed past her. “I’ll deal with this insignificant speck. He’s clearly snapped.”
Pacifica didn’t have time to debate this, she just got in front of her father and roughly shoved him back against the wall. “Shut up and stay back!” The look of indignance on his face would have been priceless were she not in a dangerous situation.

Mason had ripped his arm free from the IV and was now crawling across the bed on all fours. Pacifica tried to grab her bag, maybe the dreamcatcher could help. But Mason waved a hand out at her, forcing her back. She noticed that he was now sporting lengthy claws on his hands and feet.

She flipped through her journal, she’d copied a few of Mason’s notes on the coyote the other night. There wasn’t much on weaknesses though, even if she’d had Journal 4 itself. Mason hopped down off to the side of the bed but whined in pain as he landed. He’d landed on his broken arm, which he was now clutching.

“Mason, you gotta talk to me, tell me what’s happening!” He just snarled and tried to crawl forwards some more. He was low to the ground, legs bent painfully to attempt an animalistic gait. He waved his left arm out at the Northstes, who were all now pressed as close to the wall as they could be. The claws narrowly missed swiping Preston. Priscilla screamed out in terror, and Pacifica could only watch Mason slowly approach.

With a great crash, the door to the hospital door suddenly burst open, someone had kicked the lock in. All four heads turned to look at the newcomer. Pacifica let out a halting breath, as standing in the open doorway was Mabel, covered in dirt and scorch marks. She still seemed lightly singed on certain parts of her sweater, and her glasses were lopsided on her face. She was breathing heavily but looked determined. “I leave for a few hours and Dipper goes all Teen Wolf on me!”

Pacifica called out to her friend. “Mabel, watch out!” Mason tried to lash out at her, but Mabel just casually fired her grappling hook. It hit him in the gut, sending him sprawling on the floor. “Paz, need an assist!” Mabel grabbed the rope and started tying it around Mason’s chest, careful not to touch his broken arm. Pacifica darted beside her and helped tie the knots. “So, you had a good day so far?” Mabel glanced up at the Northstes who looked dumbstruck at what was happening. “See you had a run in with the folks, eh? Bet that went well.”

“Mabel, what’s going on! Why is Mason all furry and attacking us?!”

“Well, crazy story. Turns out when I went to get the ‘backup’ I promised, it turned out that you hadn’t found a Hyper-Coyote at all!” They finished tying the ropes, and Mason fell and wriggled around on his back.

“What was it then?!”

“Try a Were-Coyote.”

“No fucking way.”

“Ah! Language dear!” Mabel delved into her sweater pouch and pulled out a small velvet bag. Inside was some dust, which she blew at Mason. The dust got in his face, and he scrunched up in pain.

“What are you doing to him?”

“Don’t worry, all part of the plan. I got the antidote, luckily he’s still within the first 72 hours of first contact.”

“Those cuts on his arm!”
“That’s right sis, he got a big old case of the coyotes,” she said in a Texas accent, pronouncing the last word as ‘kie-oats’. “Now I just have to administer the last bits of the recipe. Let’s see, already added the vampire ash, next is the cactus water.” She pulled out a small vial and sprinkled the water onto Mason’s back. There was a hiss and a release of steam, and Mason curled up into a ball.

“You’re hurting him!”

“It’s the only way Paz, trust me. Calm, Dipper, I’ll have you all fixed up in a jiffy. One last ingredient, a claw from the original Were-Coyote.” She pulled out a talon from her sweater and tapped it on Mason’s forehead.

“Where did you get that?!”

“I’ll tell you all about it later sis, I’ve had a busy day.” Mason writhed around on the floor uncomfortably. “Uh, something should be happening by now.”

Preston tried to step towards the two girls “If I could express my opinion-“

“Preston, ol’ buddy, gonna need you to shut up for now, Mabel’s tryna focus.”

“Well, I never in all my-“ He was quickly silenced when Mason started growling at him.

“Hold him down Paz!” They both grabbed a hold of him, but he snapped free of the rope, sending them both flying. He turned on the Northwests, cornering them and preparing to strike.

“Mabel, quickly, what do we have to do next?!”

Mabel pulled out Journal 4 and hurried to the right page. “Here, I’ve got it! He needs an endorphin rush, some kind of shock! That’ll kickstart the change back!”

“Ok, you want a shock Mason? How about this.” She grabbed him by the shoulders then planted a massive kiss on his mouth. It was uncomfortable at first, jagged teeth stuck out from his face. But as she continued the kiss, she felt them receding. The hair on his shoulders also started to retract back into his skin. She looked closely, seeing the crazy glint in his eyes diminish. By the end of the process, she could feel him reciprocating, leaning into her embrace.

Slowly she pulled away, giving him a chance to breathe. He looked mildly bemused. “Uh, Paz, why are we sitting on the floor of a hospital room? And, are you wearing Mabel’s clothes?” He was suddenly brought into a double hug, and Mabel knelt down to join them. “Oh, ok, questions later.”

“Bro-bro! Welcome back to the land of the living!”

“I’m so glad you’re awake Mason. I’m never gonna let you go again.”

“Paz saved you again Dip! She’s been so brave!”

“Wait, ‘again’? Would someone mind telling me what’s going on now? I have the weirdest pain in my right arm, ah.” The girls broke the hug, mindful of his broken bone. As they stepped back, he finally caught sight of Pacifica’s parents. He swallowed, then rubbed his eyes. “Is that… your Mom and Dad Pacifica? Or am I seeing things?”

Both girls shared awkward looks, then helped Mason get to his feet. “It’ll be ok bro, you’re on the mend now, just take it slow.” They laid him down in the bed. Pacifica’s parents silently watched the three of them.
Pacifica wrung her hands together, then quietly approached her parents. “We need some time alone. Wait outside.” There wasn’t any room for argument in what she’d said, it was a simple command. Both Northwests looked at the other, then left the room without a word.

Pacifica turned back to Mason, who still had that half-confused, half-cheerful look. Some of the hair leftover from his transformation was still present. The hair on his chin, which before had been little more than a couple of tufts, was now practically a goatee. It was actually a good look for him, better than the scraggly half-beard he had before.

Mabel was already mid-way through some outlandish story when she sat back down. “… and then I had to arm-wrestle a snake! Was pretty tricky since they don’t have arms, but I managed to win anyway!” She stopped her story and let Pacifica talk to Mason.

“Hey. How are you holding up?”

“I feel alright. I think that IV lead was pumping some kind of painkiller. My arm’s starting to feel bad though.”

“The doctors said it was broken.”

“Aw, bummer. At least the other scratches have healed.” He pulled off the bandage on his left arm. True to his word, the three long scratches were now faded and white against his skin. “Guess Mabel’s miracle cure worked its magic there. I think. Memory of the last day is still a bit hazy.”

“I was so worried for you Mason. I felt so bad, like I’d let you down.”

“Pacifica never left your side Dip. She was always there for you.”

He struggled to reach out a hand to touch her cheek. “Oh Pacifica, you could never let me down.” She gripped the hand and leant into it, feeling his warmth and starting to cry lightly.

“I love you, you big dork.” Then she jabbed his side.

“Hey, what was that for?”

“Never scare me like that again Mace. Don’t be so reckless next time!”

“Definitely, I don’t want to go through another experience like this anytime soon. I wanna get out of here as soon as possible.”

“First we’ve gotta deal with… the issue.”

Mabel piped up. “Oh, you mean the oblempray with your arenstspay?”

“That’s the one. Suppose I should have known this was coming. Can’t keep things secret forever.” Mabel and Mason exchanged a quick glance, thinking of all the things they kept from their own parents no doubt. “Well, I’m gonna deal with it. If those assholes wanna boss me around, then I’m not gonna take it. You two stay here, if things get ugly I don’t want them talking shit about you to your faces.” She got up, leaving the twins alone in the bedroom.

At first, they heard a lot of loud shouting from the hallway. The Northwests’ raised voices could likely be heard by everyone on the entire floor of the hospital. Neither twin was about to stick their neck out into that fray. Monsters and villains were one thing, but the fury out in that hallway was
more than either was ready to face.

After a while, the voices quieted down. The twins strained their ears but couldn’t make out anything of what was said. Mason started getting antsy and wanted to get discharged from the hospital.

Outside, Pacifica was experiencing a whirl of emotions. First and most obviously anger at how her parents had acted, and how they’d ignored her point of view for so long. Then, after cooling off, there was a more honest discussion. Her parents tried to sweettalk her around to their side, constantly alternating between offering her platitudes or threatening punishments. As the debate went on, she got more and more fed up with their attitudes.

While they were trying to discuss some pointless detail about her daily schedule, she bluntly interrupted them. “I think I need some time away.” They both seemed confused, and she told them that she’d decided to stay with the Pines for the foreseeable future. They were outraged of course, begging her to see reason. But she put her foot down. She was going whether they liked it or not.

Reluctantly they agreed to her terms. They would leave, and not contact her again within the next month unless she initiated it. As for what came after that, things were up in the air. Preston and Priscilla left the hospital in a foul mood, leaving their only daughter behind in the hands of people they considered enemies. What other choice did they have though? If she wanted to take this course of action, they’d let her. They’d see where she ended up afterwards.

Pacifica quietly returned to the hospital room, then slumped into a sitting position with her back against the door. “It’s done, all over.”

Mabel could see that she was exhausted, so gave her a big soft hug. It felt double soft since they were both wearing thick sweaters. “What’s gonna happen now then Paz? Are you going back with them?”

Mason tried to rise, but then slumped back down. “Whatever happens, we’ll be there for you.”

Pacifica flashed a defiant grin. “Don’t worry guys. I’m not going crawling back to those two anytime soon. You two are stuck with me now.”
Pacifica was taking a while to adjust to her new life in the Pines household. Determined to never go back to her parents again, she’d committed to staying with the twins here in Piedmont.

Mr and Mrs Pines had been understandably reluctant at first. Of course, they knew Pacifica from a few scattered meetings, but having her move in with them was still a big step. Dipper’s mysterious ‘hiking injuries’ were another cause for concern, even if his arm was only in a sling now.

But both of the Pines parents could see how much Pacifica needed to be away from her parents, and how much Dipper and Mabel cared for her. In the end, they’d accepted Pacifica into their home, and said she could stay as long as she needed. She’d almost collapsed into tears of joy, then composed herself before that could happen.

After the first night, a suitcase was delivered to their door. It contained some clothes for Pacifica, as well as her laptop. Her parents might be staying well away, but they still expected Pacifica to keep up with school work and to stay productive.

She’d spent the first night sleeping on a mattress in Mabel’s bedroom, but after that she couldn’t take it anymore. The combination of those blindingly pink walls, Mabel’s snoring, and having to share the floor with a live pig, drove her out. So she quietly carried her mattress into Dipper’s room and slept on his floor instead. They’d had to keep that quiet, his parents would have flipped if they’d found out the two of them were sharing a room. Not that they could have gotten up to much anyway with Dipper’s broken arm.

After that, the three teens settled into a bland routine. It was still Spring break for another week, but with Dipper’s injury and Pacifica needing time to settle in, there was no chance for them to go out on a Mystery Hunt. Dipper’s main annoyance was not being able to write in his journal at all, having broken his primary writing arm.

They were all conflicted, on the one hand they were happy to be together under one roof. For Mabel, having her ‘sister’ living with them was a dream come true. On the other hand, they felt frustrated by being stuck in the house all day.

Dipper decided he’d had enough of waiting and came up with a plan to get them all out the house. He was planning in the living room. Mabel was sat next to him on the sofa doodling in one of her scrapbooks whilst Waddles nuzzled her side. From upstairs, Pacifica came into the room. She affected a casual lean on the doorway. “How’s it hangin’ M&M!? Not convincing? Did I come on too strong?”

“M&M?”

“You know, Mason and Mabel? Cause your names both start with M…”

Both twins made awkward grimaces, whilst Mabel waved her hand in a ‘eh’ motion. “Pacifica, you don’t have to change yourself to fit in with us. We like you just fine as you are.”

“Maybe I’m just getting cabin fever. I wanna get out and do something.”

Dipper coughed from the sofa. “I have something in mind.”

Mabel looked at him sceptically. “Bro, aren’t you forgetting something? Your arm’s still in a sling, we can’t go searching for ghouls and spookums while you’re like that!”
“I wasn’t suggesting that. What do you girls think about... an escape room!”

Pacifica slowly nodded. “Hmm, I’d be up for that.”

Mabel just looked lost. “Am I missing something? What’s an escape room?”

Dipper grabbed a flier from the living room table. “Look at this.” There was a picture of a stereotypical ghost, and the words ‘Escape Solver’. “It’s like a giant set of puzzles you have to work through to unlock the room. It’s not a real Mystery Hunt, I know, but it might be like a substitute at least, while I’m healing.”

“I’m not sure about this, sounds a bit too much like homework for me.”

Dipper looked up at her and pleaded. “C’mon Mabel, you’ll enjoy it, I’m sure! It’s horror themed, you could wear a costume?”

He could see Mabel’s eyes subtly perk up at this. “Costume, eh? I’ll be right back, you two stay fabulous!” She dashed away out of sight.

Pacifica plopped down on the sofa next to Dipper. “So, you think your parents have noticed that I’ve been sleeping in your room yet?”

“It won’t be long, that’s for sure. Couldn’t you just sleep down here in the living room?”

“I tried that one night, it’s too cold.”

“Well, they’re gonna find out someday then. You’re just lucky that Mom and Dad go to bed really early.”

“Why should it even matter? We’re a couple, if we ever live together one day we’ll share a bed.”

“Yeah, but right now we’re a) teenagers, and b) living with my parents. Trust me, I don’t wanna get a stern talking to about ‘relationship’ stuff. Always so awkward.”

“Well, I say screw the rules. I like to get what I want.”

He smirked at her, then laid his head on her shoulder. “Playing with fire Paz? Don’t blame me if we get burnt.”

“It’s the new reckless me. I’m an anarchist now without my strict parental guidance.” In mock shock, she gasped. “Maybe I’ll even start turning to vice and sin, giving in to all my deepest desires!” She started leaning over Dipper, bringing him into a kiss.

“I think I like the new you, Paz.”

“Ok guys, I’m all ready! What do you think?” Pacifica felt a flush of embarrassment, then got off Dipper. Both of them were shocked, as standing in the doorway was a dark spectre they’d both thought was banished for good. Wearing a black tank-top, black lipstick and eyeshadow, with exposed arms covered in tattoos, she had a massive grin plastered on her face. “Goth Mabel’s back baby!”

Mabel drove them over to the escape room, it was based in the basement of an old office building. Pacifica made a small effort to fit in with the horror theme of the room, switching her usual purple jacket for one of Mabel’s old black ones (made with faux-leather). Once again, it contrasted well
with her bright hair, she made the style entirely her own. Her striking new silver pendant also stood out against the darker jacket.

Dipper had just worn a black UFO t-shirt, though even if his arm had been fine he probably wouldn’t have bothered to dress up. Mabel had restitched the tears in his hoodie, but he couldn’t easily wear it at the moment. So for today, Journal 4 was staying at home in his desk drawer.

The three of them got out and looked at the building. There was no one else around as far as they could see, and the place looked old and abandoned. “You sure this is the right place, Mason? It looks like a dump. I don’t wanna go in there and get murdered by a junkie.”

“Relax Paz, this is the right address. Besides, if you can survive Mable’s driving, you’ll live through anything.”

“Hey, I resemble that remark!” Mabel smiled as they made their way through the building to the basement. The upper floors were empty of any furniture, and they went down a staircase into a dimly lit hallway. At the end of the hall was an open room, with a desk at one end. The brick walls and dim lighting gave it an industrial vibe, like they were in a nightclub. Sat behind the desk was a lanky black-haired girl, wearing a cap that had the escape room’s branding on it. She looked like she wasn’t much older than they were. She had her feet up on the desk and was reading a comic. There was a name tag identifying her as ‘Linda’.

Dipper approached her and pulled out his phone. “Room booked for three, in the name of Mason Pines?”

The manager nodded, then lazily got up. She spoke with a nasally voice. “You three ever done a room before?” The trio all shook their heads. Linda launched into a clearly rehearsed spiel. “Right, instructions then. You have 60 minutes to solve the puzzles and escape the room. No brute force will be required, don’t move any objects that are nailed down, phones must be left in a locker before you enter. I’ll go get everything set up, you have 5 minutes to prepare.”

They handed over their phones, then Mabel headed over to a side door that led to a bathroom. “Ooh, if we’re gonna be in there an hour I’d better sort out some business first. Back in a sec!”

With Mabel out of the way, Pacifica pulled Dipper into a conspiratorial huddle. “Can we talk for a sec? About Mabel?”

“Um, sure Pacifica. What about?”

“You’re not worried by her… appearance?”

“What, you mean the goth stuff? Trust me Paz, it’s just a look to her, she’s not really gone all angsty.”

“I know that. But what if it’s a bad sign. You know, she could be bottling up her emotions again, like she did when we first started dating. Maybe… maybe she sees me as a rival again.”

“Oh, come here.” He gave her as big of a hug as he could with one arm. “I’m sure Mabel doesn’t care about that. You’ve seen her, she likes to ‘put on a show’ from time to time. I know you’re finding it hard to settle in with us, but you don’t have to worry about her disliking you, even if it is subconscious.”

Pacifica let out a sigh. “You’re right, I’m probably overreacting. Maybe I just get caught up on the little details too much. Let’s just have a good time and forget about our worries today.” She kissed him as Mabel returned.
“Sup lovebirds! Ready for our pretend Mystery Hunt!” She strolled over to the main door, where Linda was standing. “With the kind of brains and experience we have, I bet we’ll be out of here in 10 minutes tops!”

They were led into the main room, which was styled like a Victorian parlour. It was lit by the flicker of fake electric lamps that were designed to look like gas lights. The manager left them alone to go set up the room, locking the door as she went.

Pacifica looked around the room. There was a bookcase lining one wall, and a set of plush armchairs. She slumped into one of them while they waited for the intro to start. “Reminds me of the drawing room in the manor. That place felt haunted too.”

Mabel was eyeing up the room curiously. “I dunno, this place feels fake to me. Looks a little too ‘artificial’.”

“Well, yeah Mabel, it doesn’t have to be a perfect recreation. You just gotta lose yourself in the challenge and have fun.” Dipper was trying to get her to see the entertaining side of this.

Mabel huffed, but didn’t say any more. To keep with the goth theme, she’d even ditched wearing her glasses. But in the gloom down here and with the small details she’d need to read, she grumpily put them back on.

From a concealed speaker in the corner of the room came the same high-pitched voice of Linda. Her speech didn’t really come off as menacing, she was just reading the script in a monotone voice. “Who dares enter the study of doom? You must face the trials within and find the key to the secret vault.” The trio looked around and saw a heavy safe in the corner of the room, with a padlock clipped over the handle. “Once inside, you must figure out who is the true criminal mastermind out of the list of suspects! Once you know the killer, you must make your accusation. Tread carefully though, choose wrong, and you’ll be trapped forever!”

A deep bell chimed from a Grandfather clock, and an LED timer set into the wall flashed 60:00. Dipper started poking around for clues and secrets. “Ok girls, let’s do this!”

Pacifica got up and looked around, finding a metal box with a padlock. “Needs a key, we gotta find that, stat.”

While the two of them began frantically searching the bookcase, Mabel casually looked over the rest of the room. She was already not feeling this. She looked under one of the armchairs. “Hey, there’s a piece of paper under here. Looks like a code.”

She passed it to her brother, whose eyes quickly lit up. “Ah yeah, looks like a simple number-to-letter shift, give me a second… done, it says ‘The first key is in the last book on the middle shelf!’” Mabel watched him flip open the book to find a hollow gap where the key lay.

“Woo, first key.” Her forced enthusiasm was pretty clear to all of them.

Pacifica had found an old black and white photograph, with the name of an old building labelled. “Hey Mace, maybe this word is a clue for another puzzle.”

“Yeah, looks like it. Can you help over here, there’s this sliding tile thingy I found, you’re good with pattern stuff.”

“Sure thing.” She headed over into the same corner as him. Mabel explored the rest of the room disinterestedly while they worked on the puzzle together. There was something lifeless about this experience. Compared to the kind of mysteries she and Dipper usually solved in the spare time, this
felt stagey. A bunch of arbitrary codes and locks that didn’t reflect the real world. Plus, without the sense of danger, she lacked that normal adrenaline buzz.

She noticed a lamp in the corner and turned it over, finding yet another key. She turned to look back at the others. “Guys, I found this…” Dipper and Pacifica were giggling to themselves in the corner.

“No, you’re just being modest Paz, that was amazing. You solved it in like 3 seconds!”

“You’re not too bad either Mason, that number cipher you decoded was pretty slick. You should teach me how to do that some time. Maybe I can put little secret notes in my journal.” She bumped his side in a way that felt way too intimate for Mabel’s liking. “You teach me how to write those codes, and I’ll teach you how to ride a horse, bareback.”

Ugh, now they were flirting. To her surprise, instead of acting all awkward, Dipper just confidently spoke back. “Oh yeah, is that a challenge? I’ve rode some pretty nasty creatures in my time, sure you can handle what I can do?”

“Oh, I’m sure I can tame your wild spirit.” They broke down into giggling again. To Mabel’s horror, they then started making out, right there!

“Ok! I’ve had enough, you two need to stop being so… sappy. It’s too sickening, even for me.”

“Oh, sorry Mabel, forgot we weren’t alone in here for a sec.” Dipper shook his head. “The puzzles, right, gotta focus.”

Mabel held out the new key, and he took it. “I think there’s a padlock like this over near the door.” He went over and found a drawer that the key opened. Inside was keycode of some kind, for a different cipher than before.

“Ugh, more clues!? Is this it? Just opening one box that leads to the next? Where’s the actual mystery, the suspense?!”

“It’s all about creative thinking Mabel, you have to be able to put the pieces together.”

“Does it have to be so booooring?”

Pacifica tried to cheer her up. “Come on Mabel, it’s not that bad. It’s sort of a race, but with your mind.”

“My mind’s not built for that kinda thing! All numbers and logic, it’s not me. Unless there’s a puzzle in here that involves me having to use glitter, I don’t think I’m gonna have a good time.”

Dipper tried to plead with her. “But Mabel, you’ve gotta get into the swing of things. Look.” He took the new clue and placed it next to the photo Pacifica had found. “It looks like there are a set of these photos. Each one has a word that lines up with the cipher. Think of it as Hide and Seek, but with pieces of paper and keys.”

“Yawn!” Mabel looked at the bulky safe that was their end goal. “Dipper, if we were on a real Mystery Hunt, how would we open this safe?”

“Uh, by finding the key? That’s what we’re trying to do already.”

“No Dip, we wouldn’t bother with that. Watch this!” From her skirt pocket she retrieved one of her lockpicks. “This is the real key to the puzzle.” She winked up at Dipper, but he looked mortified.
He hissed out a hurried whisper before she could do anything. “Mabel, that’s cheating! You’re ruining the whole point!”

“Oh, phooey. This is more fun for me at least.”

Pacifica crossed her arms in protest. “Mabel, cut it out, you’re gonna get us kicked out.”

“No no, relax guys, let Mabel show you the magic touch. And… presto!” She heard a click, then the padlock fell off. She pulled the heavy safe handle and opened it. “See, you guys, now we’re ahead of the game! Take that ‘study of doom’!”

Pacifica angrily stomped over to the safe. “Mabel, that was really dumb.”

“Pacifica, this whole place is dumb! It’s just fake and pointless!”

“It’s better than nothing! Me and Mace were enjoying it, right Mason?”

“Oh, girls, you might wanna take a look at this.”

“So what, it’s no fun if you two are off smooching in the corner! I don’t wanna stand around uselessly.”

“Well maybe if you actually tried you’d start actually enjoying yourself!”

“Girls!”

The girls turned their heads at last, to see what Dipper was pointing at. The face of the Grandfather clock was glowing bright green, and slime was oozing out. Suddenly the bell rang out, deafening the three of them.

A deep booming voice called out. “Who dares defy the natural order! Infidels and betrayers, you have corrupted this noble tradition!”

There was a bright flash like lightning, and Pacifica let out a high pitched scream. Standing by the locked door was a silvery figure, glaring down at them with an accusatory look. He was tall and the edges of his form were like flowing light. “You have broken the seal and brought this curse down upon yourselves!”

Part of the bookcase slid away into the wall, revealing a new room. This one was a bare stone room. Implements of torture sat around the cellar, an Iron Maiden, a Rack, a tight cage of iron. There was a patch of dried blood in the centre of the room.

Dipper and Pacifica looked down at the room in horror.

“Finally! This is more like it!” Mabel made the others jump out their skin with her sudden cry. The ghost behind them vanished in another flash, then reappeared in the new room behind the bars of a cage.

“To escape your certain doom, there is only one way to prove yourselves!”

Mabel was all pent up, eagerly awaiting this new turn of events. “Good, good, exciting ghost fight coming in 5, 4, 3…”

“You must escape this room!”

“By fighting ghosts?!”
“By finding clues and solving riddles!”

Mabel’s eager smile dropped off her fast faster than if someone had insulted her sweaters. “Are you flipping kidding me!?”

“Find your way out or suffer my wrath!” The ghost let out a deep chuckle, then vanished once again. Behind them, the bookcase slid back to cover the exit.

“Oh, come on! We find an actual real live ghost, and he makes us do the same things we were already doing!?”

Behind her, Dipper and Pacifica both had slowly growing grins. Pacifica came over and put a hand on her friend’s shoulder. “It’s karma Mabel, you mess with the room, it messes with you.”

“Yeah, exactly.” Dipper put his hand on her other shoulder. “At least now it’s not ‘fake’ anymore! We’re escaping this room for real!”

While Mabel sulked in the corner, only showing a passing interest in their new situation, Dipper and Pacifica eagerly got to work solving the new room. There were more clues stuffed away behind removable bricks in the wall or taped to the bottom of the rack, that lead them to keys and padlocks galore. They’d assembled a pile of solved clues in the middle of the room, adding to it as they went.

At one point, they found a puzzle that had stumped them for a good long while, a list of names they had to put in order. Eventually Pacifica realised that it was a list of British monarchs, which got them the order. 45 minutes had passed since they entered the room, but they still felt like they were missing some vital clues needed to re-unlock the door.

Mabel finally got over her moping and wandered over to where the two of them were sat on the floor poring over their clues. “Are you guys getting close? We don’t have much time left.”

“We’d be closer if you’d helped us more,” Pacifica icily said. “You’ve just been standing around being Miserable Mabel.”

“Only cause I’m not very good at this stuff. Give me a creature to search for or something to fight and outsmart and I’d be all over it. Instead we just have dumb puzzles. It reminds of that video game you like Dipper, the one on the island with all those switches and buttons that don’t do anything. I got stuck for hours just flipping things back and forth waiting for something to happen!”

“Hey, I’ll have you know that Fog is a classic of the genre!” Dipper protested indignantly. “Look Mabel, why don’t you talk to us. You’ve been gloomy all day and we just wanna know why.

Mabel remained tight lipped and tried to change the subject. “Come on, you must have a ton of notes on exorcising ghosts in Journal 4! We could just bust that ghost in a sec!”

“Uh, I think you’re forgetting something Mabel.” He gestured at his sling-bound arm, reminding her that he was only wearing a t-shirt.

“Oh right, you left it at home. Well that’s just super.”

“You gonna open up about your feelings then, or what?” Pacifica stared at Mabel, willing her defences to break.
Mabel crossed her arms and turned away. “Maybe I don’t feel like talking about it. I’m feeling intense inner pain and conflict right now.”

Dipper couldn’t help but laugh out loud at this statement, which caused Mabel to involuntarily giggle too. “Sorry Mabel, but you just can’t pull that off.”

“You’re too damn nice and sweet.” Pacifica folded one of their clues into a paper airplane and aimed at Mabel. It bounced off her back, which made her finally turn around with a smile.

“Ok, you guys, you win.” She put her hands up in defeat and came over to sit on the stone floor with them. “You cracked me, I’ll talk.”

Dipper asked the first question. “So Mabel, tell us. Why are you being all grumpy today?”

Mabel let out a sigh, then crossed her arms. “Because you’re being dumb again Dip. You always do this. You can’t pay attention to two people at once.”

Dipper’s expression fell as gears started turning in his head. “Oh! You mean like, when I spend time with Paz, then I forget to spend time with you.”

Mabel nodded. “Exactly bro. You have such a one-track mind, it’d be hilarious if it wasn’t so annoying.”

“She’s right Mace, you do suck at multi-tasking.” Pacifica was happy to chime in. “When you tried to help Mabel out once back after you first asked me out, you stopped video chatting me for a whole week. You’d just compartmentalised me somehow.”

Dipper nodded guiltily at this. “I guess you two are right. I can be a bit ignorant at times.”

“Yeah, like all the time! You always zone out when I try to tell you important stuff!”

Pacifica nodded along, agreeing with Mabel. “Definitely, you overlook a lot of obvious signs. Like, I could probably just get naked and sit on your lap, and you’d still miss the hints.”

“Ok, thanks girls, for so graciously supporting me with my shortcomings.” Dipper rolled his eyes, but he was used to their teasing.

“That’s another thing,” Mabel interjected. “You two being all ‘lovey-dovey’ and googly eyed with each other. Makes me feel more left out, and kinda inadequate. I’ve not had a long term relationship in ages.”

“I guess we could try and keep the ‘PDA’ to a minimum when you’re around,” Pacifica conceded. “We’re both just so caught up in it at the moment.”

“Yeah, why is that? You two virgins over here are acting smoother than usual.” Mabel couldn’t fail to notice Dipper and Pacifica exchange a worried glance at each other. “Wait, hold the phone. Are you telling me that you two… with each other… IN A TENT!?”

They both looked at each other again, then slowly nodded. Mabel’s eyes widened at this news. “OMG. This is crazy! You’ve gone from 0 to 60 in no time! What caused all this??”

Dipper sat upright, determined to look confident. “I took your advice, I acted like I knew what I was doing.”

“Yeah, and I took your other advice, about not taking things so slowly.” Pacifica warmly looked at
“You two used protection, right?” Mabel bluntly asked, bringing massive blushes to their faces.

“Uh, we kinda, um… forgot.” Dipper grimaced and shrugged.

Mabel covered her face with her palm. “Oy vey, you two. What am I gonna do with you? Don’t think I haven’t noticed you sneaking out every night either.” Their blushes grew, but Mabel started grinning. “Hey, it’s ok, I’m not gonna rat you out to Mom and Dad, I’m no narc. Just be careful, is all I’m saying.”

“So, is there anything else you wanna talk about?” Pacifica tried to change the subject away from her and Dipper’s bedroom activities. “You’re not very enthused by this whole escape room biz.”

“Yeah, it just feels lame. I like solving real mysteries, not arbitrary keys and codes. Maybe it’s alright for you, but I don’t like it one bit.”

“Not even all the atmosphere and dress-up stuff? You usually love that kinda thing.”

She shrugged “Guess I’m just in a bad mood cause of all this other junk. Besides, I don’t think I can rock this look anymore.” Pacifica looked up and down at Mabel. It was true, with her glasses, her longer hair, and her recent upbeat attitude and return to vibrant colours, Mabel looked uncomfortable back in her old stylings. “Maybe once we’re out of here I can get all my emotions sorted out. Too bad I suck at solving puzzles, we’re probably gonna end up mauled by that ghost.”

Dipper nodded and looked down at their pile of clues. “To be fair, we’re not doing much better right now. We have all this stuff, but none of it fits together. Feels like we’re just going in circles.”

Pacifica’s face suddenly lit up. “Wait a minute, circles… Mason, you know that enchanted ‘weirdness’ detecting necklace you got me?”

“Yeeees. Why?”

“It’s supposed to spin when it’s up close to supernatural junk, yeah? And we’ve been in the presence of a ‘ghost’ for the last half an hour. Well, this room isn’t exactly very large, and I’ve been in every nook and cranny.”

“You’re point?”

“Do you see any spinning?”

Dipper’s eyes went wide. “Oh no, do you think that means it’s like a ‘super ghost’?! Maybe it’s so powerful it’s immune to simple detection!”

Pacifica stood up and rolled her eyes. “No, Dipstick, I’m saying that I think we’ve been had.” As she said that there was another bright flash, briefly blinding the trio. Once their vision returned, they saw that the ghostly figure had returned, standing in front of the bookcase-door.

“You are out of time, you have but 5 minutes before my curse rains down upon you!”

Mabel stood up next to Pacifica, her hands tightening into fists. “I’ve finally had enough of being forced to do these lame puzzles! You’re going down!” She ran towards the ghost, no longer caring about his wrath.

Pacifica tried to grab her shoulder in vain. “Wait, Mabel! Slow down!”
Mabel let out a war cry as she approached the ghost. “Yeeeeeaaahhhhh!- ufff!” She found herself running smack dab into an invisible wall, squishing her face right up against the barrier. She pushed herself back, keeping her hands on the wall. “What the- it’s glass!” There was a solid glass window suspended between her and the ghost.

Pacifica came over and rapped her knuckles on the surface. “I was trying to tell you - I think this is some kind of trick.”

“Trick? But look,” she pointed at the ghost, “there’s a bona fide ghost right there.”

Pacifica shook her head, then smiled rebelliously. “I don’t think so. Am I right, Mr ghost?”

When the ghost spoke, his previously deep voice suddenly seemed shakier. “This is nothing, continue with the trials!”

“I don’t think so bud!” Pacifica reeled back a hand, then shattered the glass. Once the debris settled, the three of them saw that in the place where the ghost had been standing, there was now nothing. Pacifica stroked her hand, then gestured at the back of the bookcase. “Pines, if you please?”

Dipper and Mabel gave excited looks to each other, then heaved against the wood, shifting the bookcase back along its mechanism. They returned to the first room, the parlour. Once again, the ghost was standing by the entry door, glowering at them. “Stop right now, this isn’t funny!” The voice was even higher pitched now.

“Woah, cool effect. Pepper’s ghost, am I right?” Dipper came over and tapped on another pane of glass near the door.

“What’s that Dip?” Mabel asked.

Dipper had a smug grin, and she already knew he was about to launch into the explanation. Pacifica shoved him out the way, and with an even smugger grin started explaining herself. “You see Mabel, this glass is being used to reflect an image of this ‘ghost’,” she made quote marks with her fingers in the air, “so it looks like it’s floating over by the door. You alter the lighting a bit, and it changes whether you can see the ghost or not.”

Dipper had a grumpy look but nodded. “Yeah, what she said.” He drew a line in the air with a finger. “With the glass at this angle, that means our mystery ghost must be right… here!” He walked into a dark corner of the room, then the girls heard a yelp. Dipper came back into the light, dragging the ghost behind him.

The ghost was complaining in a nasally voice. “Hey, get off me! You’re gonna tear the costume!”

Dipper grabbed the ghost’s flowing body and pulled the white shroud costume over his head. “Hello there, Linda!” The face of the gangly manager glowered out at the three of them.

From across the room, Mabel put her hands to her mouth theatrically. “Huh, gasp! It was old man nerdy manager girl the whole time! And you would have gotten away with it if it wasn’t for us meddling kids! You’d better explain all this, right now!”

The escape room manager shook free of Dipper’s grasp and started to petulantly cross her arms. “You dumb kids, I spooked you good. The blonde one has a real set of lungs on her.”

Pacifica’s face scrunched up into a scowl. Dipper held her back before she could assault Linda. “So, you saw Mabel pick the lock on the safe and thought you’d scare us straight?”
Linda proudly nodded. “Sure did, it’s company policy. You break it, you pay double and get the fright of your lives. Although you guys took it weirdly well.” The trio shared a silent look of joy at the knowledge and secrets they kept to themselves.

Dipper folded his arms. “Let’s see, bright flash to disorient us, I’m guessing some kind of voice modulator for the deep effect. The slime on the clock?” He dipped his pinky on the clock face, then brought it up to his nose. “Glow in the dark paint. If I’d had my journal I probably could’ve figured out that it wasn’t real right away, the signs were all there! Man, I really do miss the obvious sometimes.”

Pacifica started angrily poking Linda in the chest. “Ugh, this wasn’t funny! Your dumb practical joke could’ve got someone hurt!”

She raised her hands. “Fine, fine, I get it. Blame emo girl though, she broke the rules.” She jabbed an accusing finger at Mabel, who turned away in shame.

“I’m sorry, ok! Come on, let’s get our phones and go, I’ve caused enough trouble today.” They filed out back to the main desk, picking up their phones from the locker. Dipper grumpily handed over a couple of bills, to make up for their breaking of the rules.

They were about to head off, but Mabel hesitated before they climbed back up to the surface. “Wait, you two stay here. I’m gonna try and salvage my reputation.”

She hurried over the desk, where Linda was packing away her ghost costume. “I’m sorry, about all the hassle. I’ve been in a dumb mood today. It’s not your fault that I was being an idiot.”

Linda didn’t look up at her. “Sure, whatever. At least I got a kick out of blondie’s reaction, making your brother scrabble around looking for clues was fun too.”

“Ha, yeah, Dipper sometimes couldn’t find his way out of a paper bag even if he had a map. His brain’s dumb like that, only works half the time.”

Linda finally looked up. “Heh, yeah. Say, what do you guys want to put as a name on your scorecard, we pin the times up on the board.”

“Call us The Mystery Trio. We’re like, big-time mystery solvers.”

She got out a pen and wrote down the name. “Uh-huh, Mystery Trio... And this is for you.” He handed her a piece of paper with a number written down.

“What’s this?”

“My number.” Linda swallowed after saying that, slightly regretting being so forward.

Mabel just leant into it though. “Oh ho, Miss ghost is after a hot piece of goth on the side. Count me interested. You ever been to a night out at a club? Mabel knows all the best bars in town.”

Across the room, Dipper sighed. “Uh oh, there she goes again. Poor dude doesn’t know what she’s getting into.”

“I think it’s sweet. I mean, the girl cosplays as a ghost for a living, I’d have thought that’d be your dream life.” Pacifica held his hand. “Besides, does Mabel look all mopey anymore?”

He looked at the large smile on her face. “You’re right. Guess there was a ‘real mystery’ after all, even if it was a double feint.”
“Look on the other bright side, you finally have a story you can tell your parents.”

“What? Oh, guess you’re right.”

“Yeah, a fake ghost is something they’d actually believe, not to mention it probably won’t get you grounded for life.”

He watched his sister eagerly chatting with the girl who’d tried her best to scare them. “Man, she can sweet talk anyone. I think she gets it from Stan, she has a gifted tongue.”

“So do I, but you can find that out for yourself,” Pacifica said with a wink.

“Oh, is that a challenge Princess? Cause I accept if so.” He kissed her, suddenly very eager to get home. Mabel came over to them, interrupting their kiss.

“Hey guys, you two can head off now if you want. Me’n Linda are gonna go hit up a club, not your kind of scene.” She bent near Dipper’s ear and spoke in hushed whisper. “Here, take these just in case you two decide you wanna ‘get lucky’ tonight too.” She pushed something into Dipper’s hand, then winked and ran back over to the desk.

Dipper looked down at the small box he’d been handed. His face paled, but Pacifica just looked down and laughed. “Wow, who knew that Mabel carried condoms wherever she goes. Girl is prepared for anything.”

“Ugh, let’s go, I don’t want Mabel to embarrass me anymore today. That manager’s getting on my nerves anyway, too smug about scaring us for my liking.”

“She’s not all bad, I think you’re just jealous that she has a job that’s all about mystery stuff. Plus, she kinda reminds me of you.”

“What, she looks nothing like…” Dipper looked over at the skinny teen chatting with Mabel, with her untidy hair under the cap. She even had a small UFO on her t-shirt. He stuck out his bottom lip in a pout. “Hmm. Well.”

“You have a better goatee at least,” Pacifica teased. “That’s something she can’t compete with.” She stroked a finger through the hair on his chin. “Come on dork, let’s leave Mabel to have her fun.” They headed out of the dark basement, hand in hand, both of their spirits raised after this outing.
Chiselling away at an amber crystal, Dipper eagerly awaited the girls’ return from the mall. The work he was currently doing was the last part of a project he’d started as soon as his arm had healed 5 days ago. He suspected that Mabel’s ‘coyote-serum’ had sped up the healing process somewhat, a break like that normally would have taken 6 weeks to fully recover.

He’d started the project as a way to pass the time whilst Pacifica settled into her new home life. She’d taken to living with the Pines decently well but was beginning to feel more uncomfortable as Spring break ticked on. She was anxious about the inevitable start of school. She’d managed to secure a temporary transfer to Piedmont High School and was dreading the idea of trying to fit in in a whole new environment.

Tomorrow was the first day back after the break, so Mabel had decided to try and ease her anxiety with a shopping trip. Pacifica had protested at first, she had no money to buy anything after being cut off by her parents. Mabel simply waved off her concerns. She told her to consider it an early birthday present, and that was the end of the argument. If the Northwests thought that Pacifica couldn’t make it on her own, Mabel would teach them the meaning of the word ‘sharing’.

It gave Dipper plenty of time to work on his own way to help Paz feel at ease. Since she was sleeping in his bedroom for now, he’d been made keenly aware of how fitful her sleeping patterns had become. At home in Gravity Falls she was used to a rigorous schedule, which she now regularly flaunted. However, it threw off most of her body’s natural rhythms. The fact that she was sleeping on a hard old spare mattress likely didn’t aid matters much either.

He was determined that he could fix that problem for her and had endeavoured to sort out a solution now he was able. Grunkle Ford had sent him plans for a device that could help, which he’d been able to build with Mabel’s assistance - her skill with fine handcrafting not lost on him. Now he just needed to get this crystal filed to the exact size, and everything would be perfect.

He kept catching his fingers with the chisel, leaving him with several small marks on his hand. He lacked Mabel’s precision, but was determined to get this done for Pacifica today though. Getting the crystal had been the trickiest part of this whole project. The specific resin structure he needed only grew as sap from one type of rare mystical tree. Finding an actual tree was out of the question, they only grew in much colder environments. He’d had to travel to the Plutonica auction house to find someone bartering the sap. It had cost him several of his pricier potions and totems, but it was worth it.

The front doorbell rang, and he placed the chisel and crystal down on the living room coffee table. He went over to the door, which was still ringing constantly. “Ok Mabel, I know it’s you. You don’t have to ring two dozen times whenever you get home.”

He opened the door to see Mabel’s grinning face. “Yo Dipper, we’re back from our spree! It was great, I helped give Paz such a makeover.” She stepped into the hall and out of the doorway.

Dipper’s vaguely dis-interested look was wiped off his face as he saw Pacifica getting out of the pickup.

She was wearing a purple sleeveless sweater. It wasn’t like one of Mabel’s baggy sweaters, it
hugged the curve of her body tightly. She had jeans with faux-tears on the knees. A pair of black boots came up to just under her knees. Her new boots had flat heels, so she was slightly shorter than him now. He was also gratified to see that she still had her Pine Tree pendant on over her turtleneck, it was a link that connected the three of them together.

Most amazingly, her hair was cut much shorter. Where it had once been at knee length, now it barely brushed her shoulders. Normally her hair acted as a shield, blocking her face from view when she wanted to hide her emotions. Now her face was revealed for anyone to see.

To most people it would seem only a subtle change. But Dipper knew that Pacifica prized herself on maintaining a constant flawless image to the world. For years she’d coordinated her look, almost always sticking with her purple jacket and pink dress combo. This was the biggest change she’d made in the whole time they’d known each other. He realised that he’d been standing there with his mouth flopping open for quite some time now.

“Uh oh, Dipper.exe has crashed and is not responding. Let’s try a full reboot.” Mabel lightly bopped him on the head, causing him to jerk his whole body.

Pacifica strolled over from the drive with a shopping bag slung over one arm. “Hey Mace. Mabel’s ‘worked her magic’. What do you think?” She pirouetted on the spot and Dipper once again found himself dumbstruck.

“You look… you… ah…” He stopped for a breath. “Paz, you look amazing.” He reached out and squeezed her arm. “You’ve really gone for a big change this time.”

“Yeah, it was sort of my idea. I don’t want people here in California to meet the old Pacifica. I’m going to be a whole new person, one my parents didn’t try and mould.”

Mabel was grinning happily beside the pair. “I made sure she got proper boots this time, no more running around in heels. I’ve just got to teach you parkour Paz, with all the jogging you do you’ll be a natural. Way better than Dip for sure.”

“Ha, I can just imagine your brother trying to do all that fast-paced jumping. Are you sure about these jeans though? I don’t like the tears. Makes me feel like a hipster.”

Mabel winked at her. “I knew you’d say that, so I bought some non-ripped ones too! I think of everything, I’m kinda awesome like that.” She headed off to the living room, leaving them alone.

Dipper saw the opportunity and pulled Pacifica into a hug. She stretched up to kiss him. “Damn, I miss being as tall as you,” she joked.

“You sure you’re coping with all this change? It has only been a week.”

Pacifica nodded slowly. “Yeah, so far it’s all been ‘good’ different. Though I’m still not sure about the hair.”

From the living room they heard Mabel call out. “Trust me sis, it looks great. And if you really don’t like it, your hair’ll grow back in a few months. Ooh Dip, you got the crystal!”

“Huh? Oh right, Pacifica, I have something to show you too.” He led her into the living room where she set down her bag. He noticed that it contained various perfumes and body washes. He couldn’t tell whether they were expensive or not, though he recognised a few of the brands as ones Mabel used. Mabel was toying around with the crystal, lightly tossing it between her hands.

Pacifica grabbed the orange stone from Mabel. The whole thing only just fit in her palm. “So, what
is this thing? Is it jewellery? Cause if so it’s a little heavy for me to wear.” It was smooth to the touch and she could see a warped image of Mabel through it.

Dipper confidently started explaining. “It’s a scrying stone! It helps amplify mental waves.”

Pacifica had a look of doubt. “Really? Isn’t that just mystic woo that scammers use to fleece dumb people out of their money?”

“Seriously Paz?” Mabel scoffed. “After mind-reading stones from the future or magic paintbrushes, this is too much for you?”

“Oh, point taken.” She handed the hefty stone to Dipper, who picked up the chisel.

“Anyway, it’s not quite done yet, but by tonight it’ll be ready. I’ve got a device upstairs to help you sleep better.”

Mabel proudly beamed up from the sofa. “I helped make it! I added some paint and shiny stickers too, Dip was gonna leave it all grey and exposed.”

“Yeah, we’re gonna make sure you have a perfect night’s sleep before tomorrow. You can count on us.”

Pacifica seemed doubtful but flashed a small smile. “Thanks guys. I could do with something to relieve the tension. Tomorrow’s gonna be tough whatever happens though. Least I can be well rested for once.”

Dipper linked with her hand. “Whatever happens, we’ll be there to help the ‘New Pacifica’ thrive.”

Later that night, once Mr and Mrs Pines were safely asleep, Dipper helped Pacifica set up her mattress in his bedroom. They were already dressed for sleep, with Pacifica donning her silk kimono and Dipper throwing on a red t-shirt and shorts. He was grateful to no longer be sleeping with a sling on his arm - he usually rolled a lot in his sleep, so trying to resist that had been torture.

He found himself doing most of the work putting Pacifica’s sheets on, as she was distractedly looking at a compact. “Hey Paz, you know we’d get this done faster if you helped?”

She waved a dismissive hand. “I’m thinking right now. Besides, what are you for if not to make my bed?”

“So charming, Pacifica.” He pulled the last sheet corner over the mattress. “This is the last night we should do this, once I have your sleep patterns fixed you’re gonna have to go back to Mabel’s room. It’s just too risky otherwise.”

“If you say so.” She perched on the edge of his bed, then stretched over it. “I could always sleep here tonight, I am a guest after all.

Dipper reluctantly pulled her back into a sitting position. “I’d love that, but tonight I wanna try out the new device, so you’re gonna have to sleep down there.”

“Aaw, no fun.”

He could tell that she was in a bit of a sour mood, so tried to raise her spirits. “I, uh… like your kimono.” It was a bit of an abrupt statement, so he started to blush. He tried stroking the silk on her
arm to reinforce what he’d said.

“Mason, I know you’re trying to help, but you’re not exactly being subtle.” She was staring at him with a knowing look, then got up off the bed.

“Oh, sorry. Guess I’m still kinda new to all this ‘boyfriend’ stuff.”

Pacifica returned to staring intently at her compact. “I’m still not 100% on the hair. You’re absolutely positive that looks ok?”

He came over from the bed and put his arms around her waist from behind. “Definitely.” He glanced down at the compact mirror, seeing both their faces reflected together. He squeezed her tightly. “It lets me see more of you pretty face.”

She blushed and lightly bumped him with her back. “You’re such a dork. Still, I think I want it a little longer at least.”

“I do miss stroking it a bit, was always so soft.”

“Softer than a new-born puppy?” She smirked as she saw his confused expression. “Mabel told me you wrote that.”

“I swear, she has pretty much no concept of privacy. Well, it’s true I guess. Your hair was lovely.”

“Then it’s settled, I’ll grow it back a bit longer in a few months.”

“Anything you want Paz.”

He leant over and gave her a kiss. They held it for longer than usual, both feeling a sudden warm urge in their chests. Pacifica turned around to face him, then put her arms around his neck. She dived into another kiss, pushing Dipper onto his bed. She sprawled out on top of him, giggling. “You’re not totally awful at all ‘boyfriend’ stuff Mace.”

“And you’re the best girlfriend anyone could ever ask for.” He had a dumb grin plastered on his face. Having Pacifica lying on top of him was one of the best feelings he’d ever had. He kissed her again, but then she yawned deeply and climbed off him.

“Come on, I need my beauty sleep now. You gonna get that crystal thingy set up now?”

“Oh, oh yeah. I’ll get it out.” He went over to his closet and started extricating the device. He carried it over to the head of Pacifica’s mattress, where she was spraying perfume in her face. “I can’t believe you put perfume on before bed.”

“I like to smell nice all the time. Something you could try sometime dork.”

Dipper lifted his armpit and sniffed, then gave a guilty look. “I just don’t like wasting time with cleaning stuff that’s only gonna get dirty later.”

“Well tough luck, I’m definitely not sleeping with you if you’re gonna be stinky. This is the thing that’s gonna help me sleep better then?” She looked curiously at the device as Dipper started warming it up. It was a purple sphere lying on the floor, roughly the size of her head. There was a cavity on one side, and she could see a bunch of tangled wires inside.

“I retrofitted the frame from an old electro-defence sphere. Mabel helped with the wires, plus she painted it. She made this holder for the stone in shop class too.” He produced a spiral of silver
metal and balanced the amber crystal on top. “The sphere generates alpha-waves which are focused into your brain by the crystal.”

“Is that safe? I don’t want it frying my brain.”

“Totally, though I’ll admit I haven’t tested it yet.” His words just made her eyes narrow in doubt. “Trust me Paz, I wouldn’t do this if I didn’t expect it to work. There, I’m ready when you are.”

“Wait, one more thing before bed.” She went over to Dipper’s desk, where Journal 4 and her Llama Journal were laid out next to each other. She flipped open the cover of her journal, opening on the page that read ‘Property of Pacifica Northwest’, then started scribbling wildly. Dipper peered over once she was done. The word ‘Northwest’ had been completely covered up. “I’m not gonna let them define me. After today, I’m my own person.” There was a confident smirk on her face, and he felt incredibly proud of her determination. The old Pacifica he’d first met would never have been so brazenly disrespectful of her family name.

“All ready for your ‘perfect night’s sleep’?”

“Yep, see you in the morning Mason.” She gave him one last bedtime kiss. “Tomorrow’s gonna be rough.”

“Try not to think about it. Lie down on your mattress and I’ll start the process.” She did as he asked, lying down under her covers and adopting her standard sleeping position. “Ok, try to imagine a quiet, soothing environment.” He pressed the button that started the machine’s emission. Nothing visibly changed, the alpha-waves were invisible to him. But he did detect a small change in Pacifica’s breathing, it was notably more relaxed now. She was already sound asleep. Quietly, he crept over to her and pecked a small kiss on her forehead. “Goodnight Paz, sleep tight.”

The gift shop of the Mystery Shack in Gravity Falls isn’t where I expect to find myself standing. Wasn’t I somewhere else just now? There’s sunlight streaking through a window, the Shack is closing soon, and I really shouldn’t be here. If my parents ever found out- no, I push that thought to the back of my mind.

Any minute now they’ll walk in, the pair of people I long to see again. It’s been another long year, but all the same it feels like no time has passed. I hope they haven’t forgotten me again. There’s a small tinkling as somebody enters the Shack, the tiny bell above the door making me feel a chill. It’s too close a sound to another that haunts my memory.

But they’re here at last, the Pines twins. There’s Mabel, wearing another garish sweater, that really doesn’t match the rest of her clothes properly. I catch myself; do I really think her look is so awful? But yes, something about it just seems off to my sensibilities.

Beside her is Mason. Wait, no, that name suddenly feels wrong, like a sour taste on my tongue. I think of him now as Dipper. But even that feels false. He ends up simply as ‘Mabel’s brother’.

Mabel’s brother is standing there, wearing that goofy lumberjack hat. He’s got a book tucked under his arm. Ugh, it’s that dumb journal. Like anyone who’s anyone would have a book like that. As I’m watching him, he finally seems to notice me, and taps Mabel’s shoulder. “Well, look who it is Mabel’s brother.”

Something feels wrong, the word ‘princess’, that feels like it should be affectionate, suddenly feels harsh and dismissive. He’s mocking me. His sister assumes a look of disgust too. “Oh, Pacifica, still haven’t burnt through your parents money with the amount you spend? I’m impressed.” It was
laced with sarcasm, and I feel hurt. Why were they doing this?

At the same time, something about this feels natural. I want to respond, to tell them I care about them and that I’ve been waiting. But instead, words force themselves up my throat. It feels like I’m throwing up as I speak, a sentence vomits itself out at them. “You dare talk to me like that? A Northwest? Poor Pines twins, you really are so dumb. If you wanna have any influence in this town, you’ll act nicer to your betters.” Immediately guilt flows over me. I feel terrible after saying that.

Something else wrong finally catches my attention. A bright strand of hair floats into view. It stretches down below my waist. Didn’t I just have it cut recently? And these clothes? I thought I’d decided to stop wearing this jacket?

“Hold on, you were waiting here at the Shack? Oh my gosh Mabel, she actually thought we’d want to see her!”

“Like we’d actually hang around with someone so heartless. C’mon Dipper, let’s leave little miss sadsack alone with her money.”

I want to call out, to stop them leaving. They’re my only friends in the world and I hate them more than anything. This is all wrong, a tumble of opposing thoughts clashing for domination. All that comes out of my mouth is a quiet, “Wait.”

Then they’re gone, and I’m alone. Always alone. Ever since I was born. Even my parents don’t care about me. No true friends - I’m an outcast at school. No one wants to face the wrath of the most powerful family in town. Something about the Pines twins brought me here, but now even they’ve left me behind.

There’s a mirror in the hall, with the words ‘Master of Fright’ written above. I see myself, long blonde hair flowing behind me, and my face caked in makeup. Is this really me? Who is this girl staring back, with her confidence unshaken and her superiority evident to all? I do feel a fright at this reflection, that’s for sure.

I look intently, trying to figure out what’s wrong with the picture I’m seeing, but it remains just out of reach. The edges of the mirror shift while I’m focused on my image. I blink a few times, then find myself out of the Shack entirely, somewhere in the woods. Now I’m holding a silver mirror in one hand. Instead of my own reflection, there’s an angry blue ghost slamming at the glass from within.

The mirror drops from my hand, before shattering into a million glistening shards, falling like a rain of diamonds. Some of the trees around me begin shrinking, turning into wooden models of people I recognise. There’s my parents, angrily scowling at me for some perceived slight against their legacy. Mabel has her arms crossed and back turned, ignoring me completely. Her brother is half turned away, and there’s a look on his face like he almost regrets what’s happened. It’s like he wanted things to be different between us, but now it’s too late.

I realise just how late it’s become as I feel my legs hardening. Now it’s my turn to join the forest of the dead, forever left as a static image of the girl who was once Pacifica Northwest.

Mabel’s sleep was roughly disturbed when she felt a pair of hands grip her bare shoulders. There was a hushed whisper from whoever was in her bedroom. “Mabel! Psst! Get up!”

She blearily wiped her eyes, seeing her brother’s worried face. “Dipper? What is it? Can’t it wait
till morning? If it’s your anomalous energy scanner again, you can forget it.” She rolled over away from him, pressing her eyes shut tightly.

“No, this is important, I think Pacifica’s in trouble.” He pulled her covers off, but then dropped then abruptly. “Oh! Are you naked under there?!”

“Nuh-uh, I’ve got socks on!” She stuck out a foot and wiggled her toes, showing off a black sock.

“That’s not what I meant- look, get dressed and meet me in my room.” Dipper left her to get ready in private.

She found a pair of pink shorts and a slim fit white t-shirt. Before she left, she put on her glasses and grabbed a glass of water. She crossed the landing to Dipper’s bedroom and found him kneeling over the alpha-wave generator, examining its components. Pacifica was still asleep but was tossing around restlessly.

Dipper looked up as she entered, noticing her t-shirt. “Is that a CD printed on your shirt? Why does all your nightwear have tech stuff on it?”

Mabel shrugged. “Dad got a lot of free t-shirts from tech conventions.”

“And you just happened to have some water prepared?”

“Never underestimate the necessity of easily accessible night-water bro.”

“And I’m not even gonna ask why you sleep in the nude.”

Mabel nodded. “That’s probably best. So what’s the problem with Pacifica?”

“We were both asleep, but I heard her cry out. She called out my name, then muttered about how ‘she’s coming to replace me’. I think there’s something wrong with her dreams.”

Mabel looked over at Pacifica, who was rolling around. Her face was tightened up in what looked to be fear. “She does look pretty rough. Maybe the machine’s working in reverse?”

“No, according to my examinations, the machine itself is working perfectly. And yet…”

They both looked at their friend’s writhing body. “And yet. What’s the plan then?”

“I’ve tried this already.” He pointed to a dreamcatcher hanging from a bedpost. “Didn’t catch any dreams, just makes the room smell of cactus juice. Then I tried to just wake her up by shaking her, but I couldn’t get through to her. She’s out cold. Last thing I tried was giving her a massage, but I didn’t get any response.”

“Sure you didn’t do that just so you could touch her shoulders bro?” Mabel made kissing motions with her mouth.

“I’m not that desperate for human contact Mabel. It’s a shame we can’t use your old telepathy stone to just read her mind. If only it still worked.”

“Uh, yeah, that’d be great,” Mabel said, careful to try and hide her true knowledge about her necklace’s functionality.

“That leaves only one option. We’re gonna have to enter her mindscape.” They both remembered the last time they’d travelled into someone’s mind, their Grunkle Stan’s, in pursuit of Bill Cipher. Neither of them wanted to bring up the possibility that their old foe had somehow returned to
torment Pacifica.

Dipper sat cross-legged on his bed, and Mabel did the same beside him. “You’re sure there’s no other way? This could be dangerous.”

“I can’t think of anything else we can try. I’m worried that turning off the machine might hurt her in some way. We have to go in ourselves and root out the problem.” Journal in lap, he reached for Pacifica’s forehead, then began reciting to the ancient chant. “Fidentus omnium. Magister mentium…”

“Mabel!”

“That sounds like a fat old lady’s name.”

Suddenly Mabel’s brother was at her side. “That’s rich coming from someone with a name like yours. Pacifica, noun: Spanish, meaning peaceful, tranquil. Pretty much the exact opposite of the real you.”

No, this is wrong again! I hadn’t met him yet, I saw him later, in the hallway. Why is everything so jumbled?

After turning to wood I’d found myself experiencing more and more fragmentary memories. I’d had my face ripped off and stuck to a wall. A blackened and charred skeleton ripped an axe from his forehead and cleaved me in one swipe. I felt the blades of a spinning windmill cut into my skin. I died a dozen times, each one feeling real and final, before I sprung back to life.

After suffering through that torment, the things I saw began to shift. It was like I was experiencing my own history playing out before me but edited and cut wrong. Moments that played out years ago were suddenly re-enacted before my eyes.

There’d been a time when I was 14, Mom and Dad made me go and work at Greasy’s Diner. It was degrading work, but they claimed we needed extra money after all we’d lost. Now I think about it, that was clearly a lie. We may have lost a lot, but we were still rich. They probably just wanted to get rid of me for a bit.

One day, the Pines twins had come round to get a meal. I ran off and hid in the bathroom for 10 minutes, cause I didn’t want them to see how far I’d fallen. Eventually I’d built up the courage and gone to take their order. I remember that they were happy to see me. They didn’t mock my new job, just chatted like old friends.

But now, I’ve seen that event a second time. The memory came back, and I felt helpless to repeat my steps. When I came over to take their order this time, they teased my new role, laughing at how I’d lowered myself to such a level. I ran off in tears. It felt horrible, something that once been a fond recollection was now twisted.

This pattern repeated several times. I’d relived scenes from my past, unable to fully control my actions. When I’d try to speak, a stranger’s words would emerge. At my parents’ annual party, the twins don’t care enough to help exorcise the ghost, leaving us to wallow in our own mess. When I’m riding home from mini-golf in their car, they shun me with silence. Every time, rather than question them or try to apologise for my misdeeds, I simply shot back with more insults.

On and on, each encounter with the Pines turns sour. I feel like a passenger in my own body, doomed to watch myself make the same mistakes each time. All throughout, my body feels strangely foreign. The long hair that I used to take such care over feels like a parasite clinging to
me and dragging me down. This jacket and dress are a prison uniform, a routine look that I must never deviate from.

As I watch the dance floor at the Shack fade away, I brace for another ugly meeting with Mabel and her brother. Now I’m sitting round a campfire. There are many people here, some I’ve known for a while, like that old grifter, Stan, and other town locals. Others are new to me, a bear with dozens of heads, a pixelated sumo fighter, two tiny bearded men. We’re sitting here around the fire, waiting for the battle to come tomorrow.

Everyone is dressed in those ridiculous sweaters Mabel makes. I fight the urge to say something insulting to her face. I’m tired of being caught in this loop. Mabel finishes giving out the sweaters, but I’m still just wearing a potato sack. “Oops, looks like I’m one short. Guess I forgot all about our resident link in the world’s worst chain.”

The gathered townsfolk and monsters all laugh at this, at me. I cover my ears, trying to shut out their jeers, because I know if I don’t then I’ll only respond in kind with more rudeness and hate. On either side, the twins close in, squeezing me between themselves.

“Don’t worry Mabel, she doesn’t deserve one of your sweaters anyway, they’re only for good people, not trash like her.”

“Yeah, we should give her over to Bill now, save ourselves the hassle. I bet—“

“Enough! I’ve had it with you two!” I push the twins aside and get to my feet. This time the anger I feel isn’t false, isn’t spewed forth from elsewhere. It’s real. “I can’t stand it any longer. Mabel, if I know one thing, it’s that you’d never drag someone down through the mud. Even when I was horrible to you when we first met, you never gave up on trying to get through to me!”

Mabel seemed cowed by what I said, and I turn to her brother. “And you… whatever your name is, I can’t remember! You’re a dork, biggest nerd I’ve ever met, your idea of a good time is sticking your nose in a book and ignoring the outside world! But you’re also perceptive, you saw the real me when no one else could! You’re smart and brave and I don’t understand what that’s making me feel right now. But I do know there’s something wrong!”

“Good Pacifica, fight it! Break through the illusion.” The voice seems to come from all around me. Those gathered around the campfire become static, like a photograph. Everyone besides the twins are still now.

Mabel and her brother have stunned looks on their faces, not sure of how to react. I look around for the mystery speaker. From beyond the flicker of the campfire, I finally see him. It’s Mabel’s brother, but he’s taller, older. I feel myself shift. I’m older again now too, 17. My hair still feels too long, but the jacket and dress combo are a relief after the sack.

The younger twins are still staring blankly at me. He sees them, the older Pines brother whose name I still can’t quite grasp. I feel a rise in my chest as he approaches. There’s a look of concern on his face, he’s worried for me. It’s the first time I’ve seen anyone care for me in what feels like an age.

“Pacifica. Are you alright?”

“You… I…” I don’t know how to respond, my mind wants to form the words, but my mouth still stubbornly won’t let me. “Help me.”

He nods. “Of course, we’re trying everything we can. Hold on Paz.” He reached out a hand for me
to take. This felt like another echo. I’d once wanted to thank him for something, when they’d arrived for that second summer. I couldn’t lift my arm out of fear, too afraid of revealing my true feelings to him. But now that fear is absent. I clasp his hand, feeling his round fingers cover my slender ones.

I feel familiar and safe after so long confused, and I never want to let go. My mind still has a mental block, but I start to feel like I can overcome it.

Then there’s an awful screeching sound. The younger twins are now screaming out at us, loud enough to shatter glass. I release my grip and bring up both hands to cover my ears. As I listen, the colour drains from my face. The screeching turns into the chiming of a bell.

But I’ve faced this particular torture before and won. I recite a half-remembered mantra to myself, that I am who I am, and no-one can take that away from me. I see flashes of golden bars and a llama, then realise that the noise has stopped.

Removing my hands, I take in my surroundings. The younger twins are still again, and the older brother is looking at me with a new emotion. I think it’s pride.

“You held them off. That was amazing!”

“Please, you have to help me! I’m lost, I don’t know what’s right or wrong, real or fake. I hate you and love you and I can’t think straight!”

Instead of his reply, I hear another voice from the air. “Looks like you need another helping hand. Lucky I’m an expert at mental stuff! Now starring Mabel Pines, as: The Third Person!”

Pacifica suddenly lurched as her perspective completely shifted. It was if she’d gone from staring out from her eyes to viewing her body remotely from above. I think she looks really good from this angle though, it shows off her neat hair. Hey, I wonder if I can change the viewpoint? Woo, woo, up and down, this is fun! Ok, dizzy now.

Where was I? Oh yeah, Pacifica’s stuck in this dream realm, and we’re here to help! Hey, why’s Dipper looking up at the sky? He seems grumpy.

“This is just great, we’re being omnisciently narrated by Mabel!” Dipper of course is being his usual annoying self. Hey bro, I don’t even know what omniscient means! “Mabel, can you try and describe us getting out of here please!”

“STOP!” Pacifica cries out. “That’s right, Dipper, that name!” She closes her eyes and bends over, trying deeply to concentrate.

“What, what is it Paz?” Dipper grabs a hold of her shoulder, such a charmer! “Mabel, now’s not the time! What is it about the name?”

“You have one! You’re not just ‘the brother’, the ‘other Pines twin’! I know you!” Aw, Pacifica’s starting to cry, this is so emotional. Ahh, now I’m crying too! Least I think I am, don’t know if I have a body at the moment.

Dipper shouts up at the sky again. “Mabel, this is gonna sound crazy, but I think you’ve manifested as the narrator of Paz’s dream. You need to explain what’s going on.”

Well how should I know bro!? Dipper looks angrily at the sky again, before focusing back on Pacifica. She’s staring at him like she wants to slap him and kiss at the same time. Woah, I’ve been there sister. One time, this boyfriend of mine, Charles, he was being such an idiot, and so I told
“Mabel, ahem!” Oh, Dipper’s right, got side-tracked again. Anyway, I broke up with Charles, end of story. Back to Paz then. Huh, she looks kinda off somehow. Her makeover! She hasn’t got it! It’s like she’s ‘Pacifica classic’, weird.

“No, not weird.” Pacifica’s realised something, I think she’s trying to get her thoughts in order. “I’ve been seeing you two so many times, always being spiteful and not caring. But that’s not who I am, not anymore! I never wanna be that person again!”

Pacifica suddenly splits down the middle! It’s like she’s been sliced in half. Both halves lean away from each other. Dipper’s mouth is gaping open in shock, obvs. One half starts regrowing, in seconds there’s a full Pacifica again, still pre-makeover. The other takes a bit longer, remoulding her body. The hair starts to recede, her clothes warp, and when it’s all over, our Pacifica is back, just as she was this afternoon!

The two Pacificas stare at one another. One is starting to curl their lip downwards into a look of hate, the other finally comprehends what’s going on. Dipper of course, has no clue. “Oh thanks sis, care to shed some light then?”

Rolling my eyes (at least, I would if I had eyes in this weird narrator state), I start to make sense of the two Pacificas. The one with the short hair is the real one, the one who’s asleep right now in that kimono you find cute Dip (and we all already know he’s blushing). The long-haired Pacifica is some sort of nightmare version of herself, all her worst aspects brought together.

Wait, something’s happening. There’s like this weird tug, I can’t, woah, woah!

Mabel’s weird narration is gone, and I’m left with my copy and the boy I now know is called Mason. My mind is finally cleared of all the negative impulses, and my memory’s back in place. I don’t know how the twins got in here to help me, but I’m so glad they did.

My copy is staring daggers at me. Did I really used to wear so much makeup? It feels like with all the hiking, then the hospital stay and the upheaval of this week, that I haven’t bothered with it in ages. Mason comes to stand beside me, once again taking my hand. Before I do anything else, I plant a big kiss on his lips, savouring that feeling. If this is my dream, then I might as well make it a happy one.

My copy doesn’t like this. She looks down at us, wrinkling her nose. “That’s so pathetic. You’d give it all up for that loser?”

I look at Mason’s face, clearing away his messy hair and looking into his eyes. He looks back at me, warmth and love evident in every fibre of his being. “I would. Because he looked at you and he didn’t see a hateful person. He saw through to the core of who I am.”

The twin’s eyes flickered open in unison as they woke up back in Dipper’s bedroom. Mabel blinked a few times. “Aw, I’m not the narrator anymore. Real life is boring!”

“Just be thankful this is all over- woah!” The alpha-wave generator started sparking and steaming in the corner, before catching fire. “Oh jeez!” Dipper rushed over and fanned out the flames.

Beside him, Pacifica lazily opened her eyes at last. “Oh, wow. I feel great. Like I’ve been asleep for ages. What time is it?”

Dipper, who’d managed to get the fire out, checked his phone. “3am, wonderful. And there goes all
the money I sunk into getting the scrying stone.” He picked up the amber crystal, now useless without the waves to focus.

“Hey, you tried your best. Why did it make my dreams go so… bad, though?”

“I don’t know, it was all working perfectly, the machine should have just lulled you to sleep.”

Mabel hopped off Dipper’s bed. “I get it, the machine worked too well! All that freaky dream stuff wasn’t this thing’s fault. Pacifica’s just gone through a lot, her mind’s bound to be taking it’s time sorting through all that junk. It was like her mental state was recalibrating, and the machine just brought it all out.”

“You really think so Mabel? At least now I feel like all that stuff is buried. I’m not the same person I once was, and that’s good. I can learn from the past and move on to the future.” Pacifica stretched out on her mattress. “Now if you two don’t mind, I wanna try and get some normal sleep, no crazy devices or dreams.”

The twins nodded, and were about to return to their respective beds, when the alpha-wave generator started rumbling. “Uh oh, that doesn’t sound good.” Dipper pushed Mabel back, when the machine suddenly exploded with a loud bang.

Before they could react, there was a click from above, followed by the sound of feet rushing down the stairs. Pacifica covered her face. “Oh no, this is it.”

A moment later, Mr and Mrs Pines burst into the bedroom, surprised to see all three kids in the room together. They were especially concerned to see Pacifica lying on her mattress in Dipper’s room. They were both about to speak, but Mabel jumped in front of them, sticking her arms up. “Surprise, we were having a sleepover! Yep, that’s definitely what was happening in here.”

Her parent’s eyes drifted back and forth between Dipper, rubbing his neck and standing beside a smouldering wreck of machinery, and Pacifica, covering half her face with her duvet in shame.

Mabel saw that her lie was failing, and her forced smile dropped. “Welp, I tried. See you round guys!” She darted past her parents, then hovered in the hallway, wanting to hear every single word of the ensuing argument. This would be some juicy drama.

Chapter End Notes

Pacifica’s new look from this point on was inspired by this art by lucelenus: https://www.deviantart.com/lucelenus/art/Northwest-and-Pines-641894967

This chapter was another experimental one for me, trying out a first-person, present-tense perspective, as well as the scene where Mabel becomes the narrator.
A week of life in Piedmont, California, had not helped Pacifica to settle much. Starting in a new school in new surroundings with only two people she trusted made it hard to slot into things easily. She was used to more expensive facilities, Piedmont High School just couldn’t compare in her mind. The students all seemed too ‘lower class’, and the school’s resources and teaching styles felt lacking.

All the same, she was still happy to be away from Oregon for the time being, and the Pines twins did their best to make her feel at ease. It was tricky though, she didn’t quite fit into either of their friend groups. Mabel’s friends were all too kooky, weird, and over-excitable. Dipper’s were nerds of the highest degree, and even talking to a girl, particularly such a refined beauty as herself, made them panic and shut down.

Truth be told, she found it hard to talk to strangers at the best of times. Few people could relate to her privileged upbringing or the abuse she’d suffered for years at the hands of her parents, let alone the supernatural stuff.

But on the whole, life returned to normal, or at least as normal as her life ever got. The routine of school gave her some structure and looking forwards to her evenings with Dipper and Mabel got her through the days.

Missing out on all the regular events she used to have scheduled was hard as well - without tennis practice or music lessons, she had much more downtime and few ways to fill it. So, a few days into the semester, Mabel sprung a surprise on her, taking her out to a small retro-themed bar in town after school.

The two girls entered the establishment and Mabel, who today was wearing a black sweater with a rainbow shooting out from a prism, led her towards a staircase leading into the basement. “Mabel, are you sure about this? If you’re just gonna get hammered, I’d rather leave you to it.”

“Oh Paz, I’m not gonna go out drinking at 4pm! Well, not with company at least, ha!” Pacifica shook her head, not sure whether Mabel was joking or not. That girl got up to crazier things in her spare time.

They reached the basement, which was dimly lit. Surrounding the walls of the room were numerous lit-up cabinets, flickering screens giving a soft glow to people’s faces. There were a couple of other high-school kids down here, as well as some serious looking adults who were clearly heavily invested in the games they were playing. “Woah, this place is like an arcade!”

“Yes sis, this place is awesome. They’ve got retro stuff, some new shooters. Sometimes they do tournaments too, I know how you love to win prizes. Dipper suggested it, he told me how much you love your games at home.”

It was true, at home she had a top of the line rig just for playing Battlestorm and other shooters. It was one hobby her parents hadn’t minded her doing, they claimed it would help train her hand-eye coordination. “This is really cool Mabel, I’ve been missing this kind of thing. I’m so gonna destroy you in that fighting game over there.”

Mabel started perusing the various games on display. In her dark sweater, she blended into the shadows down here. Pacifica looked around too, feeling relieved to just be having a break from all the stress she was dealing with. As she was absent-mindedly looking around, she bumped into a
boy her age sitting at a table. “Oh, sorry, I didn’t see you in the dark.”

The boy, who was a foot taller than her and wore a bland grey hoodie squinted to see her. He got up and stuck his hand out to apologise. “Hey, I know you. You’re that new girl right, Pa- Patricia?”

“Pacifica,” she icily responded, not taking his hand.

“Oh, uh, right, yeah.” He rubbed his neck awkwardly and sat back down. The table in front of him was covered in sprawling notes, it looked like math work.

“Eli!” Mabel came bounding over to stand beside her.

“You know this nerd?”

“Yeah, he’s one of Dipper’s friends.”

Eli perked up at the mention of his friend. “Where is the Dip-Man Mabel? I thought he’d have dragged you here. Why else would you be in a place like this?”

“Ah, he’s off tutoring again, wasn’t free this afternoon. It’s just me and Paz, I’m showing her around! She loves all this beep-boop gamey stuff.”

“Right. And how do you know each other again? I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your last name.”

Pacifica hesitated for a moment, unsure how to introduce herself. So far she hadn’t had to use her last name much in Piedmont, no one had got close enough to her for her to need to tell anyone. “I’m Pacifica… Pines”

Mabel threw her arm around her neck, slightly choking her. “Yeah, this our cousin!”

Eli looked confused. “Wait, didn’t Dipper say you two were going out-“

“She’s adopted! Adopted cousin! No blood relation at all! It’s not weird!”

Eli looked shiftily between the two of them. “Uh, sure.”

Mabel started twisting a strand of hair around a finger. “Anyway, Eli, since you mentioned going out, I don’t suppose you’ve got a date for prom next month yet?” Her voice was noticeably more breathy all of a sudden.

His eyes started darting around in a panic. “Uh, well, I-“

“Cause I’ve currently got no-one to go with.” Pacifica was astonished as Mabel sat in Eli’s lap. He was clearly overwhelmed, squirming beneath her. “It’d be nice to have someone to snuggle up close with.” He black sweater matched his dark complexion, and down here Pacifica almost couldn’t tell where Mabel ended, and her new object of attraction began.

Eli struggled to make his mouth say words. “Mabel, that’s, you’re, I mean… oh.”

She let out a childish giggle. “Tee hee, well, you know how to get in touch. See you round.” She hopped off his lap, then winked as she strolled away. He was blushing immensely as she left.

Pacifica shook her head as they left him behind. “You really are an incorrigible flirt, aren’t you? I never would have guessed when we were younger.”

“What can I say, I’m a magnet for affection. Didn’t you ever hear about all my ‘Epic Summer
Romances’ back in the day? That stunt with Eli was partly just for show though.”

“Huh, what do you mean?”

“I’ve dated most of Dipper’s friends at some point in the past. They’re all nerds like him though, so those relationships didn’t last very long. Different interests, plus guys like Dipper don’t do well with someone with as much energy and self-assurance as me.” Mabel shrugged, clearly not caring too much about the topic.

“Suppose that makes sense, they’d get burnt out pretty fast with how hyper you are,”

“You know it sis. There’s another benefit to what I did though, it stopped Eli thinking about you and how we’re related, that’s a plus too.”

“Oh yeah, you’re right. He’s too distracted thinking about a girl sitting in his lap to worry about my convoluted backstory. Guess I owe you some thanks.”

“Of course, don’t want people making you feel like an outcast here. Then again,” she said with a wicked grin, “Eli’s kinda hot too, so it wasn’t too much of a sacrifice.”

Pacifica put on a mock offended tone. “Oh! Mabel Pines, you’ll end up corrupting my innocent soul with such talk.”

Mabel chuckled. “Yo, what innocence Paz, you’ve always been a little devil. Here, this game seems fun. Fight Fighters!”

Pacifica looked sceptically at the cabinet. “I don’t know, it’s pretty tough for first timers. You sure you can handle it?”

“Positive, I’m a fast learner! I’m gonna play as… ooh, Suggessica, she looks sassy!”

“Guess I’ll be Rumble McSkirmish, he’s the strongest.” There was an option to type in a username, so Pacifica went with her usual stock online ID.

Mabel adjusted her glasses to read the text “PLATINUMPAZ, eh? I thought you were Llamalover15?”

“That’s just my phone ID, I use this name for my gaming.”

“Ok, then I’ll be…” She rapidly typed the letters, “METALMABE! Now you’re going down!”

“Oh, it’s on!”

Mabel’s initial confidence was quickly shattered when Pacifica won the first round in 10 seconds using a memorised combo move. Mabel tried to get the hang of moving and jumping in round 2, but Pacifica’s competitive streak wouldn’t let her practice for long before inflicting another beatdown. On round 3, Mabel angrily slammed her buttons down, trying to furiously overcome Pacifica’s volleys. Still, she failed to win again.

She threw up her hands. “Stupid game, it’s impossible!”

Pacifica tried to comfort her. “You’re not so bad, it just takes a while to learn the combos. I’ve had a lot of experience with games like this, you’ll learn too. Plus, I think Mace once said this game was, like, haunted or something, it’s not all you.”

“Whatever, let’s play something else. Ooh, a racing game!” Unfortunately, a similar cycle repeated
itself, as Pacifica dominated the circuit, taking first place several times while Mabel never won. “New game, this block matching one!” Again, Mabel struggled as Pacifica won again. “Another game, now!”

Fuming, Mabel angrily tapped one button over and over again. Pacifica was taken aback by this flash of rage. “Woah, maybe we should take a break.”

“No, I’m not gonna let you win again! You have to let me get better, I’m sick of losing.”

“I’m sorry alright! I’m used to always playing to win, I was taught never to lower my standards to give other people a leg up.”

Suddenly Mabel seemed to get out of her funk, dramatically putting the back of a hand on her forehead and leaning back. “Alas, poor Mabel cannot compete with the almighty Pacifica! I bow in respect of your insane skills.”

Pacifica let out a nervous laugh, glad that Mabel wasn’t taking her losses too seriously. She was reminded of how annoyed she’d gotten at her own sketching a few months ago. Mabel’s reaction today had seemed similar at first, but she didn’t seem the type to get hung up on trivial stuff like losing at video games. “Ok then drama queen. Let’s try something else. I don’t know, maybe there’s a co-op game here somewhere.”

“What about this one, Arclight: Paladins, what’s this about?”

“That’s an arcade version of an MMORPG.”

Mabel cocked her head to the side. “Arcade version of a what now?”

“It’s… like Dungeons, Dungeons and More Dungeons.”

“Oh, boo, next!”

Pacifica looked around the cabinets for a teamwork based game they could try out but stopped when she saw an all-black cabinet. There was one word stencilled above the screen, which she read aloud. “Antholybius? What is this?”

“Sounds like Greek to me sis. Wonder how it works.” Mabel slotted in a quarter, and the screen flickered on. There were patterns of coloured lines all across the screen, like it was tuned to the wrong channel. Mabel thumped the side of the cabinet. “Aw c’mon, what a rip-off!”

Pacifica stared at the lines, sensing some kind of meaning behind the interlaced lines. She also thought she could hear a faint buzzing emanating from the cabinet. Staring at the static made her eyes start to water, so she rubbed them clear. “Yeah, this thing’s a bust, we should- Mabel?”

Beside her, Mabel’s eyes were fixated on the screen. Her pupils were dilating fast, becoming wider and wider as her pupils opened up to take in the image. “Mabel!” Pacifica tried waving her hand in front of her eyes in vain, eliciting no response. “What in the world?”

“AHHHH!” Mabel screamed, then her body suddenly began convulsing. She fell to the floor, muscles twitching all over her body.

Pacifica screamed out at the few people gathered here. “Somebody help!”

Dipper’s friend Eli ran over to them, gasping when he saw Mabel. “She’s having a fucking seizure man!” To Pacifica’s scorn, rather than trying to help in any way, he just snapped a photo with his
phone.

She cradled Mabel’s head, hoping that this fit or attack or whatever would cease soon. Mabel let out a massive gasp, then fell back. Her eyes were back to normal now, but there were still occasional twitches coming from her arms and legs. “Ah, my head. Paz, ooh, feels like my head’s been in one of those thumbscrew thingies.”

“Are you ok now?! You were spasming pretty bad. I got no help thanks to ‘Mr Hot Nerd’ over here.” She angrily jabbed a finger at Eli, who raised his arms in protest, but said nothing.

“What is this game? This cabinet must be glitching out or something! Hey, maybe I should sue the company that made it, that’s always your go to solution!”

Pacifica was glad to see Mabel teasing her again, the seizure hadn’t been too bad on her spirit. She looked around the cabinet, trying to find a mark indicating who’d made it. At the base of the left side, there was a small printed logo, a hexagon with a word overlaid. “Hivemind Entertainment. Hmm.”

“Ugh, Paz, I think I need a lie down. Let’s go home, video games really do hate me it seems.”

“Ah, stop being such a worrier Mabel, you’ll be fine. I hope…”

A few hours later, Pacifica was pacing awkwardly back and forth in Dipper’s bedroom. He had his nose in a book but was aware of her hand-wringing. “I’m sure she’s fine Pacifica, just go and ask. Mabel’s not gonna shut you out. Whatever’s happened I’m sure she’ll get over it.”

“But what if she doesn’t wanna talk to me. It was technically my fault we were even in that arcade.”

“Just relax, she’s probably just meditating, I taught her some mindfulness tricks back in February.”

“Maybe you’re right. I should go and see how she’s doing.”

“Good luck.” Dipper gave a thumbs up, never looking up from his book.

The stroll across the landing felt like it took an age, Pacifica’s nerves were so tense. She knew that Mabel wouldn’t blame her for the seizure, but still felt guilty for letting it happen. Though the girls were now sharing her bedroom, Mabel’s notorious disregard for any sense of personal privacy meant that Pacifica always made sure to knock before entering, lest Mabel be strolling around nude or something. She reached the door and rapped on it three times, a simple repetitive formality her parents had drilled into her long ago.

“Who is it?” Mabel’s muffled voice called from inside.

“It’s Pacifica.”

“Ok, you can come in.” Pacifica opened the door gingerly and shut it behind herself. Sprawled out on the bed was Mabel, who’d ditched her black sweater and was now just wearing a white vest top. There was an odd scent in the air, and Mabel had something clutched in one hand, smoke lightly wafting from it.

“Are you smoking, Mabel?”
“It helps calm my nerves.” She shrugged. “You wanna try?”

She held the joint up to Pacifica’s nose, which quickly wrinkled up. “Is that Marijuana!?”

“Oh man, you and Dip are such squares.” She took another puff from the joint, sending out a smoke ring. “It’s no biggie, I’m just feeling a little down this evening after the arcade business.”

“Guess I shouldn’t be surprised, you always did like to ‘experiment’ with stuff like that.” She sat down in Mabel’s chair and propped her boots up on the desk. “S’pose I’m feeling a little put out too. I’m convinced that arcade cabinet had something more sinister going on.”

Mabel got up into a cross-legged seating position. “Oh wow, me too! You’d be surprised how many video games I know of that are secretly evil.”

“I dunno, I just feel kinda helpless. Feels like there’s this whole mystery, and we can’t do anything about it.”

“Never stopped me and Dip before. Mysteries are like our bread and butter.”

“And you’re ok, no lasting side-effects or anything?”

“I’m fine Paz. It’s nice that you care though. The old you woulda just probably laughed at me.” Pacifica looked away briefly, reminded of the parts of herself she’d rather forget these days.

There was a knock at the door, and without having to ask Mabel yelled out. “Come in Dip!”

“You know your brother’s knock?”

“We have a super-secret knock code that just the two of use.”

Dipper shut the door behind him. “Good thing too Mabel. I’m pretty sure Mom and Dad aren’t gonna be happy if they find you with that.”

“Blah, I’ll make sure the smell’s gone before I go to sleep.”

Pacifica was shocked at how accepting they both were of Mabel’s drug use. “You’re fine with this Mason?”

“Sure, as long as she keeps it to herself. It’s not my problem.” He shrugged, then pulled out his journal. “So, I heard you two had a run-in with something strange at the arcade today.”

Mabel leapt off the bed and came over to poke a finger in Dipper’s chest. “Hey, how’d you know!?”

Dipper brandished his phone. “Eli posted this photo.” It showed Mabel sprawled out during her seizure.

“Ugh, everyone at school’s gonna see this now. So embarrassing, bleh.”

“I thought I could, you know, lend a hand.”

Pacifica suddenly had a thought and got up. “Mason, that’s thoughtful and all, but this time, I wanna solve this mystery on my own.” She pulled out her own journal. “Me and Mabel found this ‘thing’ at the arcade, so we’re gonna be the ones to solve it!”

Dipper raised a single eyebrow but smiled. “Oh, ok. I see how it is. Sure, I’ll let you handle it, if
you think you’re up to it.”

Pacifica crossed her arms and matched his grin. “Oh, we’re up to it Mace. You just watch.”

“Ha, same old Paz, that competitive streak in you just won’t die. If you need any help, you know where to find me.” He left the two girls alone, who were now deep in thought about ways to solve the mystery.

“We don’t need Mason this time.” She patted her journal. “Gotta make worthwhile use of this thing.” She started examining pages, opening up on the most recent. Since her hair was shorter now, she didn’t have a use for her old lucky hair tie, so Mabel had helped her convert it into a bookmark string for the journal. She made sure it was in place on the most recent blank page, then started scanning the previous pages at random. She’d often seen Mason do this, but didn’t know what she was looking for really, she only had a few pages of real notes, and none that had anything to do with arcade cabinets. “Hmm, this might be harder than it looks.”

Mabel flopped back on her bed. “Well, whatever happens, I’m on board a hundred and ten percent Paz!”

“That’s impossible Mabel, you can’t have more than one hundred-“

“Tsk tsk, I know that. So, Miss Author of the Journal, what’s your master plan for tracking down the source of the ‘freaky epilepsy machine’?

“I… hadn’t really thought that far ahead.” She shut the book, not finding anything in its pages. “What about you, got any bright ideas?”

“Well…” Mabel waggled her eyebrows.

“What’s that look supposed to mean?”

“You got the name of the company that published the ‘game’, right?” Pacifica nodded. “Then here’s what I propose. We track down their HQ, show up tonight, and get some answers!”

“What that’s crazy! It’s a school night!”

Pacifica blushed as Mabel burst into guffawing laughter. “Oh, that’s priceless, a school night! Ah Paz, since you’re living with us now, you’d better learn fast. We don’t play by no stinkin’ rules!”

“But it’s already late, shouldn’t we get plenty of hours sleep or some junk like that?”

“I do all my best work after midnight anyway. Now let’s find out just where this company is based and pay them a little visit. Pines and Paz style!” She held out her fist, and Pacifica rolled her eyes and fist bumped it.

“Ok, I can’t believe I’m saying this, but now you’re actually starting to convince me.”

An evening of research got them the address of Hivemind’s main office building, located about an hour’s drive from Piedmont. According to the research, they were a small publishing company, currently working on a new video game project. There was no mention anywhere online about the Antholybius cabinet, so the girls decided to take action and check out Hivemind in person.

They arrived just after midnight, with Pacifica yawning as she stepped out of the pickup. “This is it
Mabel? A boring office building doesn’t exactly scream ‘evil conspiracy’.”

“Au contraire my friend, appearances can often be deceiving. See there, the lights are still on, whoever’s running this place is in the building at this very moment! Now, if we’re gonna show Dipper how awesome we are at solving mysteries, we’d better get to the bottom of this quickly.” Mabel pulled off the sweater she’d been wearing, leaving herself in a black tank top. Pacifica noticed that she had fingerless gloves and was quickly applying a layer of black lipstick. She even spotted some small skull earrings and started realising what she was up to.

“Mabel, again, the goth look? Really? Didn’t we just talk about that last week?”

“Don’t worry, I’m not going back to it for real this time. It’s for intimidation purposes, goths just look menacing, it’s like, the law! I’ve got something for you too, something you can wave around to look threatening!”

She reached in the pickup and produced a crossbow. “Woah, isn’t this thing dangerous?”

“Eh, probably. So always use it responsibly! That’s what Great Uncle Ford told me!” Mabel grinned then dove back in the pickup.

Pacifica tentatively drew back the crossbow string. “Guess it can’t be too hard to aim one of these things. My parents did make me try archery one.”

“That’s the spirit Paz! If that doesn’t work out, then next time I think I have an axe too, somewhere at home - donation from a living wax figure can you believe!”

“With you two I’d believe anything.” Mabel shut the pickup door and Pacifica saw a flash of metal on her fist. “Brass knuckles! That Stan is rubbing off on you. He’s such a bad influence.”

“Oh, the worst!” She cracked her knuckles then kissed her fist. “Let’s do this! After you sis.”

Mabel gave her a leg up over the wall surrounding the office, before climbing over herself using her parkour tricks. Pacifica was grateful now for the new boots Mabel had got for her, getting over would have been much harder in heels.

There was seemingly no security inside the grounds, just a parking lot and the building itself. They reached the main door, and Mabel amazed Pacifica by showing off her lockpicking skills, getting the door open in under 20 seconds.

Creeping through the silent reception, the girls found no signs of life. The light Mabel had seen was on the third floor, seemingly just another office room. They came to a halt at the door and listened. There was some kind of chatter coming from within, indistinct, like a low buzz.

Mabel did countdown on her fingers and Pacifica nodded, hefting the crossbow up. As the countdown ended, Mabel kicked at the door as hard as she could, and the two girls ran into the room screaming.

Both stopped almost immediately as they took in the room beyond. Occupying the generic office cubicles were not bored office workers or pencil pushers. The creatures hovering around the room weren’t even human. In fact, they were large, furry, had six slender legs, and were covered in black and yellow stripes.

Before Pacifica could say a word, Mabel shouted out at the creatures. “I don’t Bee-lieve it!”

Pacifica couldn’t help but loudly groan, and put her head in her hands, not wanting to face the
madness in front of her. “They’re bees! Giant, intelligent, bees! Oh my god, how do you cope with this nonsense Mabel, this is too weird for me to even comprehend.”

The bees, which were human-sized, seemed to ignore the girls at first, just going about with the drudgery of mundane office work, typing on computers with their multiple spindly arms or fetching printouts.

Mabel waved an arm out at the bees. “We’d better get their attention. Hey, bee guys! Over here!” Two of the bees looked up, then flew over with a buzz of their wings. “Watch this, I know their language! Bees communicate through dance!” Mabel started dancing, jiggling her arms up and down and shaking her legs.

Pacifica put her palm to her face, still not wanting to embrace the insanity. “This is the strangest day of my life so far.”

One of the bees, a female, spoke in fluent English. “Please stop with the dancing, we can talk, you know.” Mabel sadly stopped, she’d been enjoying the dance moves. “How’d you two break in here, this is supposed to be a secure facility.”

Pacifica crossed her arms smugly. “Wasn’t hard, we just jumped the fence and picked the lock on a single door. You insects really should’ve put more attention to security if you didn’t want people finding out your secret.”

The other bee shook her head. “I kept telling Bee Resources, Cindy. They should have factored this into the budget!”

The other bee slapped the second with a long black leg. “Yeah, like BR would’ve got off their stingers and done that. Real smart idea, Karen!”

“So,” Mabel asked, “you’re Hivemind Entertainment? I guess the name’s like ironic then?”

“Uh, we’ve got a Non-Disclosure agreement on all company projects.” Cindy the Bee nodded. “You’ll have to approach any questions to our PR department.”

“Oh really?” Mabel snapped her fingers, and Pacifica lifted the crossbow.

“Which one should I take out first, the black one with yellow stripes or the yellow one with black stripes?”

The bees both held up four of their arms. “Ok, ok, what do you humans want?”

“An explanation, you fat six-legged freaks. Start at the beginning. Or else.” She tightened her finger slightly on the trigger, emphasising the point.

“Yeah, you’re giant bees who make video games?” Mabel asked.

“It’s a profitable business!”

“Karen, are we really gonna give these humans the office tour?!”

“Eh, come on Cindy, it might be fun. Better than slaving away on all these lines of code.”

The two bees turned and led the girls around the office cubicles, talking quietly so as not to disturb their co-workers. “So, our Queen founded the company a few years ago, we needed a way to quietly keep our hive afloat in this economy.”
“Um, maybe take a few steps back and explain how you’re giant freaking bees!” Pacifica once again waved the crossbow about, but Mabel put a hand out to lower it.

“Paz, best in this line of work to not question the ‘weird’ too much. So they’re giant bees that speak English, so what? I’ve known stranger people. Carry on, uh, Cindy, was it?”

The bee nodded and carried on leading them around the room. They passed numerous cubicles, each one had a bee working at the newest game project. Some of the bees were typing out code or working on game models, while others were concept artists, using their multiple limbs to work on complex sketches. Mabel noticed that rather than being arranged in a rectangular grid, the room was instead laid out as a series of hexagons.

“Our first game was called Bee-tlefield. Not a great seller to be honest, we got our big break with Grand Theft Hiveo. The Buzzy the Bee platformer games got us through the 90’s, but didn’t transition well when that new-fangled 3D came along.”

“Don’t forget Bii Sports, the motion controls made that one really fun!”

“Yes Karen, I was just getting to that. Nowadays we make high end open-world stuff, those always sell like hot-cakes. We even financed a movie about bees a few years back. People… people didn’t like that one. Dark times.” Both bees shuddered in memory, leaving the girls slightly lost.

“Anyway, as soon as we get the bugs sorted out of our latest game, we’ll be back on top of the market.”

“Those wouldn’t be literal ‘bugs’ would they?” Pacifica queried, convinced that anything was possible after today.

The bees brushed it off as a joke and brought the girls back to where they’d entered the office. “So that concludes the tour, are you bipeds satisfied now?”

Pacifica shook her head. “Not really. My friend here had some kind of fit after seeing one of your products.”

“Oh, she means the ‘government’ cabinet.”

“Government?”

Karen the bee nodded. “Yeah, we were in a crunch time for our last game, Honey: Zero Dawn, but needed some extra funds.”

Pacifica searched her memory, then clicked her fingers. “Hey, I played that game. It was pretty good, though the tutorial was way too long.”

“Why thank you, human, glad to get some audience feedback. Anyway, we dug those old cabinets out of a landfill and sold ‘em to local arcades for a quick buck. They were some kind of ‘psycho hypnosis project’ from the 70’s, affects brain centres in certain humans, but hey, if we can sell it, am I right?”

Both girls boggled at this. “You sold some shady psy-ops project from 40 years ago and just expected some people to get struck down with seizures?!”

“Yeah! That’s not cool Cindy and Karen, you two should be ashamed! I got hurt because you were too cheap not to risk people’s lives!” Mabel clenched her fists again.

The bees seemed apathetic to the girl’s plight. “Look kids, so what if a couple of people have
migraines because of us. You think we care? We just do what the Queen tells us.”

Pacifica and Mabel shared a quick glance. “The Queen, eh Mabel? Guess we know who to address our complaints to.”

The two bees suddenly let out low buzzing noise, catching the attention of all the other workers in the room. “Workers! We have unwanted pests in the building- Yah!”

Pacifica let off a shot with the crossbow, hitting Cindy and impacting in her fuzzy back. She careened off and crashed into a cubicle, but seemed otherwise unaffected by the attack. Mabel punched Karen right in her multi-faceted eye, stunning the angry bee.

The noise of countless bee wings flapping filled the air as the girls were surrounded. Pacifica pulled back the drawstring but realised that Mabel hadn’t given her any more arrows. Instead, she waved the bow above her head like a blunt instrument. “Who wants it next!?"

Jumping on Karen’s back, Mabel brought the bee into a headlock, then spun her around. The bee’s stinger was now pointing out at the approaching horde. She hopped down and grabbed a hold of the stinger, clutching it like a hose. “Stay back you buzzy bullies! I know how to use this! One wrong move and I sting you!” The bees hesitated and Mabel waved the stinger around, forcing them back. “That’s right, and remember, if Karen here loses her stinger, she goes too!”

“By the Queen! I’m too young to die!”

“Quiet bee! We’re going to the Queen, now!” Mabel pushed her way through the crowd of cowed bees, with Pacifica following behind.

The nerve centre of Hivemind was situated at the middle of the top floor, two large doors stood in their way. Mabel shoved their captive bee away, then held the door handle. “Ok, we get in there, make the Queen pay, then we get all the cabinets returned so they can’t hurt anyone else.”

Pacifica winked then put her hand on the other door. “All that on a school night?”

“Now you’re getting it Paz.” They pulled the doors away and entered the massive royal chamber. The walls were a soft amber colour, and the curved walls formed a massive beehive shaped dome. Light jazz wafted in from a hidden speaker.

In the centre of the room, lying on a massive pile of honey and surrounded by a swarm of male drones, was the Queen Bee herself. She must have been larger than an elephant and was lazily fanning herself with one of her six legs.

“Hmm, yes? Who disturbs our royal slumber?” She had a stiff upper-class British accent for some reason.

Shouting up with hands on either side of her mouth, Mabel tried to explain to the giant bee what their situation was. “Hey, your majesty! There’s this totally wack arcade cabinet that can give some people random seizures and spasms! You need to recall them, now, so on one else gets hurt.”

“Please, my dear human peasant, no-one tells a Queen what to do.”

“Peasant?!” Pacifica angrily shouted. “I’ll show you who’s a peasant you fat old broad!” She pulled back the drawstring of her crossbow, using it to flick against the Queen’s side. Mabel tried to punch the Queen with her brass knuckles, but her body was too soft, and she just ended up
stretching the fur, then bouncing back.

Slowly, the massive bee knelt over, facing Pacifica with her multitude of eyes. “I sense the trickle of noble blood in you my dear. Perchance, are you from royal stock?”

Pacifica snorted. “Are you kidding me, my ancestors are all crooks and thieves. Then again,” giving a side glance at Mabel, “I’m certainly of higher breeding than most humans.”

“Hey, I heard that Paz! What’s your angle missy?”

Pacifica talked into her hand with a hushed voice. “Miss, uh, Queen Bee? Can I ask you a favour? One ‘royal’ to another?”

“Why of course my dear, one mustn’t step on formality in such times. What is it that you wish?”

“There’s this cabinet you published. All I want is to have all of them recalled. In exchange… “ She pulled out her phone, “You can have my contacts list. My parents introduced me to several wealthy investors who’d love to back such lucrative projects as you make.”

The Queen considered the tiny screen for a moment, before her face seemed to morph into what passed for a smile. “I’d be happy to comply, absolutely charmed. Hear this, I pronounce you, honorary princess of our Hive!”

The male drone bees all let out a half-hearted cheer. Mabel’s whole face lit up. “Oh my golly gosh! You’re technically a real princess now, isn’t that adorable!

Pacifica’s face paled. “Great, Mason’s just gonna love it when he hears about this.”

“Ooh, Queenie, can I have a title too?!”

The Queen, whose attention had been on writing out an order to recall the Antholybius cabinets, turned back. “Hmm, what? Oh, the peasant. You shall be my princess’ royal consort. Carry on.” She waved an arm, dismissing the girls.

“Woo, consort! Paz, what’s a consort?”

Pacifica wanted to bury her face deep into a pillow and never come out. “Strangest. Day. Ever!”

“And then I got named as royal consort! So now you have to move over Dip, I’m Pacifica’s new girlfriend! Ha!”

“I’m mortified, this is it, this is what my life has come to.”

“Hey, it’s not all bad. You ‘saved the day’. Princess.” Dipper couldn’t hold in his laughter after that point, as Pacifica sunk further into her chair. She let out a deep sigh. Life in Piedmont might not be ‘normal’ in many ways, but somehow she was starting to get used to the strangeness all the same.
Weighing of the Heart

Pushing through the crowds at the Lawrence Hall of Science, Mabel eagerly scanned the room, seeing the latest exhibit. It was a large recreation of an Egyptian tomb, with many authentic artefacts dotted around. She turned her attention to the crowd, first looking for the person she was meeting here, then seeing Dipper and Pacifica finally catch up with her.

“C’mon guys, you’re taking too long! I wanna see the whole exhibit before today ends!” She irritatedly tapped her foot.

“We’re here Mabel, why are you eager today? I mean, I know you’re into all that Egypt stuff, but you’re acting more excited than usual to come to a museum.” Dipper looked at the tomb, impressed by the scale of the reconstruction.

“Remind me why you care about some dusty old mummies again?” Pacifica wasn’t the kind of person to enjoy museums much, she already had a rigorous enough education and preferred to learn at her own pace.

“Uh, duh, cause this stuff is awesome!” Mabel grinned, but it didn’t shake Pacifica’s disinterest. “Ok, seriously, it’s cause of that time I spent in Siwa. Remember, our old buddy from the future, Merak? He was Egyptian, or like, from space Egypt or something. Siwa was his home.”

“That place was too hot.” Mabel’s smile faded as she failed to move her friend.

Dipper came over and took Pacifica’s hand. “Hey, Pacifica, at least we can unwind here. We know you’ve been having a rough time settling in.”

She pulled her hand away and crossed her arms. “I’m fine Mason. You don’t have to worry about me.” Dipper was crestfallen but determined now to try and get Pacifica to find some enjoyment in the museum.

“Anyway guys, why wouldn’t you wanna learn all about Egypt?” Mabel’s grin was back, and she playfully bumped Pacifica in the side. “They worshipped cats! Cats! They had the right idea.” Pacifica couldn’t help but chuckle about Mabel’s childish glee. Before she could say anything though, Mabel let out a piercing scream. “AHH!!! She’s here!”

Pointing across the crowd, Dipper and Pacifica followed Mabel’s finger and set eyes upon girl their age. She looked up as she heard Mabel’s cry, then smiled and came over to them. As she approached, the couple identified her as Linda, the manager of the escape room who’d tried to frighten the trio with a fake haunting. She was wearing a plain red polo shirt and appeared to have combed her black hair since they’d last met. “Mabel, good to see you!”

“You too! I’m so glad you came, we’re gonna have a great time!”

“I’m just gonna go grab a snack, then do you wanna…”

“Go round the tomb, I’d love to!”

“K, see you round. Meet me over by that sphinx statue.” To Dipper and Pacifica’s astonishment, Linda gave a quick peck on Mabel’s cheek before dashing off.

Mabel raised a hand to her check, then spoke in an awed tone. “Oh wow, she actually came. This is so cool.”
“Ahem.” Dipper coughed, emphasising the surprise he and Pacifica were experiencing. “Maybe wanna explain what’s going on?”

Mabel tapped her fingers together as she did often when having to reveal secrets. “Ok, you got me. I’m not just here for the Egypt stuff.

“That jerky escape room manager, Mabel, really?” Pacifica was feeling even more doubtful about how today was going.

“She’s awesome really, I swear! We went to a bar that night, got talking. Turns out she’s really nice when you get to know her. She makes these little painted figurines too, I gave her some helpful tips. Sure, she’s a bit of a nerd like you two,” the couple both frowned, “but she likes a lot of the same stuff as me. It was just a fun evening, I thought that would be it. Then the other day she called me again! She said she wanted to see me! It made me feel all gooey and weird in my chest, I don’t know why.”

“Oh my gosh! I know what this is!” Dipper said, noticing her purple sweater with a sunglasses wearing love heart for the first time. “You’re smitten, oh wow, this is adorable!”

Mabel pouted at this perceived slight. “Adorable?! I’m not adorable! I’m cool and sexy, like a fox or a tiger! You know, one of those attractive animals.”

“Oh no Mabel, you’re totally head over heels for this girl! You’re not even wearing your glasses today, you’re supposed to have those on all the time. And is that purple eyeshadow?”

Pacifica nodded, knowingly. “Hey, you’re right Mace. It’s just like how you were around me before you got brave enough to ask me out properly.” The couple both revelled in understanding fully what was going on with Mabel, who had started to blush uncontrollably.

“So maybe I think she’s cute and nice and- oh man, you’re right!” She started panicking, a side that Pacifica had never really seen. “What if I mess something up on our date, if this even is a date?! Aghh! You guys have made me all self-conscious now! I feel flustery and angsty! Dipper, if this is how you feel all the time, then I’m glad I’m not you, no offence.”

Pacifica gripped her shoulders. “Calm down Mabel! You’re usually fine with flirting with anything that moves, you can handle this. You’ve taken down crazy monsters and saved the world. One teenage crush won’t defeat you.”

Mabel took a deep breath. “You’re right sis. Just gotta show Linda the whole Mabel experience.”

“Maybe not the whole experience, you don’t wanna scare her off,” Dipper interjected, getting a scowl from both girls in return. “Just saying.”

“Ok, I’m gonna go wait for her over there. You guys go… do couple stuff I guess.” Mabel darted off, weaving through the crowds. She called back one last time. “And remember, no weird stuff! I don’t want her getting overwhelmed with how crazy our lives are yet!”

Dipper made a sigh of relief as she left. “Phew, she’s gone. Now we can deal with the artefact.”

“Artefact? Mason, did you have some extra reason to come here today?” Pacifica gave him a penetrating scowl. “Is it something, as Mabel put it, ‘weird’?”

Rubbing his neck, Dipper tried to explain. “Kinda, there’s something here with the Egypt exhibition. Came direct from Giza for the first time. It’s an original Book of the Dead, an ancient funeral text. But this one is actually a spellbook!”
“Really? How’d you know?” She found herself swept up in his descriptions, Dipper had a way of getting his passion for these subjects across.

“Ford discovered it, but his copy got shredded by Egyptian Super Termites before he could do a proper study. I wanna make sure it’s safe if the public are gonna be getting close to it.”

“You sure know how to treat a girl. Guess we’ll be making sure Mabel’s date goes ok at least. Don’t want an ancient curse or something spoiling things.”

“That’s the spirit! I promise, after this, we can do whatever you want. I’m sure there’s something in this museum to entertain you.” They linked hands and set off across the museum.

Mabel sat by the sphinx, wringing her hands and trying to keep calm. She hated feeling like this, the way she’d often seen Dipper panicking. She was usually very calm when it came to relationship stuff, but something about Linda with her raven black hair made her heart go wild.

She pulled out her music player and popped one earphone in. The sounds of loud drumming and electric guitars soothed her, a hangover from her goth phase. She’d just relax, learn some neat Egypt facts, and have a nice day out with a girl.

She tried to remember her previous romantic endeavours, starting with her ‘boy crazy’ phase 5 years ago in Gravity Falls. None of those relationships had ended well, but she’d still learnt a lot that summer. Over the years she’d gotten used to casual relationships, but those too had a habit of not lasting long. She was too energetic for most other people, and her weird interests made it hard for them to keep up. She also found herself getting heavily invested for a short while before moving on quickly. Much like her various ‘phases’, she rarely stuck with anything for too long.

Not to mention her fair share of supernatural encounters, which had driven off a handful of her partners before. Most couldn’t handle that secret side to the world. At least she expected little chance of that happening today, in such a public place few creatures would dare rear their heads.

She spotted Linda heading over, so stowed her music away and quickly checked her breath smelt ok. She’d covertly borrowed some of Pacifica’s perfume that morning, just to add that little bit extra for her chances. “Hey Linda! You ready for an unforgettable day out?”

“Sure Mabel, this place sounds fun.” Not quite sure where their relationship stood, Mabel awkwardly took Linda’s hand, causing both teens to blush.

“So! Egypt! Onwards!” Mabel hoped for something to get her mind off how suddenly overwhelmed she was feeling. They entered the tomb area, passing into the shady interior. The first chamber had displays of canopic jars and small statuettes of the Egyptian pantheon.

“No way, these things are awesome!” Linda appreciated the detail in the miniature figures.

“Like the ones you make, right?”

“Yeah, ‘cept mine are usually from anime, not history.”

“Maybe I should do a Mabel’s Guide to mini models sometime?”

“Mabel’s guide?” Linda’s curiosity was piqued.

“Oh, it’s this video show I make sometimes, I just do whatever and then post it online.”
“And people actually watch? That’s awesome.” Her expression dropped. “No one I usually talk to cares about miniatures. It’s nice to meet someone so passionate about the arts like you Mabel. Like that sweater, you made that, it’s amazing.” The hand hold between them tightened.

“Uh, yeah, I just love making stuff, turning my thoughts into reality.” They continued around the exhibit, Mabel tried to relax and enjoy this, but was too stressed about the ways she could mess things up to do so properly. She took a deep breath as they went deeper into the tomb, and even got desperate enough to wonder if she should ask Dipper or Pacifica for advice. Then she shook her head, that was a terrible idea.

On the other side of the museum was a small collection of the more valuable artefacts transported from Egypt, concealed in bullet proof cases due to their fragility and how rare they were. The tomb exhibition had a lot of people passing through it, and the museum didn’t want these artefacts being potentially damaged by a visitor.

Dipper and Pacifica started searching the cases, looking for the Book of the Dead. Dipper found a few fraying pages with tears around the edges and suspected this was it. He checked around for any security guards, then got close to the glass to examine the pages. “Let’s see, lots of hieroglyphics, some pictograms on the top left, looks like some gods, maybe Anubis there, or Osiris? I dunno, I never studied the gods much. You think I could get a photo without anyone noticing?”

Pacifica sidled over and peered through the glass. “Not if you wanna set off an alarm, I bet the flash on your camera would trigger it.”

“Guess I’ll have to make a sketch later. Assuming this is the correct page.” He squinted, trying to make out the text more clearly.

“Don’t tell me you can actually read that stuff? Mr ‘barely knows Latin’ can read hieroglyphics?” He opened his mouth to answer, but Pacifica cut him off. “Let me guess, ‘your uncle Ford taught you’ for some dumb reason.”

“Yeah, pretty much. I can’t glean much from the text though, it might be a cursed tome, or it could just be a cookbook. We have no real way of being sure this thing is supernatural in any way.”

Pacifica leant over the case. “Well, we have one way.” She grinned as her pendant began to spin, possessed by some unseen force that appeared when it was near magical objects.

“Oh man, we’ve struck gold! Or in this case papyrus!”

“Good thing you went to all the effort of getting me this.” She held the pendant, stopping its motion. She rubbed a thumb over the smooth silver, seeing her reflection in the metal.

“You know, when I made that for you, I never thought you be using it like this.”

“Like what?”

“Going out and identifying stuff, being proactive. I thought that you’d use it more for protection purposes, in your everyday life.”

“Guess we kind of uprooted my ‘everyday life’.”

“Ha, yeah.” He rubbed his neck uncomfortably. “Pacifica… if you’re not happy here in Piedmont, we can always try and find you somewhere else to stay.”
Pacifica was taken aback by his statement. “What?! No! I like it here, really!”

“You’ve just been kinda grumpy this week, I thought maybe you were finding it tough living with us.” He looked away, not wanting to face her gaze.

She took both of his hands in hers, rubbing her thumb along one as she’d just done with her pendant. “Sure, it’s weird living with you. There’s not really room for me in your house and sharing with Mabel and her pig is a pain. I think your parents resent me being here, and it’s hard getting used to a new school.”

“So you do-“

“But.” She put a hand to his lips. “But, I wouldn’t wanna be anywhere else but right beside you. You and Mabel. I might be used to better luxuries, but without you two I’d have nothing.” She started to smile again. “Besides, who’d want my old boring life anyway, magic Egyptian spellbooks are way more fun.”

“As long as you’re happy Princess.” Dipper gladly turned his attention back to the pages. “There seems to be some reference to an incantation here. I would study it more if I had time, but we can’t exactly take it home.”

“Don’t you have ‘epic lockpick and thievery’ skills like Mabel always brags about? Stan will be disappointed in you Mace.”

“Mabel was always better at that sleight of hand stuff. Takes me 10 times longer to pick a lock than her. Maybe if I just read the incantation now, we can figure out what it does.”

She raised one eyebrow. “Isn’t that kinda risky, reading a random spell out here in public?”

He shrugged. “Better than someone else accidentally reading it aloud. I’ll have you know I have experience in reading spells I shouldn’t. Mabel still hasn’t forgiven me for the ‘zombie’ incident.” That got a chuckle out of Pacifica, and he laughed along too, remembering his naivety on that night.

Rubbing his hands together, he examined the hieroglyphs. “Ok, let’s hope my pronunciations aren’t too rusty. It begins, ‘By the power of Ra.’” He ran a finger along the glass, matching up with the line he was reading. “Then there’s a list of gods, Mut, meaning ‘mother’, Nut, sky goddess, Khnum, had the head of a ram, Ptah, he was a god of craftsmen and architects.”

“That’s appropriate for you then, ‘Mason’.”

“Ha, yeah, guess he’s my patron deity. Rest of this parchment seems to just be a list of gods, nothing particularly unusual about that… wait, look there.” He pointed through the glass at one of the names, which had been crossed out with two lines.

Pacifica looked at the hieroglyph, seeing that it was a coiled animal. “What god was this? God of snakes?”

“It’s supposed to Wadjet, she was the protector of Lower Egypt. Her name’s been defaced though. I think there’s a little bit of text above it. In English!”

“Huh, that’s impossible! You said this was an ancient artefact, as in 4000 years old or thereabouts! English didn’t even exist back then.”

“I know it’s impossible, but it’s right there. It’s very faint, but it says, uh, ‘He who reads this text…”
yadda yadda, impure, there shall be a judgement… seize his heart… cast the fear of myself… Apep. Hmm.”

Dipper suddenly stopped reading, but Pacifica noticed that he’d not finished the sentence. “Hey, you missed some words, right at the end. Man, this writing is tiny.”

“Pacifica, I’m not sure we should read that, I think I know-“

“It doesn’t look like English. straeh ruo ruoved... dna htrof emoc, pepA uoy nommus I.’ … Woah, that felt weird. Was I speaking backwards? That’s actually pretty cool! Uh, Mason, what is it?” He was staring stock still at the papyrus pages, which were now fluttering from an unseen wind.

“Get back!” He pulled her away from the case. The glass was starting to flex and bend. In an instant, it shattered. Dipper covered Pacifica to make sure no shards of glass hit her. Then he, along with several startled museum visitors, turned back to the case.

A black column of smoke was twisting around in the air above the Book of the Dead. It spun about, gradually turning into a being of flesh. Starting from the tail, the smoke faded away, revealing enormous green scales covering the entire body.

While the body was covered in scales like a normal snake, the head seemed to be made of a bare grey stone, like flint. Two bright slits contrasted against the dull stone, piercing out with a keen intelligence. In total, the creature, resembling a horned viper, must have been 16 feet long, dwarfing Dipper and Pacifica.

“With a single phrase spoken, I am free! Praisssssse the formless void! Apep the Devourer livessssssssssssss!!!” His speech was accompanied by frequent hissing, and a forked tongue was often seen emerging from its jaws of flint. “What missssssschief can I perform in this dull place?” Most of the onlookers fled in terror at this point.

Dipper sighed. “Oh great, of all the deities to summon, we got a god of chaos, whoop-dee-effing-doo.”

The massive snake bent over to study Dipper. “Thisssssssss one knowssss of my kind?”

“Trickster demons, always a nightmare to deal with. Sometimes literally. What do you want Apep!? If that is your real name, I bet you’re some kind of impersonator, aliens love pretending to be gods. Would fit the standard Von Danniken models.”

“Ssssssilenceccccccccccccce, this insssssssolenceccccccce will not be tolerated!”

Pacifica covered her ears mockingly. “Can you quit it with the hissing? It’s getting on my nerves.”

“Are you afraid mortal?” Apep slithered around Pacifica, the great bulk smoothly crossing the museum floor. “Perhapsssss you should be.” The snake’s body tightened suddenly, trapping Pacifica between its folds.

She gulped in air and the scales tightened around her waist. “Hey! Let go of me!”

“I think judgement is in order young onessssssss. First I shall find the other, then the scales shall be tipped in my favour!” Apep moved away from Dipper, taking Pacifica in its grasp in a knot of its body.

“Mason, get me out of here!” Pacifica tried to break free, but the snake just squeezed her tighter.
“I’ll come after you Paz, don’t worry!” Dipper pulled out his journal, searching for everything he had on ‘tricksters’ and chaos creatures. He had pages on similar beings like Hyper-Coyotes or the infamous Bill Cipher, but who knew whether those same weaknesses they had would carry over.

Before heading off in pursuit, he made sure to grab the fraying papyrus pages. With those stuffed roughly into his hoodie in a way that would surely offend every archaeologist on the planet, he headed over to where he knew the snake would be headed. Towards Pacifica, and towards his sister.

In the Egyptian tomb Mabel was still casually browsing with Linda. She’d reluctantly put her glasses back on, reading the info plaques was impossible without them. It made her feel even more self-conscious though, maybe Linda would like her less with glasses?! Then she thought that was just herself being silly, which somehow doubled up her anxiety. “Grr, why is this so much harder than usual?” she mumbled to herself.

Linda hadn’t changed much though, content to idly explore the museum’s collection, with an occasional comment about the artefacts. Mabel felt like it was horribly forced and awkward, like Linda was merely humouring her, but maybe that was just her own insecurity talking. She tried to find something to say about what they were looking at, currently they were stood in front of a display of cat mummies.

Luckily, Linda was the first to speak. “Pretty freaky these. Those poor cats.”

“Yeah, it’s kinda morbid. Still, they did worship them, so the Egyptians weren’t all bad.”

Linda gave a snort of laughter. “Yeah, but they also worshipped snakes and hippos and junk.”

“I wonder if they had any Pig gods? Waddles woulda loved being worshipped.”

“Waddles?”

“Oh yeah, he’s my pet pig! Going on 6 years old now, and cute as a button! His face is soooooo chubby and adorable!”

“You own a pig?!” There was a look of confusion on Linda’s face, and Mabel expected her next statement to be some kind of mockery. Instead, she was relieved by Linda’s statement. “Must be nice having a pet, I’ve never had one.”

“WHAAAAT?! No way, never?!!” The idea of never sharing her life with an animal companion horrified Mabel.

Linda nodded and looked frustrated. “My Mom says we can’t get a pet, our apartment’s too small.”

“Aw, that sucks. You’ll have to come round to our place sometimes for a pig meet ‘n greet!”

“That sounds fun!” Linda’s honest excitement at the prospect of coming over to her house lifted Mabel’s spirits.

“Ooh, hey, look at this.” It was a recreation of the famous Rosetta Stone, with translations in Hieroglyphic, Egyptian, and Greek. Feeling more upbeat, she led Linda over to the stone. “Reminds me of a crazy night I spent with my brother, there were these giant rock creatures out in the woods, and…” She noticed Linda had a puzzled look, and quickly tried to cover her tracks with forced joviality. “I mean, never mind all that, it’s just a neat stone right, haha.”
She moved on to a different exhibit, not wanting Linda to see her quickly spreading blush. How could she have been so stupid as to almost let slip about that monster stuff? “Mabel, are you ok?” Linda put a hand on her shoulder, suddenly concerned about Mabel’s fluctuating mood.

“I’m fine! Of course I’m fine, why wouldn’t I be!?” Mabel blurted out. Before she could say something else to assuage Linda’s thoughts, she heard an odd sound. Her ears had long been attuned to notice out of place noises, it was always an asset when being stalked by monsters. This sounded like something being dragged across the museum floor, something smooth and bulky.

With no time to react, a wall of the tomb caved in, sending dust from the fake plaster stones everywhere. Linda yelped as Mabel pulled her low to the ground. A ginormous head emerged through the dust, then turned to stare directly at them. “Hello girlsssssssssss.”

Linda let out a piercing high-pitched scream. “OH MY GOD! WE’RE GONNA DIE!”

“Oh dear,” Mabel bluntly intoned.

“Mabel!?” She peered around the stone head, seeing Pacifica wrapped up in the snake’s body. “Hey sis, sorry about crashing your date. Weird day, huh!”

Apep lashed out with his head, snapping his jaws in the air above where Mabel and Linda had been standing moments before. Mabel grabbed the other girl’s arm tightly, forcing her through the tomb. Linda had gone almost limp with fear at the sight of the giant snake. “Come on Linda, you’ve gotta run! I can’t drag you the whole way! Uff!”

Mabel halted; Linda had snagged on something. She turned, seeing that the snake had clamped onto her leg with its mouth, mercifully avoiding using any of the sharp teeth. Linda was pulled out of Mabel’s grip as the snake’s head flicked upwards.

Screaming as she flew through the air, Linda landed in another coil near Pacifica. Apep’s wide mouth twisted into a grin. “Yessssss, I have you both now!”

“Let her go! Whatever you are. She’s probably innocent! I mean, she did spook us once, but that’s water under the bridge!” She took a determined stance against the snake, who didn’t seem to want to attack her.

“Mabel!” Dipper came fumbling into the tomb through the cracked wall. He gracelessly ran around Apep to stand beside her.

“Dipper…”

“Yes, I know,” he mumbled and kicked out at the dusty tomb. “No more reading spells out loud ever again.”

Apep raised himself above the twins and looked down at them through his keen slitted eyes. “Finally, we can begin. Time to test your Ka mortals!” He slithered back, leaving room for a giant pair of brass weighing scales to materialise out of the air. He slid over the scale’s left bowl, depositing Pacifica and Linda on the platform and unbalancing the system. The rim was too smooth for either girl to climb back out again.

Lying back in the bowl, Pacifica tried to reassure the shaking girl beside her. She remembered what it had been like during her first encounter with the supernatural, tied up by living golf balls and stuck on a conveyor of doom taking her towards spinning windmill sawblades. “Hey, I know this seems pretty strange and terrifying, but if you really think about it-“
“Ahh! Ahh! What the hell is going on?!” Pacifica’s words fell on deaf ears as Linda just kept shaking and looking around wildly.

“Ok, probably should’ve expected that reaction.” Pacifica peered over the edge of the bowl, seeing the twins far below her.

Apep let out a laugh. “Let the weighing of the heart begin!”

“Weighing?” Pacifica queried the snake towering above her.

“The Architect summoned me, I feel it fair I ‘reward’ him. An eternal reward, haha! Since you are twins, I shall give you two chances to lose your lives for the price of one.” A sharp needle shot up between the two scales. It leaned over to one side. “This marks the purity of your Ka, your heart shall be deposited in the right bowl. Instead of being weighed against the feather of Ma’at, I shall weigh your hearts against… your hearts! The ones you love shall be the counterweight to your lives. What do you say to my offer? Your heartssssss for theirs.”

Mabel whispered to her brother. “Dipper’s, what’s a ‘Ka’?”

“It’s basically our souls,” he whispered back. “Can you give us a minute Apep, need to have a word with my sister.” He brought Mabel into a huddle to shield their conversation from the snake.

“I think we should go along with what he wants.”

“Are you crazy Dipper!? First you spoil my date, now you agree with fang-face over there!”

“Trust me, the key to beating tricksters is usually to go along with what they want, then find a way to trick them back with the rules they set. I think I have an idea, we just have to go through our hearts being weighed, then I can spring something.”

Mabel sighed, then broke the huddle. “If you say so Dip. I trust you. Alright *Monty Python*, we’ll play your little weight game. I’m sure we’re pure enough of heart to deal with this.”

“Very well. These are my rules. If your hearts weigh less or equal to these two mortals, you shall pass my test and be free. But, should your heart prove heavier than theirs, endless suffering shall be your fate!”

The twins glanced at one another, then nodded in time.

“Seems fair.”

“Onwards Snakey boy!”

“Architect!” Dipper knew Apep was referring to him. “You shall have the honour of being weighed first.” Blue sparks erupted in the air above the right scale. The four anxious teens watched the lights fade, leaving a small object started floating down. It was a small acorn.

Mabel nudged Dipper’s side. “Hey, I bet it’s from a-“

“Yes Mabel, we all know what kind of tree it’s from. I swear, what is it with chaos gods and nicknames?”

They watched the small acorn as it hovered above the rim of the bowl. Apep spoke out again. “This seed contains the potential wrought by your journey through life. We shall see how heavily it weighssssss.”
The acorn landed in the bowl, which caused the far side to rise at first. Pacifica and Linda rolled about in the bowl as the scales wobbled. They eventually settled, with the girls ending up marginally below the right scale.

“It is done, judgement is passsssssssssed! Your heart has been weighed and found to be lighter than the feather. Well done.”

Dipper gave a sigh of relief, glad that his ‘soul’ or whatever hadn’t tipped the scales too far. “Oh phew, that was easy. Guess I’m ‘pure of heart’, I dunno.” The girls flailed about again as the acorn vanished, resetting the system.

“Now, for your twin. Daughter of Sopdet, I wonder how much your heart weighs?”

“Bring it on Horn-Head! I’m totally pure of heart, no matter what some Unicorns might tell you!” Mabel’s casual dismissal of Apep’s challenge quickly vanished when her ‘heart’ appeared in a flash of purple. A smooth black stone attached to a necklace descended towards to the right scale. “No! That’s not fair!”

Apep had a wicked grin, delighting at upsetting her so effectively. Dipper and Mabel watched the slow progress of the Ursus stone towards the bowl. The instant it landed on the brass surface, Pacifica and Linda shot upwards.

As things settled, they found themselves at the limit of the scales’ height. Mabel’s ‘heart’ had reached the maximum weight. “This is totally unfair, those secrets don’t matter anymore! That was the past, things are different now!”

“Oh, but those secrets do hang over you, child. Not important to the ones already close to you - but to your balance...” A chill ran down her spine at his words. She knew exactly who he was talking about.

“Is… is he talking about me?” There was a timid voice coming from the scales high above. Linda’s head poked up over the rim. She was still shaking. “Mabel, I don’t know what the hell is going on. But what does mean about you having secrets?”

Mabel clenched her fists and scrunched up her face, trying to keep her emotions in line. She couldn’t figure out how to break the information to her.

Apep let out another laugh. “Yesssss! As long as you hide yourself from her, I will own your Ka forever more! A thousand years of torment await...”

Mabel tried to ignore his evil speech. It was nothing she hadn’t heard a hundred times before from better villains. There was only one course of action she could take, and it was a terrifying one. She felt Dipper’s reassuring hand on her shoulder, then took a deep breath. “Linda... I... I do this sort of thing for a living!”

She still looked confused, so Mabel carried on. “The world is a strange and wondrous place Linda, and me and brother... well, we look for that kind of stuff. Anything out of the ordinary, that’s our jam. We solve mysteries, fight monsters, be generally awesome at it. And it’s dangerous, and scary, just like this.”

She gestured at Apep, who now looked decidedly displeased. “Be quiet girl! You’ll ruin everything!” As Mabel spoke, pouring her heart out, the weight of the stone gradually diminished, causing the scales to tip.

Ignoring the snake, she continued. “Linda, I know this is all hard to take in. Paz struggled with it
too when she first found out. But you have to understand, the universe isn’t always as cosy as we
like. And that’s ok, makes life more fun! I’m sorry for hiding who I am from you.”

“So you’re telling me magic and sci-fi… it’s all real! This is crazy, you’re all insane!”

Dipper rolled his eyes. “Lady, you’re being judged by a giant Egyptian snake god, get some
perspective.”

That shut Linda up, and Mabel frowned at her brother’s indiscretion. But her words had had the
desired effect, as the left scale finally passed below the right, with Mabel’s Ka lightened. The stone
vanished like Dipper’s acorn, setting things back to square one.

“Aha! My time to shine!” Dipper clambered into the left scale alongside the girls.

“Dipper, what are you doing!?” Pacifica ran a hand on his arm, but he was too focused to notice.
He leapt towards the left scale, nearly losing his grip as the weight shifted. He reached into his
hoodie, then deposited something into the bowl.

Successful in his goal, he let go and landed back on the tomb floor. “Excellent. Hey Apep! Let’s
see just how light your heart is!”

“What!” Apep screamed and slithered over to check the scale. Dipper had placed the papyrus
Book of the Dead. Linda and Pacifica both shouted out in shock as they teleported down beside the
twins.

Floating down above the right scale was a single feather of pure white. The scales rebalanced, and
Apep screamed out in rage as the pages ended up weighing more than the feather. “NOOOOO!
Thisssssss cannot be!

Mabel called up. “Hey, don’t throw a hissy fit about it!”

The scales suddenly vanished in a puff of smoke, and Apep started thrashing about in pain. He
collapsed onto his side, then the smoke started consuming him as well.

Mabel walked over to the snake god’s head and bent over to stare him in the eyes. “You know what
you are bud? Hissssstory!”

Apep rolled his eyes. “Hissssssterical.” In seconds there was nothing left of him but a faint wisp of
black dust.

“And don’t come back!” Mabel breathed easily now that the threat was defeated. She saw Dipper
and Pacifica, both also glad to be out of that situation.

“Like I said Mabel, trickster gods, just gotta twist their rules.” The Book of the Dead floated down
and came to a rest on the floor of the tomb. “Oops, I’ll take that.” He discreetly tucked the pages
into his hoodie. “Don’t want anyone else summoning Apep.”

Mabel smiled at her brother’s ability to always somehow get them into trouble no matter where
they were. Then her smile dropped as she remembered that they weren’t alone. Standing away
from the trio and still shaking like a leaf, Linda was slowly stepping back. “Linda, wait!”

“No! This is all too much!”

“Please,” Mabel quietly said, then held out a hand. “There’s no more lies between us. You’ve seen
my real life now. What do you say?” She hopefully waited for a response.
Linda took one look at the outstretched hand, then around at the destroyed tomb and her two companions, who both looked totally nonplussed about what had just occurred. “Get away from me, you freak!”

“Linda...” Mabel was hurt by her words.

Backing away, Linda turned and ran for the exit. “You’re all freaks! I never wanna see you again!”

Mabel let out a soft whine and dropped her hand. Her face started to give into tears, but she felt two hands grip hers. Dipper and Pacifica stood next to her. Pacifica called out after her fleeing date. “Yeah, well we don’t wanna see you either! Can’t handle the heat, stay out of the kitchen!”

Dipper shouted after her too. “You don’t deserve Mabel anyway, she saved your life!”

Mabel threw her arms around her friends’ necks and pulled them in close. “Aw, thanks guys. Who needs boring old her anyway? If she can’t take me at my Mabliest, then there’s no hope.”

“Yeah, you’ve got us Mabel, we’ll never desert you.” Pacifica broke the hug then. “Uh, guys, I think we should probably follow Linda’s example though.” She waved a hand around at the devastation they’d caused.

Dipper nodded quickly. “Oh right. Mabel, let’s go with escape plan 6, I’ll take Paz round the back way, you try and mingle through the crowds at the front.

“Then I’ll meet you back at Pinesbase Delta 12, got it.”

Dipper grabbed a hold of Pacifica’s hand and started running to the back of the museum. “Wait, Pinesbase? Ah, haha!” She laughed as he led her out of the tomb and they giddily ran hand in hand.

Mabel watched them leave, then smiled. With people like them in her life things would never be mundane or simple. And that was great. With renewed confidence, she started off on her on escape from the museum, putting all thoughts of Linda out of her mind.
Dipper lay back on the sofa, Journal 4 lifted above him. He was studying up on a rare flower, that was meant to bloom in a few weeks’ time. He thought it’d make a nice evening out to see the blossoming with the girls, so was learning everything he could about the flowering cycle. He felt like Pacifica needed a relaxing evening to de-stress after the last few days. Were-Coyotes and Giant bees were one thing, but not everything the twins took Pacifica to had to be a life-or-death scenario.

Speaking of the devil, Pacifica came into the living room at that moment, hands behind her back. He looked at her briefly before returning to the text. “Hey Paz, how ya doing? I’m planning something I think you’ll enjoy, I won’t spoil the surprise though.”

When she didn’t reply, he closed the book and looked at her. Something seemed slightly amiss. Her hair seemed to be growing back pretty quickly, already nearly back to its old length. He didn’t really know how long hair took to grow, always keeping his relatively short. She was wearing her old purple jacket and pink dress, which she hadn’t worn in a while. He’d thought she’d stopped wearing them, but hey, fashion was a mystery to him.

Shrugging off these minor oddities, he asked again how she was doing. Pulling her hands out from behind her back, she presented a piece of note paper to him. “I’ve got a plan for you, Mason.”

He took the notepad, which had an address and map scribbled hastily on. “What is this?”

“Why, it’s a Mystery Hunt silly! Tee hee!” Pacifica made a weird high-pitched giggle. Maybe she was starting to feel better about the whole moving thing after all. “I’ve… found something out, there’s a haunting at this address, I think we should go investigate!”

“Oh wow, that’s really cool Paz! Planning your own outing, I’m impressed. Shouldn’t you have written this in your journal though?”

Pacifica slapped her forehead. “Right, the journal. How could I forget.” She smiled broadly, showing more teeth than usual. Dipper was just glad to see her happy.

Dipper grabbed his phone off the table. “Well great, I’ll call Mabel and we can-“

“No!” Pacifica raised her voice, surprising him. “No, what I mean is, I wanna do this privately. As a couple.” She twisted a finger through her hair in that way that was guaranteed to get his full attention.

“Oh, alright, I see your game. Mabel will be disappointed though, she prefers that we do things as a team.”

“Just this once Mason, please? For me?”

“Hff, I can’t say no to you.” He slid the phone slowly into his pocket. He consoled himself with the thought that Mabel had largely dealt with those feelings of being left out now, so hopefully wouldn’t be too offended by them having another ‘couples only’ trip like the hiking trip.

“Great, let’s go!” With more enthusiasm than he was expecting Pacifica grabbed his hand and dragged him out to the pickup. He was so distracted by the way Pacifica had been flirting with him, that he didn’t notice how rough and scratchy her hand felt. He just got into the pickup and started the drive to the destination she’d picked out.
Meanwhile, across Piedmont at that very moment, Mabel was at the abandoned industrial park, giving a parkour lesson to an entirely different Pacifica. She was sat on a high inaccessible ledge, looking down on her friend’s progress. “Now lift with your arms, that’s it, nearly there. Yes, you’re at the top, yay!”

Pacifica got to her feet atop a piece of scaffolding, having spent the morning training in basic climbing moves with Mabel. She was taking her time learning but had started to get comfortable with finding handholds and making her way up previously insurmountable surfaces. There was still a long way to go, she couldn’t yet string a sequence of moves together to run across the derelict buildings as Mabel could, but it was a decent start.

“Alright Mabel, let’s break for lunch. You owe me a burger for all the work you’ve made me do this morning.”

Mabel wagged a finger “Now now Paz, you wanna watch your figure. I know Preston and Priscilla never fed you much decent food, but you don’t wanna overdo it, trust me, I speak from lots of experience.”

“I’m getting that burger Mabel. Race you to the gate!” She darted off, and Mabel hastily leapt down from her ledge in pursuit. Pacifica had an early lead, but Mabel’s familiarity with this course and her advanced skill gave her the final victory. She hopped down from the main gate just as Pacifica reached it, panting for breath. “Damn, you’re too slippery for me to catch.”

She clambered over the gate herself, joining Mabel. “It’s my natural boundless reserves of energy. Plus I have, like, months more practice than you.” She winked.

“Yeah, well I won’t let it slide for long. You know I love a real challenge.”

“Pah, no one can catch Mabel. Face it, I’m just too fast and nimble to ever get caught!”

Right then, a screech of tires caused both girls to spin around. A white van came hurtling towards them, swerving left and right on the road. Mabel threw herself at Pacifica, knocking them both to ground so that they avoided getting hit by the van.

Pacifica got up and started yelling at the careless driver. “Hey, watch where you’re going you idiots! You could have killed us!”

The van came to a sudden halt, and two short hooded figures leapt out of the back. Before either girl could react, they had Mabel’s arm in their grip. “Let go of me, you dwarves or whatever!” Their small forms belied a deep reserve of strength that Mabel couldn’t break away from. They shoved her into the back of the van, then slammed the door shut.

Running over, Pacifica bashed her fists on the metal. “Give her back!” The van sped off, taking Mabel away, leaving her powerless to stop them.

Mabel finally knew how Dipper had felt when he’d been abducted by the Council back in January. She didn’t get a good look her abductors but knew there were two of them. They were abnormally short as kidnappers went. Perhaps they were gnomes getting their long-awaited revenge!?

She’d soon find out, as after 52 minutes the van stopped. One of her kidnappers opened the rear door, leading out to what looked like a small garage. There were piled up computer parts and
circuit boards everywhere, and the van barely fit.

Stepping out, she saw the two short men who had grabbed her off the street. Before she could take another step, one of them reached into her jeans pocket, taking her phone and glasses. “Hey, I need those to see!” The person who’d taken the glasses turned them over in their hands quizzically, before sheepishly handing them back to Mabel. “Thank you.”

With her glasses on, she could finally see that both of her kidnappers were dressed identically in matching plastic rain ponchos. Brims of caps stuck out from the hoods of both figures, who she now realised were only kids. One of them was missing a leg, the limb simply cut off halfway down at a clean stump. He supported himself with a crutch. The other had odd splotches visible on his arms and legs, like mild burn marks.

“Ok, you’d better start talking you little men, what you want with me! Talk, or I’ll drop kick you so hard you’ll end up a mile out into the Pacific!”

The two figures shared a glance, then lowered the rain hoods. Mabel’s eyes went wide as she looked down at two boys who shared the same face. The face of her brother.

“Hey there Mabel. It’s been a long time.”

“A very long time, sis.”

“Dipper… and Dipper! Ok, this day has officially gone from creepy weird to gonzo-coocoo-nutso weird!!”

At the base of the Mt Diablo State Park, Dipper and the other Pacifica got out of the pickup. “So now will you tell me what we’re looking for Paz? You don’t usually keep secrets.”

“I told you, it’s a surprise! You’ll love it Dipstick- uh, I mean Sugar pot, uh, Kitten baby, Sexy wasp you!” She shoved his arm then started marching off with a blush growing on her face. Dipper thought that had been an odd outburst from her, she was never usually so easily flustered.

They headed out into the wilderness around the mountain, Pacifica promising to reveal all once they reached a certain point. The area they passed through mostly consisted of sloping hills and occasional woodland sections. After a while of walking in silence, Dipper tried to strike up a conversation with the unusually quiet Pacifica. “Hey, I just wanna say Paz, it’s really cool how you’re taking the lead today. Shows how much you’ve grown into a real adventurer.”

“Uh, thanks. Mason.” She’d hesitated slightly before saying his name.

“Is that it? Come on, you don’t have to stay tight-lipped the whole time.” He hurried his pace to keep up with her. “It’s nice to be back out in nature together. Oh, you probably shouldn’t have worn heels today, this terrain’s getting a little rough.”

“It’s fine Mason, I’m used to it, had a lot of practice walking on them recently.” Another cryptic statement from her. Dipper was about to question her further, but she cut him off. “I wanna say something Mason. You’re the most amazing and smart person I’ve ever met.”

He felt himself blushing, not expecting such an honest comment. “Oh, wow, thanks Paz. You’re pretty awesome too.”

“What I’m saying is, I’m sure you can figure things out, you’re, like, a genius.”
He beamed, all thoughts about her weird behaviour forgotten. “Well thanks Paz.” He took her hand, again overlooking the rough texture of her skin.

Pacifica’s compliments didn’t end there. “You, uh, your eyes sparkle nicely in the moonlight, you make me go crazy.”

“Oho, Paz, save it for when we’re somewhere more private.” He chuckled and she politely laughed too, rolling her eyes when he wasn’t paying attention. Then he leant in for a kiss, and she hastily put up a hand to stop him.

“No! Mason, not right now! Ahem, once we get to our destination, then we can…” She swallowed. “Kiss.”

Dipper looked forlorn, unsure why she seemed reluctant to kiss after all the flattery. “Oh ok. If that’s what you want.”

“It, it is.” Privately, she looked away from him and stifled the urge to vomit. Through gritted teeth, she led the oblivious Dipper through the woods, getting further and further away from civilisation.

“Two Dippers! Two 12 year old Dippers! This is crazy!” The two clones of Dipper tried to introduce themselves to their older sister.

The clone with a missing leg spoke first. “Hi, Mabel, take it easy. I’m Tracey, this is my brother Quattro.”

“Hi.” The splotchy clone waved a lazy hand at her. Mabel noticed now that their caps were the same as the one Dipper had used to wear, but instead of pine tree logo they each had numbers, 3 and 4. “I don’t believe it, you can’t be Dipper! And why are you so short!?”

“That’s a long story Mabel, we don’t have time to-“

“Prove to me that you’re really my brother! I’ve dealt with a lot of strange things, shapeshifters, dream demons. It could be some kind of disguise. Prove to me that you’re really him!”

Both clones shared an uneasy glance, before taking a deep breath and pushing back the hair on their foreheads. Mabel gaped at the two constellation birthmarks each clone bore. “It’s true, you are Dipper! You did the whole ‘scared of your birthmark’ thingy he used to do! So, what are you two? Did Mom and Dad have another set of twins I don’t know about?”

“Watch this.” Quattro pulled his wrist back as far as it would go. Mabel winced, expecting him to break a bone. Instead, she watched in amazement as the wrist simply crumpled up, then unfolded back to normal.

“Paper clones! Of course! You must be from the photocopier that was in Stan’s office.”

“Now prove to us that you’re really Mabel!”

“Huh? But it’s me, your sister. Isn’t it obvious that I’m Mabel?”

“Says the girl with the tattoos and glasses.” They crossed their arms.

“Hey, I make this look work. If I had one of my sweaters you’d know it was me. I only wasn’t
wearing one cause I was doing parkour.” The clones seemed to be studying her, looking for imperfections. “Ugh, ok, how about this. Something only the two of us would know. Third Grade, we played Mini Golf together once. You managed to hit the ball so badly that it smashed a window in the main office. We ran all the way home in about 5 minutes flat, you were panting so hard.”

As she recounted the story, the clones’ eyes widened. They huddled together, exchanging a short conversation. “It really is her Trace!”

“I know! I thought we’d got the wrong girl at first, but I guess 5 years changes people.” They broke the huddle. “Ok Mabel, we believe you. So, when did you go crazy?”

“Crazy?”

“Just look at your arms!” Mabel looked down at herself.

“What, the tats? Oh come on, does that really seem far-fetched to you? I’m Mabel, remember.” The clones both nodded. “Good, glad you understand. So Dipper cloned himself back in our first summer of Gravity Falls eh?”

The clones nodded. “Uh huh, and me and Quattro are determined to finally succeed in getting our date with Wendy!”

Mabel stared in utter confusion for a second, before bursting into laughter. “You guys still have a crush on Wendy? OMG, that’s the funniest thing, Dipper’s gonna freak when he finds out about this!”

“Dipper Classic isn’t gonna find out! He betrayed us and our brothers 5 years ago.”

“Wait a second. Back up. Why exactly did Dipper make you?”

“He doesn’t deserve that name, we’re just as much Dipper as he is!”

“Yeah, don’t blame us for his failures!”

“Alright alright! Look, let’s be mature about this. We’ll call ‘Dipper Classic’, the original or whatever, we’ll call him Mason. Right, that sound good?”

The clones seemed unsure. “Does he actually use that name these days?”

“Sometimes.”

“Alright. We’ll talk.”

Mabel listened as the clones took turns telling her about the party at the Mystery Shack. She remembered Dipper’s crazy multi-step plan to woo Wendy but had been too occupied by her rivalry with Pacifica to notice any odd goings on. These two clones had been tasked with stealing Robbie’s bike and riding off into the night as a distraction.

By the time they’d returned to the Shack, all their paper brethren were gone, melted by the sprinklers. After that, they’d fled into the woods, leading a nomadic life around Gravity Falls, careful to always cover themselves with rain ponchos to avoid being melted. Occasional attempts at spying on the Shack had failed to get them any closer to their original goal of going out with Wendy, since the original Dipper was usually around. He was enough to scare them away, neither wanting to share the fate of the other clones.
After the summer ended and Dipper Classic left, they’d thought they finally had a chance at getting to Wendy. But their efforts were fruitless, as she’d disappeared not long after. Mabel had to explain that she’d moved to Portland, and both clones cursed their luck.

“So you guys spent 5 whole years hiding out in the woods! Didn’t you get lonely?”

The clones both had a distant look in their eyes. “We missed a lot out there on our own. We had to go without certain things.”

“At least until we met the boss.”

“The boss?” Mabel’s enquiry was shut down by a wall of silence. “Ok, guess that’s a no-go question area for now. Suppose they’re the one who wanted you to kidnap me for whatever reason. What happened to your leg then Tracey? And Quattro, what are those weird marks you have?”

Tracey wiggled his stump of a right leg. “We were fishing for food one day, mudbank slipped and I submerged part of my leg. We had to tear it off so the moisture wouldn’t spread.”

“I got these from a garden sprinkler, should have been more careful.” Quattro pointed to his face, highlighting a particularly large dark spot on his cheek. “We survived though, and we’re never gonna give up on Wendy.”

Mabel shook her head. “Oh brother. That was doomed 5 years ago, let alone now. Mason’s moved on.”

“Heretic!”

“No, he was just being realistic. Wendy was 3 years older than him; it was never gonna happen. They settled it as friends though, it’s fine. And Mason got over the crush, he has a girlfriend now!” Both clones’ mouths dropped open in shock.

“No.”

“Way.”

“Yes way Bro-bros! Mason is now dating my best friend, the bombshell beauty known as Pacifica Northwest!”

A pair of blank faces stared back at her. “Who?”

“You don’t know Pacifica?!” Mabel thought back, realising that Dipper hadn’t learnt who Pacifica until after that night at the Shack. “Oh right, that was after you were made. She and Mason are inseparable now.”

Quattro suddenly snapped his fingers. “Hey, I think I’ve heard of the Northwests. They’re that super rich family that everyone in Gravity Falls hates! They threw that big party one time.”

Tracey shook his head. “I don’t believe it. You’re seriously trying to convince us that Mason has somehow fallen in love with some rich jerk?”

“No no, I’m serious guys! She’s really awesome and cool now. She’s the one he lets call him Mason.”

“He trusts this girl that much? I’m not convinced.”
“Look, if you give me my phone back I can show you a picture of her.” The clones shared a suspicious glance. “Oh come on, I’m not gonna call for help.” Tracey fished in his poncho and reluctantly handed over her pink device. She brought a picture of Pacifica she’d taken after the first day of the semester.

The clones squinted at the screen, puzzling over the image. “I think it looks kinda familiar. I’ve definitely seen that face somewhere before. Not sure about the hair though.”

“Yeah, it does strike a resemblance to someone I know.”

“Here, try an older photo.” She swiped left, moving to the photo she’d taken with Pacifica on their night in the Shack in March. She’d brought it up to help Dipper with a recent Pacifica related ‘top-secret project’. To her surprise, both clones gasped in shock. “What, what is it?”

“It can’t be, surely Quattro, it can’t!”

“But it is, that’s her!”

“Who, who is it?!” Mabel snapped her fingers in their faces, trying to get them to focus.

Tracey slowly answered. “This Pacifica person… is our boss.”

Entering into a small clearing, Pacifica finally came to a halt. Dipper looked around for signs of what had brought them here but couldn’t see anything obviously out of the ordinary. “Ok Paz, this has gone on long enough, what is all this about?”

“Just come into the clearing, then everything will be revealed.” She goofily giggled again, in that way Pacifica never normally did. It started to set him edge as he hesitantly brushed through the trees.

He got to the centre of the clearing, Pacifica standing off to the side. “Ok, I’m here. Now what?”

“This!” She snapped her fingers, and Dipper felt a sudden tightness around his ankles. He looked down to see vines twisting and grabbing a hold of him. They shot up, pinning his arms to his chest and wrapping all around his body. “Pacifica help! What’s happening?!”

She stared impassively at him, then broke into a smug grin. “Psychic powers dork. I control those plants with my mind.” Stepping forward, she grabbed his cheeks and smushed them between a hand. “Poor ignorant Dipper, couldn’t even notice the differences. I thought for sure you’d suss me out, the wrong clothes, hair too long. But no, guess I shouldn’t have underestimated your teenage hormones.”

Alarm bells rung out in Dipper’s head. Pacifica hadn’t called him Mason, she’d used the name ‘Dipper’, something she’d stopped doing since last October. “You’re not Pacifica!”

She gave a slow clap. “Oh, bravo Bro-Bro, it took you long enough.”

Dipper’s mind suddenly did cartwheels trying to keep up with what she’d just said. “What, Bro?! Bro-Bro?! What the hell is going on here?!”

“Here’s a hint to help you figure out who I am. Third Grade, mini-golf. You smashed a window then we ran home as fast as our little legs could carry us.”
Barely able to comprehend what she was saying, he spluttered out his words. “M-Mabel?! What the hell is going on here?!”

This girl who’d lured him out here and captured him just kept eyeing him with an air of dominance. “I just needed to get you out of the way, so my boys could get a hold of your sweet innocent sister. Soon I’ll have her body back, the full breadth of my powers, and no one will be able to stop me. Taunt taunt!” The playful phrase Mabel had once used sounded totally wrong coming from Pacifica’s sardonic tone.

Dipper forced a hand out through vines, reaching out for Pacifica. He brushed her jacket, but instead of feeling leather, the texture was all wrong, far too coarse, and he bristled at the touch. The gesture wasn’t lost on her, and she shoved his hand back into the tangle of vines. “Oh yeah, you probably have questions. If you get a chance to see the real Pacifica again, ask her about your sister’s Ursus stone. I’m sure it’ll be an enlightening conversation.”

Dipper’s eyes widened in shock, which was her intended reaction from him. Amusedly, she turned on her heels and made to leave the clearing. Dipper called out, desperate to try and understand what was going on. “Wait, please! Don’t leave me here! I don’t understand, Pacifica! Just-“

“My name!” She suddenly exploded with a fiery temper. Forcing herself to stay calm, when she turned around and spoke again she was controlling her emotions. “My name is not ‘Pacifica’. It’s not ‘Mabel’ either. I am my own person!”

“Then who? Who are you?”

“Why, I’m Pacifi-cabel, Dipper.” She put a hand to her lips. “Uh oh, seems like someone’s been keeping secrets again. Oh well. Won’t matter for long. Toodle-oo Dip, I’ve got a body to reclaim.” She lazily waved, not looking back as she departed.

Dipper was stuck enmeshed in the vines, as the girl with Pacifica’s face and Mabel’s memories casually strolled away to take her revenge, leaving him with a million questions spinning around his brain.

To be continued…
“So let me get this straight. 2 weeks ago, Pacifi-cabel - the clone I made while in Pacifica’s body - just showed up out of the blue and found you guys?”

The two paper duplicates of Dipper nodded. “Yep, that’s pretty much it,” said Tracey. “She told us that she could ‘sense’ us somehow.”

“Sense you?”

“She has special powers,” Quattro ominously said.

“And now you, what, work for her? How come she gets to give the orders?”

The two clones suddenly seemed meeker than before. Tracey puffed out his chest, trying to appear strong. “She’s given us a purpose at least! And she’s our sister, sort of. We paper clones have to stick together!”

Quattro nodded. “Yeah, we’ve missed having someone to rely on, like when we used to have… you.”

Mabel was suddenly struck by how these two messed up kids must see her, a sister they used to trust that had left them behind. Even if it wasn’t really her fault, she still wanted to comfort them. But first she had to concern herself with her own safety.

She looked around the dark garage she’d been taken to. Light streamed in through two narrow window slits, which was enough for to make out the piles of old computer parts. Most of them were covered in dust and were probably long past working. She wondered whose garage this was, and how the clones had known it would be unoccupied.

She turned her attention to the most pressing matter. “So why did your new sister order you two to kidnap me? What does she get out of it?”

Quattro nudged his brother. “This is it, we can finally do what Pacifi-cabel wanted.” He faced Mabel and held out a hand. “Give us the necklace now.”

“Necklace? You’re gonna have to be more specific Dip-Dop-Duplicate!” She started counting off on her fingers. “I have a pentagram necklace, little llama necklace, a heart one that glows in the dark, Pacifica has a Pine Tree necklace-”

Tracey hobbled over to her on his crutch. “Don’t play dumb with us Mabel! You know exactly which necklace. The Ursus stone.”

Mabel froze, her fingers still hovering in the air. “Oh, that one. And why does she need that?” She remembered what they’d said about her having powers, maybe that was tied to the stone somehow. She curled her fingers back into her palm, forming a fist. “Well it’s too bad. Whatever she wants it for, she’s not getting it!”

“We can make you give it to us.” The two clones advanced on her, making fists of their own.

“Um, you two aren’t exactly very intimidating.”

“GRR!” Quattro lunged at her, but she just darted out of the way effortlessly, sending him crashing
into a pile of circuit boards.

“Look, Tracey, Quattro, I’d give it to you if I could, but I don’t have it anymore! I gave it to Pacifica, it’s probably still at her house in Gravity Falls!”

Tracey helped his brother out of the pile, then both clones’ expressions dropped. “We came all the way down here and the stone’s not even in Piedmont!”

“Sorry guys, but hey, I’m sure Pacifi-cabel will understand, right? She’s like practically me!” The clones pointedly stared at each other. “Uh, right?” she shakily said.

A buzzing noise from a desk caught the clones’ attention. Tracey went over and retrieved a phone. “Hello?”

Mabel strained to hear the voice on the other end of the line. She could hear Pacifica’s voice, but knew it must be the paper copy. “It’s me. Operation Dipper Disposal has been dealt with for now, I’m heading to your position. Do you have the stone?”

“Uh, slight problem there. Mabel’s claiming she doesn’t have it.”

“WHAT!?” Tracey nearly dropped the phone in fright. “I gave you little dirtbags one job, one simple thing to do!”

“We’re sorry Pacifi-cabel! She says the stone’s in Gravity Falls.”

“Hmm, could be a ruse to get us to leave. Alright, change of plans. We rendezvous at the backup site, bring her to the dam. If she’s lying, I’ll get her to talk.” There was a click and the line went dead.

“You heard her Quattro, bind her hands!” The other clone started tying a rope around Mabel’s wrists.

“Guys, please. You don’t have to do what that poophead says! The way she talked to you didn’t sound like a sister to me.”

“Quiet you! She’s done more for us than you ever have!”

“Is that really true? Cause from where I’m standing it just looks like she’s using you!”

The clones were clearly affected by what she said, but then bore grim looks. Quattro finished the knots. “It doesn’t matter, we’re taking you to her whether you like it or not.” She was prodded in the back, then heard his voice soften. “We have to do this Mabel. So we can be a family again.”

Stuck in a tangle of vines somewhere near Mt Diablo, Dipper was struggling to process the facts of how he’d ended up here. A fake copy of Pacifica, probably made of paper, had led him like an idiot into a trap, then run off to do who knows what. He still couldn’t get over how although she’d looked like Pacifica, she’d actually had the mind of Mabel all along.

And how the Ursus stone tied into all of this was an even more burning question. He’d assumed that he’d dealt with that thing for the last time 4 months ago, when Mabel had told him it was no longer enabling her to read minds. He’d always suspected she might not have been totally honest with him and Pacifica, but had decided that if she wanted to read his mind to feel secure, then he’d let her do it in peace. It wasn’t like he had much to hide beside embarrassing thoughts about his
girlfriend.

But it seemed now that the stone was definitely still active, and this clone was wrapped up with it somehow. He definitely had a lot of questions for both Mabel and Paz when he managed to get out of the plants covering most of his body.

Or rather if he managed to get out, since he’d made little progress at loosening his restraints in the last hour. He’d got one arm squeezed out, but the rest of his limbs were still trapped. He really needed something to cut the vines, but all he had on him was his journal, and even that was stuck tightly inside his hoodie. Calling out had done no good, the clone had led him too far off the main trails, so there were no walkers nearby to hear him.

He needed to get out of here and stop this clone’s plans. He gave up struggling against his bindings, annoyed with how blind he’d been to not see how blatant an imposter the other Pacifica had been. He should have been more observant, but there wasn’t much he could do now. He was starting to consider chewing through the vines, an experience he wouldn’t relish, when he heard rustling from the edge of the clearing.

“Hey! Over here! I’m trapped!” He hoped whoever was there would hear his cries. He listened to the sound of branches and leaves being cut, someone was chopping their way through the undergrowth to get to him.

A heavy axe impacted onto a log at the edge of the clearing, and then his rescuer stepped out of the trees. “I can’t leave you twins alone for five minutes without both of you getting kidnapped, can I.”

“Pacifica!” He was overjoyed to see her, the real her. With her shorter hair and the new sleeveless sweater Mabel had picked out for her, it was obviously the Pacifica he trusted and loved. He even saw her Pine Tree pendant hanging around her neck, which he’d completely forgotten about. How he’d ever overlooked the copy’s differences now seemed insane to him. “How’d you find me Paz?!”

She propped up one leg on a log and rested the axe by her side. He saw that her jeans were torn, but it was from tracking through the woods, not an intentional feature this time. “Tracker bracelet, the same one Mabel used to find you at Polaris. Good thing you actually bother to wear yours.”

She slung the axe behind her, slotting it into the side of a small backpack. He noticed that on the other side of the pack a crossbow was hanging off it. “You could say this axe is another early birthday present, found it under Mabel’s bed.” She shook her head. “’Donation from a wax figure’ my ass.”

She came over to him and started pulling the vines off of him, she had much easier time than he had. “Woah, Paz, you’ve gone all rugged and epic!”

“Someone has to pull up the slack when you two both prove useless.” She smirked at him, and he gladly smiled back. Their lips quickly connected before Pacifica continued freeing him.

His smile dropped however when he realised what she’d said. “Wait, both of us? You mean Mabel’s in trouble too?”

“She just got grabbed off the street, there was nothing I could two! Two midgets in raincoats dragged her into a van. I ran back home, but you’d already left. I couldn’t find Mabel, but I figured you’d have some solution. What are you doing out here anyway, and how’d you even get here?”
“I could ask you the same thing!”

Pacifica shrugged. “I got a good bus connection. Now you explain.”

“I came in the pickup. Oh man, that means she must have taken it!”

“Who?”

“Uh, what does the name Pacifi-cabel mean to you?”

Pacifica froze in her removal of the vines. “You can’t be serious, I thought she was gone for good. She pretended to be me?” Dipper nodded. “And you fell for her?! Man, Mabel said she was a good actor.”

“Hold up, can you explain some more? Who is she, why is there a copy of you that acts like Mabel?!” Pacifica grunted as she finally cleared enough of the vines for Dipper to slip out. “Thanks Pacifica, I owe you big time for this.”

“Guess I’ll pay you back now by explaining what’s going on then. Back in March, when Mabel drove up to give me sketching lessons, we had a sleepover at the Shack.”

“Uh huh, you guys told me all about that part.”

“Well there’s more, some things we didn’t tell you.”

“About the Ursus stone.”

Pacifica frowned, her guilt obvious. “Yeah. About that. Surprise, it still works.”

She pulled her journal out of her pack and turned it to the page she’d made regarding Pacifi-cabel. There were sketches of both the electron carpet and copying machine, as well a drawing of one moment from when she and Mabel had had their bodies switched. “Mabel was using it to see the traces of her past memories in the Shack, she wanted to get some perspective on herself. I found her in your Great Uncle’s basement.”

“Oh man, Ford would freak out if he knew someone was down there! Mabel should know how dangerous the stuff in there is!” Dipper peered down at the journal, slightly irate that they’d both kept this story from him. It wasn’t so much out of anger, more that he always liked to learn about a good supernatural encounter or event.

“Yeah, we found that out the hard way. Some dumb carpet fell on us and we each got a taste of each other’s bodies. Yuck, that’s one memory I never wanna relive.” She shuddered. “Anyway, it did something weird to the stone, because when I was in Mabel’s body I could sort of use it. There was an alien stuck there that I could see with the stone, she needed a body so she could get home.”

Dipper snapped his fingers. “And Mabel knew about the photocopier! That’s how you made Pacifi-cabel. Lemme guess, Mabel chose the name?”

“You know it Mace. The alien possessed the body for a bit, then folded up and vanished. Then we switched back to our normal bodies. We thought that was the end of it, there were no remains of the clone or anything like that.”

“Well she’s definitely back. I was so dumb, she convinced me she was you!”
“No offence Mason, but Waddles in a wig could probably fool you.” He stuck out his bottom lip and raise a finger, but then dropped it. Pacifica smugly grinned. “That’s what I thought.”

Dipper stroked his goatee. “Did the clone show any abnormal abilities back in March? She had some kind of control of the plants out here.”

“Other than acting just like Mabel? Isn’t that abnormal enough?” Pacifica joked.

“That reminds me - Mabel! You said she was kidnapped?”

“Yeah, like I said, two midgets in raincoats.”

Dipper nodded. “Sounds familiar. I might know who has her; makes sense since Pacifi-cabel comes from the copier too.”

“How are we gonna find her then?”

“Mabel never wears her own tracker, so that’s no good. Did you see the pickup at the edge of the park?” Pacifica shook her head. “Good, Pacifi-cabel must have taken it. There’s another tracker embedded in the chassis.” He took the tracker from Pacifica and opened the holographic map display. “Yeah, there she is, heading off on that highway. We just gotta follow the signal and hopefully we’ll find Mabel, her kidnappers, and Pacifi-cabel all in one place!”

“You know, you seem way too casual about your sister getting kidnapped. Is it normal for you two to get grabbed off the streets and thrown into the backs of vans?”

“Um, kinda, yeah. There does seem to be a pattern forming.”

“Well, we’d better get going then! Mabel needs our help.” She tucked her journal back in her pack, grabbed the axe, then started off back towards the trail. Compared to the frustrated girl he’d hiked with in Yosemite a few short weeks ago, Pacifica now looked like she was born for this kind of adventure. “Come on Mason, no time for slacking!” Utterly smitten, he bounded after her.

The clones dragged Mabel out of the van and into the brilliant daytime sunshine. She covered her face as they pushed her towards a decrepit old hydroelectric dam, situated by an isolated mountain reservoir and seemingly abandoned. There were numerous large holes in the dam with water spilling out. As supervillain lairs went, Pacifi-cabel knew how to choose the right location.

They walked along the top of the dam, then she was led inside. Since Pacifi-cabel was arriving on the road on the opposite side of the dam, they needed to cross to the middle via the interior as there was a massive crack dividing the upper wall. Parts of the interior were severely flooded, there were damp patches and puddles everywhere. The clones had to step carefully to avoid touching any of the water, or else they’d risk melting. There was an awful smell of mould pervading the place.

The two mini-Dippers were both keeping quiet, not wanting to engage with Mabel, too scared of her swaying them with her words. One clone had his attention on her at all times, making sure her hands stayed bound and she didn’t try anything. What they didn’t know was that she’d been trained in escapology by Stan from his years of experience travelling across America. First, she needed a distraction.

“So, Tracey, you got any plans for what you wanna do after you hand me over to Pacifi-cabel? Maybe take a year off, visit Europe?”
“Nothing like that Mabel. We’ll have our true sister back, we can finally divert all our attention back to Wendy.”

“Ugh, look, it’s never gonna happen, you have to move on!”

From behind her she felt Quatto jab her forwards. “It’s not that easy. We were made for a purpose, and we live to fulfill that one purpose. We’re copies of Dip-, of Mason from that night, our brains are exact matches to his. We can’t just move on, cause our brains were permanently moulded that way.”

“Oh, you poor kids. Don’t you have any other desires, nothing at all?”

“Well…” The clones halted in a corridor. “We never did solve the big mysteries of Gravity Falls.”

“Yea, we never got a chance to learn the identity of the author. I miss having that journal.” The clones sadly looked at their feet, despairing over the lost lives they could have led.

Mabel saw an opportunity though. “I think I can help you there. I know all kinda junk about that stuff. You wanna know something amazing?” She looked left and right, then huddled closely to the clones. “I met the author.”

“No way!” Quatto’s mouth opened in shock, but Tracey just shook his head.

“She’s lying, she must be!”

Trying to muster as much sincerity as she could, Mabel carried on “I promise you, it’s all true! The author came back through a portal, it turns out that Grunkle Stan had a twin brother all along.” Quatto’s look of amazement grew, but Tracey’s eyes narrowed. “I could probably even introduce you to him, we could give Grunkle Ford a call if I take you home.”

“It’s a trick, she’s just trying to get us to believe in her, then she’ll spray us with water!” Tracey angrily started off down the corridor, dragging Mabel along.

Quatto hesitated for a moment before quietly calling out. “But what if she’s telling the truth?”

Tracey angrily pirouetted. “Excuse me? You really wanna trust her?”

“Well, yeah! She’s still Mabel, sure, she might be older now, but she’s still our sister. Isn’t she?”

Tracey’s expression softened a little. “Mabel never did anything to really hurt us I suppose. But we promised Pacifi-cabel we’d help her!”

“Hey guys, I wanna show you something.” Mabel called down the corridor and the two young boys came over to her. She lifted her arm and gestured at one of her tattoos. “Recognise that? It’s a pine tree. After all that went down with the original journals, Mason started his own one. Journal 4, with that symbol on the cover instead of a golden hand.”

The two clones stared closely at the golden tattoo. “This is a symbol of how much we trust each other, me and Mason. We made that journal together, a team. We trust each other absolutely. So you two know just how much you can trust in me.”

She thought for a moment that she’d got through to them, particularly Quatto, who had indecision written all over his face. But then their jaws straightened, and they hardened themselves. Tracey spoke first, no hint of emotion in his voice. “Pacifi-cabel still wants you. You’re not going to convince us otherwise.”

“We’re sorry Mabel. We have to do this.” Quattro was clearly saddened by this.

Mabel smiled sadly at the clones, who didn’t deserve any of this. “I’m sorry too.”

“For what?”

“THIS!” She slipped her arms free of the bonds that she’d been loosening while their attention had been on her tattoo. Lifting a hand, she blew out a cloud of pink glitter, stunning the pair and giving her an opening to run off. Unsure which exit was closer, she darted off deeper in the bowels of the dam.

“Get her!” Tracey cleared his face and shouted at his more mobile brother. While Quattro pursued her directly, Tracey headed around to flank Mabel. The tight corridors of the dam made a difficult route for Mabel to travel. Her parkour moves helped her navigate through the more heavily damaged sections, and she nimbly jumped over a flooded section. The clones would take much longer to follow her that way.

She had to stop as she passed into an open area. She was on a gantry suspended above a large flowing river, which completely covered the main floor of the room. This whole section of the dam had been overwhelmed by the water, leaving these high overseer walkways as the only dry spots left.

She was about to continue onwards through the flooded labyrinth, when Tracey stepped out in front of her. He’d been here before and knew his way around well enough to overtake her. She turned to run back, but saw Quattro emerging to cut her off.

“It’s over Mabel, give in! Don’t make this hard on yourself.” The clones closed in, she had nowhere to run. The gantry shook, having three of them on one platform was straining the rusted restraints holding it up. Mabel’s mind was already plotting escape routes, examining every possible way of moving through the space.

The clones stretched their arms out, ready to grab hold of her before she could dart away. She would have to use a tool she kept as her last resort. As the two clones simultaneously lunged at her, she shouted out. “Escape plan Grunkle-Alpha Seven!” There was a burst of smoke as the clones jumped towards her. They collided in the impermeable cloud, each grabbing a hold of someone.

“I’ve got her!”

“Me too, it’s a leg!”

“Woah!”

Tracey pulled on the leg but heard Quattro scream. He coughed as the smoke dissipated, then saw that the person he’d grabbed had been his brother. Mabel had slipped out when she’d thrown the smoke bomb.

He helped his brother to his feet. “We have to stop her, if Pacifi-cabel finds out she’s escaped…” He didn’t have to finish the sentence. They both knew how angry she would get. They’d seen her formidable mental powers in action, and neither clone wished for them to be turned on themselves.

Dipper and Pacifica pulled up on the far side of the dam, stopping right next to the pickup. They’d travelled here in a stolen car; Stan’s lessons had extended to grand theft auto. Dipper promised Pacifica that they’d return the car later. There was no sign of anyone else up on the top of the dam,
so they too descended into the depths.

“So you’re really sure we’re gonna find two clones of you from 5 years ago down here? Wouldn’t they have melted in the rain by now?”

“Guess that’s what the raincoats are for, they’d wanna keep dry all the time. Probably have to eat very dry food as well. That is, if they even need to eat. Hmm.”

“Whatever, you can interview them once we have Mabel back.” Pacifica pulled a flashlight out of her pack. Most of the corridors on this side were completely submerged, so they only had one path they could follow. The distant echo of clanging metal came to them through the dam. They exchanged a quick glance, then ran towards the noise.

They stopped in a dark intersection, trying to discern which way the noises were coming from. The sound of approaching feet running along the concrete was now audible, so the couple huddled together.

Seconds later, something collided with them, sending the flashlight flying away. Pacifica suddenly felt a weight pushing down on her, and saw Mabel trying to lash out at her. “Mabel, it’s me!”

“Pacifi-cabel, you’re going down!”

“No, it’s really me!”

From across the corridor Dipper called out. “Mabel, stop! You’re hurting her!”

“That’s the idea Quattro, I’m not gonna let her get away this time. This is for Dipper!” Mabel started punching at Pacifica, who desperately span away. Stumbling in the dark, Dipper finally found the flashlight and shone it in Pacifica’s face.

Mabel noticed the glint of a necklace, seeing the Pine Tree pendant. She audibly gasped, realising that this was the real Pacifica. “Oh my gosh, Paz! I’m so sorry, did I hurt you, let me see!”

Pacifica straightened herself and went to take the torch off Dipper. “It’s fine, at least it wasn’t the other way around, and you didn’t think the clone was me like your brother did.” Dipper laughed uneasily as she grabbed the flashlight. “Come on, let’s get out of here before-”

There was a rattle of metal down one of the corridors. Dipper headed towards the noise. Both girls tried to stop him, and Pacifica gave a hushed whisper. “Uh, Mason? Exit’s this way, come on!”

He shook her off. “Wait, we have to sort this out, once and for all. Pacifi-cabel knows where we live, she’ll only come after us again. We need to know what she wants with the stone.”

Mabel’s breath caught at his words, and both Dipper and Pacifica noticed. “Oh, you… you found out about that.”

He reassuringly put a hand on her shoulder. “Yeah, I found out. And no, I don’t care. Now let’s go, team. Mystery Trio?”

He put his hand out, and Pacifica laid hers on top of it. “Mystery Trio.”

Mabel broke into a massive grin and put her hand on top, then all three lifted their hands at once. “Mystery Trio! Yay!”

“Oh Mabel, before we go, you’re probably gonna want this.” Pacifica reached into her backpack,
pushing past her journal, and handed an object over to Mabel.

“My grappling hook! Aw, Paz, you shouldn’t have. This’ll probably come in handy, this place is falling apart.”

The trio followed the corridor, which lead them to the gantry ways above the roaring river. Dipper eagerly took in the decay as he stepped onto the walkway. “Woah, you were right Mabel, this place is a wreck! I’m amazed the whole superstructure hasn’t given in yet!” There was a bridge spanning two gantries over the river. Pacifica tentatively stepped out onto it, hearing the sound of creaking metal. It was holding for now.

Before she could take another step, the two Dipper clones emerged on the far gantry. Their mouths opened in shock when they saw Pacifica, then widened even further when they saw their creator standing beside Mabel. Dipper was amazed to see these reflections of his younger self, looking weary after years of hiding away, living on the streets and in the woods.

“It’s you. Mason.” Tracey could hardly get the words out.

Quattro did the same, looking over the 17 year old Dipper. “He looks so… mature. And you’re… Pacifica?”

Pacifica glanced at Mabel, who gave a small smile, then gingerly nodded. “Yeah. You don’t know who I am?”

“We were made before we… before he met you.”

“Well, um, nice to meet you? I’m Mace’s girlfriend.”

Mabel giggled as the clones both gasped incredulously. “I told you guys, Mason’s totes moved on.”

“Wait, when did you start calling him Mason?” Pacifica was suddenly concerned that Mabel too was somehow a copy.

“It’s nothing sis, we just needed a way to distinguish between the clones and the original. You guys can come over now, we’re not gonna hurt you. We only wanna discuss this.”

“Yeah, that’s right.” Dipper stood beside the girls, forming a line. He gripped both their hands to present a united front. “I’m sorry that I neglected you for all these years. I probably should have remembered you and done something about it. But now we have a chance to do that, to change things.”

Mabel stretched out her free hand. “We can help you, we wanna do what’s best for you, so you don’t have to skulk about in the shadows anymore. Join us!”

The clones looked at each other, non-verbally communicating to each other about the decision. Quattro looked longingly at Mabel’s outstretched hand, while Tracey seemed more unsure.

“Nice try Mabel, but they’re mine.” A new voice filled the high walkways as Pacifi-cabel stepped out behind the clones. They seemed to shrink, cowed into submission. Behind the trio, a heavy metal door slid out on rusted hinges, making sure they couldn’t run. Pacifica was shocked to see a vision of her old self, the way she’d looked just a few short weeks before. Her heeled fur boots gave her a height over the Dippers that made her seem much more powerful.

Mabel tried to keep her voice even, not wanting to provoke her. “It’s you, or me, or whatever you are.”
A dark look crossed Pacifi-cabel’s face. “No Mabel, I am not you. I’m not Pacifica either. I am me.”

“Then why are you acting like a jerk? Those two guys aren’t your lackeys to boss around!”

Pacifi-cabel gave a small tittering laugh. “A jerk am I? Oh, whose fault is that, I wonder? Maybe the ones who made me like this!”

“Like this? Like what?” Pacifica was confused, she’d been expecting a straight duplicate of Mabel, who just happened to outwardly appear to look like her. Instead she seemed quick to anger and driven by some mad passion.

“You see, it’s like this, humans.” The trio were taken aback by her heartless description of them. “The storage space in my brain just isn’t enough. There’s too much information crammed in to too small a space. You can only fold a piece of paper so many times after all. I have Mabel’s memories, but parts of Pacifica’s personality keep bleeding through. I’m not just a straight copy anymore, I’m a blend of both of you. And it hurts.”

“That’s how you got the powers, isn’t it? Some part of the stone’s essence got lodged in your brain.” Dipper was analysing the paper clone, trying to see if her powers had any visible outward signs.

“Trust you to care about that over my messed up brain chemistry Dip, you really care about me,” Pacifi-cabel sarcastically responded. “Yes, I have some ‘powers’.” She made air quotes with her fingers, then puffed out her cheeks, a tic they recognised of one of Mabel’s when she was thinking hard about something. “I can sort of stretch out my mind. Not read thoughts, I can’t see mental traces, but my mind isn’t fully limited anymore. Controlling plants is one thing.”

“And sensing those two was another. I’m putting the pieces together now. Why do you need the Ursus stone then?”

“Always to the point I see bro. No asking how I’m feeling to have two personalities at war within me, not wondering if I’ve been lonely these last few months. I couldn’t go back to the Shack, Mr Ramirez… I mean Soos… Soos would’ve smelled me out in no time. And you girls, you didn’t even care what happened to me once you used me!”

“We didn’t know you were even still alive!” Mabel implored.

“You still made me for a purpose! I was just a tool! But unlike these whelps,” She waved a hand angrily at Tracey and Quattro, who instinctively flinched, “my purpose was done, over! So I found my own goal in life. To shut out the voices in my head, to gain full clarity. That’s what I want with the stone, to spread out my mind and take back a body I feel at home in! Yours!”

She pointed at Mabel, the full extent of her plan now laid bare. Mabel felt intimidated by this threat on her psyche, she’d faced the idea of her mind being overwritten before and it was one of her biggest fears.

Pacifica could tell how much Mabel was being affected, so stood to block the twins from Pacifi-cabel. “You want Mabel’s body, then too bad! Someone else is using it!” She pulled out the axe, ready to defend her friend no matter what. “We don’t even have the stupid future stone, it’s back in Gravity Falls!”

“Even if you’re lying, I’ll just have to take Mabel’s body with me then!” Pacifi-cabel stepped onto the metal bridge, advancing towards Pacifica with a rigid gait.
“I’m warning you! Stay back!” Pacifica swung the axe at her chest, cleaving her glowering facsimile in the stomach. There was a scrunch of paper as the axe embedded itself, but no wound formed, nor was there any blood.

Pacifica stood back as Pacifi-cabel simply tugged the axe out, leaving a crease across her belly. “Nice try. Now it’s my turn. Let’s see how you take an axe to the chest.” She started swinging it back and forth with a crazed expression. “Ree ree ree!”

Pacifica backed against the metal door with the twins, gripping their hands again. If they were gonna go down, they’d go down together. “Guys, if this is the end, I just wanna say I love you both. I couldn’t wish for better friends.”

She felt their hands reassuringly squeeze hers. Dipper quickly kissed her cheek. “We’re with you Paz, all the way!”

“Yeah, though if we could figure out a way not to get an axe to the face from your doppelganger, that’d be real swell right about now!” Mabel yelped as Pacifi-cabel reached their side of the gantry.

“Aw, how touching. Don’t think any empathy from me is gonna save you! I need your body Mabel, more than anything else. I’ll try not to damage it too much. Dipper, Pacifica, you make a cute couple, but I bet your heads will look even cuter on my mantelpiece!”

“Stop!”

Pacifi-cabel immediately halted, then twisted around to see who’d challenged her. Tracey had his spare arm out, pleading with her to not strike at the trio. “They don’t deserve this! They made mistakes, but we don’t have to kill them for it! They’re only…”

“What? Human?! Ahaha!” Pacifi-cabel let out a cruel laugh. “FYI Dip-shit, we’re not humans, we’re paper. If you’ve got a problem with what I’m doing, then maybe you should join them! If you can’t stand the heat, stay out of the way of my axe!”

“No, you’re not gonna hurt my brother, or anyone else!” Quattro stood beside his clone. Both of them looked as determined as two 12 year olds could, calling to mind all of the times Dipper had stood up for himself on that first summer. “You’re… you’re not our sister! We don’t need you. We won’t be your slaves anymore!”

Pacifi-cabel got right up in the clones’ faces. She reached out with her mind, attempting to control them as she had the foliage before. “You think I needed you? You’re nothing, flawed copies of my idiot brother. You were useless without me, wasting away pining for a girl you couldn’t even muster up the courage to talk to! You think Wendy will want to go out with a pair of permanent 12 year olds?”

“We won’t let you bully us anymore!” Both clones were much stronger than mere plants now, and Pacifi-cabel’s insults and powers bounced off them harmlessly.

“Woo, go Tracey!” Mabel cheered from behind Pacifi-cabel, glad the clones had finally grown backbones.

Pacifi-cabel jabbed an angry finger in Tracey’s chest. “Who’s gonna look after you if not me, huh? I gave you a chance, a new purpose! Well, what are you gonna do, Dipper!?” She started shoving his chest, backing him up against the bridge’s railing. “Huh, if you’re so tough, what are you gonna do about it?”

“My name’s not Dipper!” He angrily grappled with Pacifi-cabel. “I’m Tracey, and no-one’s gonna
take that away from me!”

Quattro came over to try and wrestle Pacifi-cabel off, but she was too strong. Caught up in their struggle, none of them heard the metal creak.

“I’ve had it with you little annoyances! If you want a job done right, I guess you have to do it yourself!” As she said the last word, she punctuated it by shoving Tracey as hard as she could. Behind him, the railing suddenly snapped.

“AHHHHHHH!” A look of pure terror in his eyes, he fell towards the torrent of water down below.

“TRACEY!” Quattro stuck out his arm, too late to save his brother. The one-legged clone plunged beneath the surface of the flowing water, washed away to nothingness in seconds. His pine tree cap was the last thing to go, sadly bubbling on the surface before it was swept away. Quattro turned on Pacifi-cabel. “You killed him! Pushed him to his death!”

“I-I didn’t mean to! The railing snapped, it wasn’t me!”

“He was all I had left! My only family!” Fighting through tears, he stared down at the river, searching for any last trace of his brother. Pacifi-cabel’s attention instantly turned back to the trio, who’d been silently observing the action, still up against the far wall.

“You want something done right… do it yourself!” She lifted the axe and swung out wildly. The three of them ducked, avoiding the swing. The axe collided with a support beam connecting the gantry to the roof. The whole walkway shook, then before Pacifi-cabel could swing out again the platform fell out from under the trio’s feet.

They splashed into the river, which started carrying them away in its current. Mabel reached out and scrabbled to grab a metal pole attached the wall. Pacifica and Dipper, now thoroughly drenched, held onto her for support. Mabel glanced up at the gantry. Pacifi-cabel had already fled, and Quattro was impassively watching them. “Quattro, help! You’ve gotta do something.”

He started hyperventilating. “I- I can’t, it’s too- I!”

Mabel lost her grip on the pole and the three of them hurtled off through the dam’s hallway. They bounced painfully off a wall, as the river turned around a corner at 90 degrees to match the curve of the corridor.

Mabel struggled to keep her arms above the water, scanning the gantries above for something to grab onto. She fired off her grappling hook, impacting on the walkway from below. As Dipper and Pacifica were carried interminably onwards, she pulled herself out of the water, applying all her upper-body strength, honed in her parkour training, to reach the gantry. Dripping wet, she got to her feet and ran along parallel to the river, trying to catch up to the couple.

Dipper clung to Pacifica as the current’s intensity ramped up. They found themselves dragged under by the flow several times, spluttering up for air again each time. Mabel fired a rope down to them, which Pacifica grabbed a hold of.

“Climb up guys, you’re too heavy for me to pull on my own!”

Pacifica pulled with both arms but couldn’t lift herself very far. “Grr, I’m not strong enough!”

Mabel tried hefting, but it was no good. She shouted down at the couple. “Dump the backpack, it’s weighing you down!”
“I- I can’t!”

“Well why the frick not?!”

“My journal’s in there!” Dipper looked up at her, realising how important the book had become to her. Much like his own journal, it was a priceless record of her life. He prayed that Journal 4 was staying dry in his hoodie pocket. “I can’t do it!”

Fatigued from the energy of holding the rope, Pacifica let go, leaving them adrift in the river again. Mabel pulled up the rope and kept up with their progress. Sooner or later they’d be dragged underwater and wouldn’t be able to come back up for air.

They rounded another corner, Pacifica and Dipper once again impacting hard with the concrete wall. Mabel gasped as she looked down the long hallway. At the far end was a spinning turbine, part of the old hydroelectric systems. If they carried on down the river, they’d be funnelled right to it and sliced to bits.

She had to try again with the grappling hook and fired off another shot. This time Dipper grabbed on, but even unencumbered by a backpack his noodle arms made it impossible for him to climb up. The couple both screamed as they careered towards the turbine.

There was nothing Mabel could do as Dipper lost his grip on the rope. She gaped as the two most important people in her life sped towards their doom.

Out of nowhere, a metal gate sprung up across the hallway, blocking Dipper and Pacifica from being carried away by the river. Running onto the catwalk opposite was Quattro, panting and desperately checking that he hadn’t been too late. “I did it! Oh my gosh!” He looked like he was about to faint, but then Mabel heard a sharp metal crack.

“We’ve gotta get them out of there, now!” She once again fired off a line, and with Quattro’s help was just about to lift one of them at a time. Despite being a younger version of Dipper he had an unusual well of strength, probably due to being made of dense paper. First they extracted Dipper, who gratefully collapsed onto his hands and knees when they got him onto the gantry. Just as they cleared Pacifica from the water, the metal gate broke off from the wall, tumbling straight into the turbine and getting mangled to shreds.

Pacifica rolled over onto her back, panting and giddily laughing. “We- we were almost shredded down there. Ha! Man, days out with you two, how do you handle it?”

Quattro stood back from the trio, giving them space to calm down after their near-death experience, and also staying well away from any water that might drip off them. Dipper and Pacifica checked over their journals, making sure the pages hadn’t got damp. Mabel checked that her hand was dry, then held it out for Quattro. “Hey, that offer from before still stands. If you wanna join us. Join our family.”

Quattro looked down at his own hand, then up at the three of them. “Family. Like what you three have… I’d like that.” He put his small hand in Mabel’s and the two of them gripped tightly. “Without Tracey though I don’t know what I’ll do, where I’ll go.”

Dipper got to his feet. “I have something in mind actually. Somewhere you can go without anyone calling you a freak or judging you.”

“That sounds great… Dipper.” Quattro finally decided that it was time to forge a new identity. The original was now Dipper, he would be Quattro only from here on out.
They emerged from the dam, seeing that the white van had vanished along with Pacificabell. They’d have to deal with her another time. They anonymously called into the police about the car they’d stolen, then left in the pickup.

Dipper did a quick google search, then directed Mabel to drive them to a small town en route to Piedmont. They got out, and Quattro questioned their destination. “What are we doing here Dipper? Is this the place?”

“This is it, Quattro.” He spread his arm out, highlighting a network of red tents. “Welcome to Mr Alcor’s Constellation of Amazements! The guys here have been needing someone with a smart brain to handle their finances. They’re all a little strange, just like you…” He looked at Mabel and Pacifica, “Like all of us.”

The trio introduced Quattro to the circus workers, then headed off as he got to know them better, not wanting to intrude on his first impressions. Mabel promised that she would soon bring her massed scrapbooks, to catch Quattro up to speed on the last few years. He blushed as Pacifica gave him a goodbye hug, possibly starting the first tentative steps of getting over his deep-rooted Wendy obsession.

They piled in the pickup and made for home. On the drive back, Mabel broached a sticky subject to her brother. “Hey, Dipper. I just wanna say something. About the stone.”

“Mabel, you don’t have to say anything about it. I understand why you did what you did.”

“Yeah, I already told him the reasons earlier Mabel.” Pacifica held her hand, trying to be comforting. “Neither of us are mad.”

“Aw, thanks you guys. Poor Pacificabell never had anything like this, friends who supported her. She just had those clones to rule over and boss around, that’s not real family. You think she’ll try something again?”

Dipper shrugged. “Who can say. She knows we don’t have the stone now. She’s lost her ‘purpose’. I hope she can deal with that.”
The twins walked across the sandy beach, sea stretching out behind them as far as the eye could see. Traipsing up the shore towards a small glade of palm trees, the sun beat down on them from above, with little shelter from its rays to be found. The twins had dressed for colder weather so discarded their heavy overcoats on the sand.

They’d been voyaging for a long time, and it was nice to finally set foot on land again. One of the twins took out their journal and began writing down some first impressions of the island. Most tropical locales like this had very similar coastlines, so there wasn’t much of note to remark upon. One thing did stand out against the white sand though - small purple spikes of luminescent rock that jutted out occasionally.

The other twin covered his eyes, adjusted his glasses, and took in the sweep of the beach. Scratching the red beanie on his head, he knelt down and picked up one of the colourful rocks. “Well Sixer, what’s our next move?”

Tucking the journal away, he turned to his brother. “This is it Stan. The key to the treasure. Let’s go find it! X marks the spot!”

“Ford, you took the words right out of my mouth.”

2017-04-17

Pinestar97: Hey there guys! Know it's been a while but wondered if you'd finally finished your suuuuuuuuper long ocean trip yet?! BTW, We♥U 4EVA!:D

UrsaPinus: We've got a lot to tell you guys too, wanna save it for a video chat though. Suffice to say, a lot has happened since we last spoke. You'll never believe who's living with us as our new guest! It's way too much to explain in text form. Just let us know when you get a chance to message.

Stan and Ford had been at sea for the past 7 months, having left Gravity Falls at the end of August. This was their yearly cycle, exploring the seven seas in the Stan ‘O War for most of the year, then returning to stay in the Mystery Shack over the 3 months of summer. This was mainly so they could see all their friends and family, like Soos and Melody or Dipper and Mabel, but also partly just to give themselves some time for rest and relaxation. Full-time adventuring was a tiring occupation after all, even if it was very fulfilling for both twins to finally spend time doing what they loved in each other’s company.

Currently they were looking forward to a well-deserved rest in around a month’s time, having been worn down a lot lately. After completing a nautical circuit of Polynesian islands in the Indian Ocean, they’d set out to cross the Pacific, a long tedious voyage where they lost sight of land for several weeks. Stan had grown tired of eating endless tins of brown meat and playing repetitive card games with his brother for the duration. Now they had arrived at their destination, a cluster of islands situated not far from the famous Galapagos archipelago, he hoped they could find somewhere to relax for a bit.

Unfortunately, this island seemed to be deserted, with no signs of humanity anywhere. The trail of
the treasure they’d been searching for had led them on a merry chase across a stirring of locations, each one providing some small hint where to go next. The trail ended here, on this small unmarked scrap of sand.

Still carrying one of the curious rock spikes, Stan had been trawling up and down the beach looking for signs of anything out of the ordinary. So far nothing had turned up. He headed over to where Ford was sat on the sand. He was seemingly studying another of the rocks which unnaturally covered the beach.

“Found anything Stan? My study here isn’t giving me much to work with.”

“Nah, this beach is empty, there’s just more of these purple rock thingys. What are they supposed to be anyway?”

Ford got up off the beach and gestured at the rock Stan was holding. “The creature we’re looking for, well, those rocks are the remnants of the processed food the creatures eat.”

Stan fumbled and dropped the rock. “What the heck, you let me carry around a hunk of cryptid shit for the last half hour without telling me?!”

Ford waved a hand through the air. “Now now Stan, the digestive system of whatever we’re hunting acts like a refinery, crushing all of the nutrients down into that rock form, it’s totally harmless.”

“Well you carry one then!” He crossed his arms, and Ford’s darting eyes told him he was equally opposed to the idea. “These ‘rocks’ then, how are they gonna get us any closer to the temple of Rignablarg, Rignablech, however you say it?”

“Rignabog, Stan, and according to all the clues, the temple guardian should be somewhere on this beach. We’re looking for some kind of large reptilian creature, who can point us the way to our next destination!”

“Uh huh. And these poop rocks are like our ‘yellow brick road’ straight to this guardian? Tell me again what’s so worth it about this Rignabog?”

Ford sighed and brought out the journal again. The book was dark green, and while it had a golden six-fingered hand embossed on the cover, within the palm of the hand was another symbol. It resembled a rounded fish eating a circle and was the same symbol Stan had worn for years on his fez at the Mystery Shack (a fez which was now owned by Soos).

After the events 5 years ago, Ford had thrown his original ‘hand’ journals into the Bottomless Pit, potentially never to be seen again. It was for the best, those books had caused a lot of harm over the years and chronicled a period of his life he didn’t look entirely fondly back on.

Their new journal was a much better compromise, focusing less of recording a catalogue of bizarre creatures and objects, and more about capturing his day-to-day reactions to his and Stan’s adventures. There’d be no secret conspiracies or dangerous information this time around.

It was also shared with his brother; they took turns on who would write up their adventures. Stan had grumbled at first about having to write in a ‘nerd book’, but he ended up quite enjoying sharing something so personal with Ford. They’d had precious little of that over the last 30 years, and he wanted to enjoy everything he could now they had time.

Ford now focused on the most recent pages, which included a rough map of their voyages, as well as details about the treasure they’d picked up. He puffed out his chest and began recapping from
"The temple of Rignabog was said to be a mythical shrine that held ‘the greatest treasure known to man’.” He saw Stan’s eyes widen in anticipation of that prize. “Now, I’m not sure whether that’s treasure as in gold or jewels, or some kind of metaphor, but it’s intriguing nonetheless.”

Stan’s eager grin dropped. “You really know how to get me excited Ford. ‘Metaphorical’ treasure ain’t gonna put food on the table.”

“It might still be something valuable. Think of it like the Fountain of Youth or El Dorado, we have no idea what secrets we might uncover! The temple complex might even have an undiscovered ziggurat!”

“A ziggu-what? What is that, some kind of sciencey measurement? What, you get 1.21 ziggurats and you can travel through time? Heh, I think I saw a movie like that once. Hmm.” Stan rested his chin in his hands and had a distant look in his eyes. He stared out towards the distant horizon, as if searching for some sign that was just out of reach.

Ford closed the journal and focused on his brother. “Do you think this an old memory resurfacing?”

“I don’t know. I think… I think I watched it with the kids? Not sure. Heh, maybe I’m just getting old.”

“Hmm, perhaps.” Ford nodded, but suspected that this was another piece of Stan’s memory returning after his memory wipe 5 years ago. Even though the majority of Stan’s most important memories had been rekindled, there were still occasional gaps, particularly from the years he spent travelling alone before owning the Mystery Shack. There were very few reminders of that time for Stan to rekindle old memories from.

Every now and again, something would trigger him, and an old fragment of his past would return. Clips from old tv shows, snatches of half-remembered songs, vaguely reminiscent locations, all of these could bring back surprising floods of recollection. So slowly, over the years, he’d been regaining more and more of what made himself who he was.

“Come on, I’m gettin’ sunburned standing around out here. Let’s find this crummy guardian and get off this place. All I’m seeing is sand and a couple’a palm trees.”

“There’s that big rock over there too.”

Stan rolled his eyes. “Yeah, big rock, how exciting. Come on, there’s nothing here, let’s head back to the ship.”

“The Stan ‘O War is a boat Stanley, there’s a difference.”

“A ship just sounds better than a boat poindexter, it’s that simple.”

“We still might find something out here, you never know. I’m sure a thorough study of the island will turn something up.” Ford nudged Stan’s side. “I’m sure even that big rock could probably make you money at the Mystery Shack.”

“Ha, the kinds of customers I got, you could sell ‘em literal painted pebbles I found in the woods, and they’d still be lining up to fork over their cash! Did I ever show you ‘rock that looks like a face rock’? Hey, speaking of that rock, where is it?” Stan pointed over to where the boulder had been previously, where there was now just an empty patch of sand and grass.
Both twins jumped as they felt something hit the back of their legs. They swirled round and saw that the rock had moved to right behind them. What they’d thought was a rock lifted up off the sand on 4 chunky legs. From the base of the ‘rock’, they watched a scaly head emerge, and two shrunken eyes blinked up at them. “Fascinating!” Ford tapped the shell of the massive creature, which he could now see wasn’t stone at all, but some kind of keratinous defence.

Stan’s reaction to the creature had less curiosity and more shock. “Holy moly! A giant turtle!”

“Tortoise, Stanley.”

“Right, that’s what I said, tortoise. Whatever, it’s big, it’s scaly, it has a shell. It’s huge though, never knew they got this big.” He tentatively brushed his hand across the shell. The tortoise was indeed much larger than both of the twins, around half the size of the Stan ‘O War in fact. The tortoise seemed to smile appreciatively at the Stan’s stroking on the shell.

“Ah yes, right there, that feels nice.”

“Ah, it talks! Kill it!” Stan immediately pulled his hand away and started kicking wildly at the tortoise. “Quickly Ford, before it very slowly kills us!”

Ford ran over and restrained his brother. “Calm down Stanley, this is the temple guardian we’ve been looking for!”

“Oh.” He stopped his leg in mid-air, preventing another kick from connecting. The head of the tortoise poked back out, looking apprehensive.

“That wasn’t a very nice greeting. You Sapiens should learn some manners.”

“Apologies for my brother’s rash actions, you seem strange to our eyes. Who exactly are you? More to the question, what are you?”

The tortoise’s expression grew serious. “I am Testudine, one of the last of my kind. There were once many like myself, the large dominant life on these islands, with unparalleled genius. Few remain now. I committed my last years to the humble role of providing answers to those seeking knowledge.”

“So where’s the fat loot stored, shelly?”

“Stan, please, let’s do this with some level of tact.”

Testudine sagely shook his head. “No no, he’s right. I am the guardian after all, it’s my job to lead people to the… heh… ‘treasure’…” The twins shared an uneasy glance. Stan made a ‘go on’ gesture with his hands. “You two young ones are close to the temple. It lies west of here, on a larger island. It’s surrounded by a thick jungle, which cannot be penetrated by any normal means.”

Ford scratched his chin. “Hmm, impenetrable jungle you say? I think I have something for that.”

“Then you will find the ziggurat in no time.”

“Ha, I knew it!” Ford cheered and Stan chuckled at his brother’s innocent excitement. These were the moments he looked forward to most.

“You got any specific co-ordinates then, Tess? More specific than ‘west’?”

The tortoise began moving forwards. “Of course, you’ll have your location in no time!”
“Brilliant!” Ford and Stan watched as the tortoise dragged itself over the sandy beach. “Uh, any day now kind sir.”

“Yes, I’m going lightning fast, tracing the map onto the sand with my body.” The twins watched as Testudine agonisingly crossed the beach. “We’re really racing now! This is exhilarating!” He’d still only moved a few inches.

“Ford, if I die of old age before he finishes drawing that map, I am so gonna haunt you afterwards.”

As promised by their unhurried guide, their destination lay a few nautical miles west of the first island, and was covered in dense foliage that came right up to the shore. To even make landfall the twins had to anchor the boat out at sea and swim over to the edge of the trees.

Getting through the outer layer took a lot of work, but Ford’s modified triangular energy gun had enough output to burn through thick plants.

It was unnaturally dark below the treeline, the tightly packed leaves allowing no sunlight to breach. It was the opposite of the first island they’d visited this morning, leaving both Stan and Ford longing for the sight of the sun again. At least it was now clear why no one had ever found the temple after all this time. Even with modern satellite tech it would be obscured by the trees.

While the exterior of the jungle provided a solid barrier to entry, the inside was a more traditional twisting labyrinth of paths, which thankfully weren’t as tough as the overgrown surroundings. Shining a flashlight through the hot dim jungle, Stan spotted a large square pillar of carved stone, an old column which showed them they were definitely on the right track.

Both twins gasped as they set eyes upon the Rignabog temple complex itself. Beneath the emerald canopy of foliage, a massive open dome had formed. There were numerous squat grey and brown buildings, covered in vines and half crumbling. At the centre of the clearing was a step-pyramid, reaching up to nearly touch the tree layer. A large opening at the base of the pyramid led into a darkened space.

Stan shone his torch up and down, trying to cover the whole scope of the ziggurat. “Wow. Now that’s sure something. That’s me being honest for once too Ford, this is a really neat pile’a rocks.”

He felt Ford’s hand on his back. “Indeed, a truly majestic piece of architecture. But it’s what inside that’ll really make it stand out. After you.”

Stan glanced down the illuminated tunnel. All that was visible were the walls of the passage, which were a faded brown stone, with occasional etchings carved into them. The beam from the flashlight almost seemed to be absorbed by those dull walls, leaving little visibility. He suddenly felt an odd chill at the thought of being stuck down there, beneath both stone and jungle. “No, after you I think.”

“This is it, must be the centre of the pyramid.” A pair of heavy doors stood in front of them, each one with a massive round knocker. The doors raised high above them, meaning that the central chamber beyond was likely enormous. They hadn’t encountered any side passages yet, the corridor simply funnelled them straight here.

Ford pulled out their journal and shone his light on the pages. “I think the door might be openable
if I can figure out the right symbol to press. See those carvings, they’re part of the languages used by similar civilizations on the mainland, now I just have to—"

“Or you could just pull them open.” With a withering look, Stan gently pulled one of the knockers, and the door slid silently out of the wat.

“Oh. Or we could just do that. Must remember to always check whether things are actually locked before trying to solve a complex riddle. Thank you Stan.” Ford passed into the chamber and Stan pulled the door shut behind them.

The interior of the room looked like an inverted copy of the pyramid outside, a vast hollow space with upturned steps for walls. They were at the exact midpoint of the pyramid now. The chamber was largely empty, as the rest of the complex had been, though was lit by a few scattered torch sconces. The room was much cleaner than the outside structures, as if none of the decay had taken root.

But right in the centre of the room was a modest stone throne, upon which sat a man, looking down at the twins with an air of contempt. He wore a crown of bright blue feathers and was adorned in a shining gold necklace. His skin was tanned, and Ford took him to be a native of this region. The skin itself was smooth, he appeared to be no older than 25. “Uh, greetings. We are the Pines, we come in peace to study your temple.”

The man waved a dismissive hand. “I know why you have come.” His tone was clearly one of boredom. “I don’t know what I’m paying Testudine for, if he only ever sends me petty scavengers.”

“Hey, I’ll have you know I’m a professional plunderer, not just some—“ Stan caught himself. “Eh, wait a minute, forget I said that.”

The man gave short, sharp laugh. “I don’t care who or what you are. Thousands of years of waiting and there’s still no-one to give me even a little of bit of excitement.”

Ford’s eyes widened. “Pardon me, did you say thousands of years? May I enquire who you are exactly?”

“Why, I’m Rignabog!” Both twins seemed confused by this statement.

“I thought that was simply the name of this temple or island. You’re telling us that you’re the one all this is named after?”

Rignabog just yawned. “Please, I’ve heard it all before. Who am I, what am I doing here, yadda yadda yadda. Even as an a-mortal I don’t have time to humour you.”

Ford let out an audible gasp, but Stan just seemed lost. “What’s the big deal, so he can’t die, so what?”

“He’s not immortal Stan, he’s a-mortal!”

“What’s the freakin’ difference?”

“Think about it like this. An immortal being can’t die by any means, you can shoot them or stab them or throw them off a cliff, but they simply will not die. An a-mortal is different. It’s all based off theoretical concepts, but the gist of it is that they are immune to ageing. You could still kill one if you tried, but natural causes will never claim them.”
“Exactly.” Rignabog had put his feet up on one of the arm rests of his throne. “I can prevent the decay of telomeres, maintaining my body’s cells in perfect metastasis.”

Stan was about ready to call this whole tomb raid off. “Wait, so there’s no actual ‘treasure’?! It’s just you, one guy? What a waste of time!”

“Oh, there’s plenty of treasure.” Rignabog stuck a thumb behind the throne, gesturing at a huge pile of silver and gold coins the twins hadn’t noticed.

A hungry look came into Stan’s eyes, and Ford could only chuckle to himself as his brother threw himself on the mound of treasure and started rolling about in it.

He was still curious with the mechanics of this ancient being, so turned back to the throne. “How exactly does your unusual ‘condition’ function then? Some kind of secret formula to sustain yourself? Ritual magic? Do you just moisturise really well?”

“Every man and woman on earth has the capacity within them. You just have to know how to tease it out. With enough fortitude, my will is simply strong enough to command my body to survive. Now disease cannot harm me, nor will time wear away at me.”

“Oh of course, zen meditation, but to the nth degree! I believe it was the Buddha who said-“

Stan rudely interjected, sticking his head out from beneath the gold pile. “Well I believe it was that old spy movie that said, ‘you only live twice’!” Or was that three times…” He shook his head.

“Not important. The point is, it’s unnatural! If I’ve learnt anything over my 70 odd years, it’s that life is for living! Not for sitting around alone in a dark cavern. Wait, if he can’t die, what the heck is he doing here in the first place? You’d think a guy who can live indefinitely would wanna go out and see the world.”

Almost imperceptibly Rignabog’s eyes narrowed, but Ford didn’t seem to pick up on it. “Please Stan, be reasonable. I’m sure our host here is a decent fellow. He’s not harming anyone living like this.”

Rignabog smiled and put his arm on Ford’s shoulder. “I see you are one who appreciates all the possibilities life can throw at us. The world is a strange place, and I have been alone a long time. Perhaps someone with as keen a mind as yours could be open to learning more about my ways?”

Ford gave a small bow. “I’d love to, I already have some knowledge of meditation techniques, and, not to brag, but I am something of a genius.”

“You may be the one to follow in my footsteps then. Open your mind, Stanford. With the true power of your consciousness, many things can become reality. Is that what you want?”

“I would very much like to learn from you.”

“Excuse me?! I can’t believe I’m hearing this, how are you lapping up this dreck Ford?” Stan dropped the handful of coins he’d grabbed and stepped out from the pile. He jabbed a finger in Ford’s chest, making him glower. “You don’t need to be a-mortal or whatever! I reckon it’s not exactly all it’s cracked up to me, eh Mr Rignabog?”

A frown crept onto the a-mortal’s face, but Ford tried to calm Stan down. “Come on Stanley, this is a great opportunity, for both of us! Just imagine living free of aches or pains, content to stay alive as long as you liked.”

“I don’t see that as a plus-side. Look at this guy, he seem ‘content’ to you? He lives on his own,
“Cease this prattle, mortals!” Rignabog put his hands on hips. “I will not have this conflict in my sacred chamber. The very idea offends me, it would not be-

“Aha, I’ve got it!” Stan dramatically stuck a finger in the air pointing at Rignabog and grinned wildly. Ford’s eyes glanced back and forth between his brother and the a-mortal. “That’s why you stay in here, isn’t it? You’re scared of dying from something you can’t control.” Rignabog glanced away, not matching Stan’s glare. “See! He’s so bored by his existence here, but at the same time he’s too much of a wimp to risk going outside once in a while! What’s the matter, scared of a little sunburn?”

“Silence!” Rignabog shouted, but then impotently unclenched his tightened fists. “My mind keeps my body running, it keeps this sanctum pristine! I will not be intimidated by two wrinkled old men who stink of fish!”

“Hey, what else are we supposed to eat when we’re at sea?!” Stan pointed out.

“I have no desire to quarrel with such simple beings as you! Stanford, join me, forget this ignorant oaf-“

“Why you!-“

“And we can be greater than anything you can imagine, together!”

Rignabog stretched out a hand, offering it to Ford. Adopting a blank expression, Ford looked down at the hand, then back up at Rignabog’s face. “Sorry, a-mortal. My brother is right. I won’t be swayed by easy temptations! I would never just abandon my family like that!”

Rignabog nodded. “Fine. I understand. Shame I’ll have to keep you here now.” He clapped his hands together and tiny roots began sprouting between cracks in the stone floor. Before either twin could react, the roots tightened around their legs. “I am a natural empath in addition to my longevity. It gives me an acute control of the senses and comes in handy when dealing with annoyances such as you.” He sat back in his throne, no longer expending any attention on the twins.

Stan started pulling at the coiled roots, but as soon as he’d pulled some off, more had wrapped themselves around him. “You know Ford, you really are easily manipulated. Little bit of sweet-talking and any fantastically old guy with a skewed sense of morality’ll have you eating out of the palm of his hand!”

Ford grunted as the roots spread further up his body. “I’m sorry, alright!” He grimaced and gave a shrug. “I thought someone that old would have a lot of experience and would naturally end up having some level of respect for all life. Guess I was wrong, the opposite has happened. He’s just a callous coward.”

Stan reached out to grip his brother’s shoulder. “Yeah, well, we all make mistakes. What was he talking about anyway, ‘empath’?”

“It means he can sense and manipulate emotions, it’s giving him control over these plants. Most humans never develop any kind of mental powers, but I’d say thousands of years would probably give you enough time to figure it out.”

“What are we gonna do then? We don’t have long before these roots reach all the way up our bodies! I don’t wanna turn into ‘reverse compost’.”
Ford dejectedly looked at the floor. “There’s nothing we can do. He has incredible abilities and so many years of experience. I think this a-mortal is about mortally wound us!”

“Wait… mortal..” Stan stroked the grey stubble on his chin. “That’s it! It’s so simple!”

“What is? You’ve thought of some way to counteract the mental fields he’s generating?”

“Nope.”

“You have some sleight of hand magic trick that can free us from these bonds?”

“Nada.”

“What then?”

“Watch and learn brother! Oh, and you have terrible spatial awareness, it’d be hilarious if it didn’t so often land us in a heap of trouble.” Ford’s brow furrowed at Stan’s mysterious comments, but he had to go along with the plan, since he couldn’t think of anything of his own. Stan yelled across the chamber. “Hey you! Yeah, you! Peacock head!”

Rignabog angrily stood up off his throne. He crossed his arms, and a smug grin came over his face. “What could you possibly say to me that’s worth hearing? A last minute grovelling for your lives, or maybe you have something to offer me?”

“Nah, I just wanted you to stand up so I had a clearer aim.” Rignabog’s smug expression immediately vanished, but before he could respond in any way, a bright blue blast of energy carved a round hole straight through his chest.

Rignabog looked down at the clean incision, back up at Stan, then back down again. “I knew this would happen eventually. Ghh, you’ve just, ugh, proved… my… point…” He fell back, collapsing onto his precious throne.

Ford gasped. “You just shot him!”

“Well yeah, he’s a-mortal, not immortal, duh. You should pay more attention Ford,” Stan said with a cheeky wink, and Ford could only smile as the roots around their legs fell away. Tossing the gun casually to his brother, Stan cleared away the last of the roots. “You’d better watch your possessions more closely Ford, what with such a renowned pickpocket being in your company.”

Ford kept smiling and shook his head. “I can’t take you anywhere.” Both twin’s satisfaction in their escape disappeared when the floor began to shake. “Oh no, without Rignabog’s influence, this structure is beginning to decay!”

Chunks of rock began detaching themselves like melting icebergs from the ceiling, crashing onto the floor. A massive section collided with the central throne, sending debris everywhere. “Hot Belgian Waffles! Run!” Leaving the body of the a-mortal behind, the twins sprinted back down the darkened hallway as fast their old legs could carry them.

When they finally emerged it was hard to tell they’d actually left the pyramid, since it was so dark beneath the canopy outside. They turned back to witness the final destruction of the pyramid, which imploded in on itself, as if a black hole had opened up in its centre. It now seemed that it had been Rignabog’s will alone that had maintained any semblance of stability in the temple.

They surveyed the wreckage of the collapsed bricks with their flashlights. “So much for the ‘greatest treasure known to man’,” Stan ruefully said with a sigh.
Ford smiled sympathetically. “Hey, maybe the treasure wasn’t gold, or living forever. Maybe, just maybe, it was the knowledge that we didn’t need anything to succeed, except each other.”

Stan couldn’t help but cheerfully laugh. “No, ha! That’s sounds like something Mabel would say! Besides, you missed the obvious again. Wasn’t a total loss.” With a flourish, he presented a set of gold coins between the knuckles of one hand.

Warmly smiling, Ford turned back towards the path out of the jungle. “Come on, let’s head back to the ship. I could sure do with a rest right about now. Like you said, ageing may be for the best, but it does have its drawbacks. I’m gonna ache for days after that run out of the temple.”

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2017-04-27

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Manofmystery82: Heya kids, sorry we took so long to reply. Our darned satellite connection was down when we were so far from land, then we both forgot about the computer. This new-fangled ‘internet’ stuff is still weird to us old timers.

Manofmystery82: Things with us 2 have been good though. I’m sure Ford’ll have fun boring you guys by explaining all about what an ‘a-mortal’ is, but I’ll just tell you now: We totally found a secret hidden temple, a mound of treasure, and watched it all get blown up!

Pinestar97: Holy moly! Tell us more Grunkle Stan!

UrsaPinus: You guys met an actual a-mortal?! Oh my gosh, I thought they were just a myth!

Manofmystery82: Knew you’d focus on that part kid.

Hexadactyl: I have a whole document compiled to show you Dipper! I’m sure you’ll find it captivating reading. Unfortunately, we don’t have a strong enough signal to video chat yet. I’m working on patching us a fix, but until we’re back in more civilised waters this thread is all we have.

Hexadactyl: Though I’m certainly intrigued by this ‘mystery guest’ you mentioned.

Manofmystery82: Yeah, what is it, some kind of magical pet Mabel’s adopted?

Pinestar97: I’ll never tell ;) You guys’ll just have to wait till we can speak on a proper video call for the full story.

Manofmystery82: Sounds great pumpkin.

UrsaPinus: You’re not gonna believe all that’s been going on. So many great Mystery Hunts. We have to compare journals over the summer.

2017-04-28

Manofmystery82: Catch you two later, me’n Ford are setting off for another long trip. Probably won’t be able to communicate for a week or two, we’re heading for the Panama Canal, then on to the Caribbean!

Pinestar97: That sounds sooooooo cool Stan! I’d love to be there with you! :)

Hexadactyl: And we’d love to have you Mabel.
UrsaPinus: Searching for anything in particular Grunkle Ford? I myself have been doing some research into a rare event supposed to occur very soon. I think tonight might be the one.

Hexadactyl: Sounds fascinating my dear boy! From what you two have shown us of Journal 4, you've become quite the adventurers. We're merely following up a rumour, but well... you know how those often turn out...

2017-05-10

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Hexadactyl: Hey kids, neither of you have happened to detect any unusual sensor emissions lately? We've been getting some odd readings, relatively close to your area, and they may be potentially dangerous, if not worse. Our signal's not amazing at the moment, but we'd be reassured if you could contact us.

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Hexadactyl: You guys ok?

Manofmystery82: Dipper? Mabel?

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Kids?

Chapter End Notes

The primary goal with this chapter was to stretch myself by attempting to write two new characters I’d not written for before, to create a contrast with the usual Dipper and Mabel focused chapters.

The idea of a shared journal was inspired by this piece of art by Toastbutt: https://toasttbutt.tumblr.com/post/179798355760/i-can-finally-post-these-aaaaaaaaa-my-peices-for

The idea for the a-mortal originated from a concept mentioned in the non-fiction book *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, by Yuval Noah Harari. It seemed interesting to turn an abstract idea into a defined character concept here, it made for a nicely detached and cynical villain that worked well against the older twins.
“Get back here you little twerp!”

“Ah! No, get away Paz!”

“MABEL!”

The brunette girl dashed up the stairs on all fours like an animal, getting a slight distance on her friend. Pacifica raced after her as fast as she could but was no match for her bursts of energy that allowed her to sprint at immense speed. Mabel crossed the threshold of her bedroom and slammed the door shut behind her.

Seconds later Pacifica impacted with the door, attempting to shove it open. “Let me in Mabel! This is beyond childish!”

“No, not when you’re in ‘super rage mode’!” Mabel’s voice came muffled from inside. The door was locked, and Pacifica’s knocks on the wood were in vain.

“Come on Mabel, hand it over! You can’t get away this time!”

“No! It’s part of our shared history!”

“It’s embarrassing and I want it gone!” Mabel didn’t reply again, probably wrapped up in her blanket and hiding from the recriminations Pacifica was shouting at her. That was a common Mabel reaction when cornered, to simply shut out the world and not care to come up with a practical solution.

Pacifica knew that her shouting was getting her nowhere, so rested her forehead against the door in defeat. Quietly, she tried to argue with her again. “Please Mabel, I’m not up to this.”

“Rough day?”

“Ah!” She jumped as Dipper came up beside her carrying a soda. He seemed mildly curious about their argument.

“Lemme guess, Mabel’s done something to tick you off?” He took a sip and waited for her to respond.

Pacifica closed her eyes and rubbed her temples, attempting to calm herself down. “More like royally piss me off. It’s her stupid love of taking photos of anything and everything! I was downstairs on the sofa in your living room. I guess I was tired after school today, so I drifted off while doing that English homework. Next thing I know, Waddles is licking my face, and Mabel’s there taking snapshots of the whole thing! Look, I even still have a mark from where that dumb pig smooched me.”

She pointed to a slightly reddened patch on her cheek. Dipper finished his sip, then sagely nodded. “So now Mabel’s gonna stick that photo in a scrapbook or send it to her friends, and you wanna stop her.”

“That’s it exactly! She can’t help but embarrass me whenever she gets a chance. I just can’t deal with this right now. I’m having a shitty enough time getting used to living here as it is, without her petty antics driving me up the wall. I thought she’d have grown out of this stuff.”
“Ah, you know Mabel, she never really grows out of anything.”

“That’s the problem, she can’t seem to understand how much this stuff annoys me! I don’t like the thought of her holding those shots against me, it just… ugh! It makes me so frustrated!” She put her fists to her forehead and shut her eyes, giving a grunt of annoyance.

Hearing the sound of Dipper’s slow slurping, she gradually opened her eyes again. “Ok, you’re not helping here Mace.”

He coughed slightly on his drink. “Oh, sorry. You’ve just got to get through to Mabel, once she knows how much this is affecting you, she’ll stop… at least for a few days, then she’ll probably try it again.”

Pacifica grunted again. “Ugh, it’s better than nothing at least.” She took a deep breath, then spoke softly. “Mabel?” She knocked lightly on the door. “If you open this door right now, I promise I’ll forgive you and won’t try to take the phone off you.”

There was a pause, then the door opened a crack. “You promise?”

“I promise.” Mabel warily opened the door, and Pacifica took a step inside. “Good. NOW GIMME THAT GODDAMN PHONE!”

“Ah, no!” Mabel was caught by surprise and fell back onto her bed, Pacifica grappling with her arms. Resistance was ineffective, try as she might she couldn’t wiggle free of her friend’s grip. “Get off! That’s mine!” She was rolled over onto her back, and Pacifica sat triumphantly on top of her with the glittery pink phone in her grip.

“There, that’s taught you your place.”

“You said you’d forgive me,” Mabel simply said, with a small hint of betrayal in her voice.

“I lied,” Pacifica dryly responded.

“Aw poop, that always gets me.”

“There, photo deleted, thank god.”

“You know, you’re kinda threatening when you’re angry, we should turn you on our enemies someday! You’re like ‘the Pacificator’!” Mabel put on a cheesy Austrian accent for the last word and smiled goofily up. Pacifica didn’t return the smile but handed back the phone and stood up.

“Next time I’m keeping that. Mabel, would it kill you to just be normal for once?”

“Well I don’t think so, not unless I’ve been cursed with some sort of black magic. Or maybe some kind of normality ray, that instantly kills if you go below a certain level of weirdness! Or-“

“That was a rhetorical question Mabel.”

“Oh…” She awkwardly looked at her feet, not wanting to meet Pacifica’s scowl.

“Look, I’m tired of saying this, but please, lay off with your ‘pranks’ and ‘quirkiness’, or I swear I’m gonna-“

“Make me suffer to within an inch of my life, then sue me for all I’m worth’, yadda yadda, I know Paz, ok! I’m sorry!”
Pacifica put her hands on her hips. “That’s just not good enough anymore! How many times have I asked you to give me a break now?!”

Mabel sighed. “About a bleventy-hundred times. I know, I know!”

“Well when are you gonna actually take responsibility for your actions!?”

“Ahem!” Dipper coughed into his fist as loudly as he could, interrupting the girls’ squabble. “If I might interject—“

“SHUT UP DIPPER/MASON!” Both girls turned to him and shouted in unison, before glancing back at one another in mutual confusion, mixed with a slight admiration for their dissing of Dipper.

Cowed by their aggression, he visibly shrunk down and put out his hands. “I was only trying to, uh, suggest that maybe you two aren’t really coming to anything resembling much of a compromise.”

Pacifica crossed her arms. “Oh yeah Mason, and what do you suggest?”

“I suggest we let cooler heads prevail. Come on you two, I have something to show you.”

“And what is that exactly?” Pacifica sceptically responded.

“Perspective.” And with that cryptic word, he led the girls out to the pickup, and took them for a drive.

Dipper led the girls from the pickup to a large open plain, sloping slightly and covered in nothing but long stalks of grass. He checked his journal one last time, then jumped the wooden fence surrounding the field and hunched down in the grass. “Ok, this is it. Just a few more minutes before germination.”

Pacifica looked around the dark field, then up at the sky. Half the sky was obscured by clouds, but there were many stars shining towards the west. She sat next to Dipper. “Gonna tell me what we’re waiting for yet?”

“Nuh uh, it’s surprise Paz. You’ll love it though, trust me.”

She shivered, they were exposed out here in the field. “Better be worth it, my arms are freezing.”

Mabel, who’d been idly stargazing, piped up. “Ooh, I’ve got something for that!” She ran back to the pickup, then brought out Pacifica’s yellow llama sweater.

She looked over it with gratitude before putting it on. “Thanks Mabel, guess you’re not totally useless tonight.”

“Aw, you know you love me loads really!” Mabel came over and sat down. The trio huddled together in the dark, eagerly anticipating the coming surprise Dipper had promised.

“You do always seem to know when I need something to lift me up. Better than your brother at least.”

As she said, he wasn’t paying attention. He was checking his watch, making sure the time was right. It was 11:35pm, only 3 more minutes until the blooming. “Hmm, what, sorry?”

“Nothing Mace,” Pacifica replied, making Mabel snigger at how oblivious he was being. “So
Mabel, you ready to ‘settle our differences’?”

Mabel looked quizzically around the dark empty field. “I don’t know Paz, bringing us out to the middle of nowhere on a cold night isn’t exactly giving me a new insight. Maybe Dipper’s just trying to get us annoyed at him instead, bonding through mutual dislike.”

She winked at Pacifica, who finally cracked a smile for the first time this evening. “Psst, hey Mabel. Listen to this.” Dipper’s brow furrowed in confusion as what sounded like a guttural chant came from Pacifica. “thginot tihspiD latot a gnieb si rehtorb e'reuO.”

Mabel put her hands over her mouth in shock, unable to contain her laughter. She replied in the same unintelligible speech. “siht ekil ecalp a ot tuo slrig a'elpuoc a sekat krej fo dnik tahw ,zaP yllatoT?”

Realisation dawned on Dipper. “Wait, are you guys using backwards speak against me! That’s not fair! You know I can’t understand it.” Both girls broke into laughter, Dipper’s embarrassment really was working wonders to help them forget about their argument.

Pacifica put a sympathetic hand on his shoulder. “Aw, it’s alright Mace, we were only teasing.”

“Yeah bro, we’d save the real insults for when you do something really stupid, not just being a little vague about why we’re out here.”

“Oh wait, girls, shh.” He hushed them as the event he’d predicted finally came to pass.

All across the field, bright lights began shining up from the soil. Poking up between the strands of grass were small blue stalks, each luminous plant growing from a seed into a flower in mere seconds. The light shone from them in a deep sapphire blue, illuminating the trio’s faces with a soft glow.

After the flower’s petals unfolded, they revealed a shining core of pollen. Each one detached, then began floating up away from the grass. Pacifica could only stare in awe as hundreds of beautiful shimmering lights rose up to the heavens, outshining the very stars above. It now seemed as if there were no clouds, the radiance coming from below giving the illusion of an unbroken pattern of lights in the sky.

From beside her came Dipper’s soft voice, explaining the phenomenon they were collectively witnessing. “The pollen is going up into space, eventually they’ll dissipate, and who knows how far they’ll fly off to. These flowers bloom only once every 4 years, they only grow in this single field, and I have no idea why! Isn’t that amazing? This is the one place in the entire world, maybe the entire universe where we can watch this happen.”

Pacifica silently nodded, mouth agape, and saw Mabel doing the same. It really was something. Sometimes their lives brought great danger or terrifying encounters. Other times, the supernatural could be an annoyance or provide a boon.

But what they were seeing tonight was just pure wonder. A look at the side of the world no one else could experience. It wasn’t a threat or a benefit, it was merely a cycle of life they were privileged to be able to see. It made her feel incredibly special, not just because of the incredible shining lights, but that she was close enough with the twins that they’d show her this.

Her life was never going to be ‘easy’ again. And that was fine. What she had now was better in so many ways. Mabel might annoy her from time to time, but she was still a better friend that 99% of the people in the world would be to someone like her.
Pacifica found Dipper’s hand in the grass and felt the warmth coming from him. She breathed in the cool night air and turned her head upwards, taking in the infinite universe.
“Please Pacifica, won’t you come?! It’ll be great!” Pacifica was sat on the living room sofa, perfectly content with staying right where she was.

To emphasise the point, she crossed her legs. “I’m not coming Mabel, I already told you. I have chemistry homework to do, and besides, I am not getting involved with that kind of… ‘establishment’.”

“Oh come on, please? We haven’t been on a proper Mystery Hunt in like forever!”

“Mabel, we went out to see those flowers bloom only three days ago.”

“Yeah, but that wasn’t the same thing. I wanna go out and find some creature causing mischief or fight a ghost! It wouldn’t be the same without you! We’re a trio!”

“Maybe another night Mabel, but not right now. I’m staying, it’s final, buh-bye.” She gave a half-hearted wave, not looking up from her journal.


“Thank goodness you’re here Dipper, you’ve gotta convince her to come! She actually wants to stay at home and be boring!” Without speaking, Pacifica showed a particular rude hand gesture at Mabel, who pouted in annoyance. “See!”

Dipper pulled Mabel over into a huddle. “Don’t you think she deserves a break just this once? You know she’s gone through a lot these last weeks. I’m sure she’ll be up for it next time, but if she doesn’t wanna come, then she doesn’t wanna. I don’t think you wanna argue with her, cause believe me, it never ends up well to argue with Pacifica when she has her mind set.”

Mabel sighed, conceding the point. “Fine, you win. Catch you later Paz.” Pacifica lazily waved an arm in their general direction. “Go on you two, go catch a fairy or bring back a new monster pet, have fun. Love you Mace. Oh, and where you’re going, try not to get too distracted.”

“It was 10 feet tall if it was inch. Damn thing nearly tore the roof off’a my car. Big ol’ sharp teeth, nasty claws, that sort of thing. You gettin’ all this Mabel?”

“Thanks for the info, Marissa-Jane, this is a big help, definitely.”

“Sure kid, now it’s 10 bucks if you wanna see the full show.”

“Nah, not tonight, I’m here on business, my brother wouldn’t approve.” Mabel looked over at
Dipper, blushing incredibly brightly as he asked similar questions about the creature sighting to some of the other employees of the local strip club. “Maybe I’ll swing back around once we’re done though, lol! See ya later!” Mabel skipped over to her brother, who was trying to avoid eye contact with a middle-aged woman lounging on a velvet sofa.

“Ahem, so, let me go over this one more time. It had big floppy ears, kinda bulky and low to the ground, stubby legs.” The woman nodded, and Dipper looked relieved when Mabel came over. “Oh Mabel, thank goodness. Can we get out of here now?” He whispered into her ear. “I’m uncomfortable with how casually nude half these girls are.”

“Oh, pish-posh Dip, I’ve seen worse.” She nudged his side. “Don’t tell me you’re not enjoying this a little bit.”

His eyes darted around, and his blush reddened even deeper. “I’m kinda already taken! You know, blonde girl, used to be very rich, IS CURRENTLY SAT AT HOME!”

“Yeah yeah, I’m sure she doesn’t mind you having a little fun on the job.” Mabel grabbed his hood and pulled him out onto the street. “So, we got a profile on El Monstro?”

“The thing stomped around this street a few nights ago, made quite a mess, then fled. Based on the description, it’s some kind of large mammalian biped, could be some kind of distant cousin of Homo Sapiens, maybe a Gigantopithecus, possibly matching the cryptozoological charts I-“

Mabel started drifting off midway through his speech. “In English please?”

“It’s big, it’s hairy, it’s a menace. We gotta track it down and contain it. And I think I know how.” He bent over near one of the cars parked out the front of the club, running his fingers over a dent inflicted by their mystery creature. “Look at this, trace elements of DNA. Probably very unique DNA. If I run it through a scan, I think we can trace its movements.”

“Let’s go then, wagons roll!”

“So the creature walked out into the middle of this bridge, stopped, and then disappeared into thin air? As excuses go for your scanner bein’ busted Dip, this a new one.”

“I don’t get it, the trail just ends right here, it doesn’t continue to the far side. I should be picking up some trace elements.”

Mabel stood up and took in the bridge, a rusting red metal structure connecting two sides of the river. Few cars used the old bridge, so they had some privacy for their investigation. Dipper was just glad to be out of that strip club, he’d felt all kinds of awkward in there.

Mabel lazily strolled along the bridge’s length, looking around for any signs of supernatural activity. Dipper panned back and forth over the same area of ground for the creature’s footprint trails but wasn’t having any luck. Leaning against the railing, Mabel peered down distractedly at the water.

Her attention changed from her idle gaze out at nothing, down to the railing, since she felt it slightly move under her weight. She pushed down intentionally, feeling that the metal was bent. “Dipper, I think the trail just got warm again,” she yelled over to him.

Excitedly examining the damaged metal, Dipper fished out his scanner goggles and searched along the bridge in X-ray mode. “Aha! There’s some kind of sample down on one of the bridge supports.
“Probably a clump of hair got caught, with that we can track it directly to the source!”

“What are we waiting for then!” Mabel stepped back from the railing and began stretching her arms.

“You’re not seriously going to try climbing down there? What if you fall, it’s too big a risk!”

“Trust me Dip, I’ve made some ‘modifications’ that should help.” Mabel pulled back the left sleeve of her sweater, which was turquoise and noticeably hugged her body more snugly than usual. It also had a hood instead of a turtleneck. From within the sweater’s pouch she pulled out a black leather bracer, which she slipped on to her fore-arm, Dipper saw some kind of mechanism attached to the underside. She fastened the straps, making sure it was on tightly. Finally, she tied her hair into a ponytail and passed her glasses to Dipper.

“Now watch this.” Grinning wildly, Mabel ran to the edge of the bridge and threw herself off into the air.

Dipper gasped as she fell, there was nothing to stop her falling into the river below. She twirled in the air, and a puff of compressed air shot out from her wrist. Dipper flinched when a hook embedded itself into the metal beside him, a rope trailing from it out under the bridge. Mabel swung on the rope, propelling herself into a spin and vanishing out Dipper’s sight. The hook beside him snapped off the bridge, reeling itself back towards Mabel.

“Woohoo!” Mabel flew up after another swing, confidently alternating between jumping and grappling through the lower supports. Eventually, she swung back around landed beside Dipper, whose mouth was now wide open. She slowly recoiled her line, which clicked into the mechanism attached to her wrist. With a simple flourish, the hook folded up, and Mabel spoke with a humble sense of pride. “Boom. Grappling hook, 2.0!”

Dipper still couldn’t quite get over how awesome Mabel’s display had just been, so she came over and tapped his gaping jaw shut. “Relax Dipper, this wasn’t my first time. I’ve been practicing with this baby for a little while now.”

“That was incredible Mabel, you made this all yourself!?” Dipper turned her wrist over, marvelling at the equipment strapped on the bracer.

“Yes, I’m not just a pretty face,” she said with a wink. She flicked her wrist a couple of times, and Dipper watched the hook’s prongs extend and retract. “I added this too.” She pointed to a hollow tube next the grappling hook’s launcher, then turned a gear lower down on the bracer. “It uses compressed air as a propellant, for, say, tranquiliser darts, or gold dust, or pellets to cause a distraction, but right now…” She flicked her wrist again, and Dipper moved back as a few strands of confetti pitifully flew a short distance out. “Yeah, still working on the firing mechanism, needs some tweaks.”

Dipper nodded. “Impressive work Mabel, I shouldn’t underestimate your craftsmanship. Must have taken you a few weeks to retrofit the gun into a wrist-mounted orientation.”

“Taped a while, but it’s all perfect now. I’ve got this ‘anti-snag streamlined snug sweater’ too, less baggy so it doesn’t catch on anything while I’m on the move.” She pulled her turquoise sleeve back down over her arm. “And it fits neatly under the sweater, leaving more room in muh pouch!” She jiggled her belly as a joke.

“Nice work sis! This’ll come it a lot of use, I’m sure. So… did you get the sample while you were down there?”
Mabel slapped a palm on her forehead. “Whoopsie daisy, completely slipped my brain.” Dipper’s heart started racing again as Mabel took another leap of faith off the bridge. When she returned, she was clutching a mass of tangled greenish-blackish hairs in her hand. “Success!”

To celebrate, Dipper reached under her arm and twisted the gear, so Mabel could send out another small cloud of confetti. He handed back her glasses, and she left a sticker of a monkey behind on the side of the bridge to mark their progress so far. “Next stop, creature feature!”

Now able to track the creature’s genetic ‘scent’ directly, the twins drove off in pursuit of their enigmatic quarry. The creature had been on the move in recent days, so they drove for a few hours, mostly in a southwards direction. When they finally came to a halt, neither sibling could quite believe where they’d ended up.

“Dipper, the shining lights, the beautiful castle, the crowds of adoring fans lining up to go on rides... our creature is a tourist at Disneyland?!”

“I’ll admit, it’s not where I was expecting this hunt to end up.”

The twins purchased a pair of day passes to the park and headed in. Whatever the creature they were pursuing was, the number of oblivious visitors here suggested that it hadn’t seemed to have shown itself in public. Wandering down Main Street USA, Dipper checked his scanner, then discreetly stowed it away. “Ok Mabel, we’ve already paid over $200 just to get in here, we don’t wanna do anything too weird and get thrown out before we can nab our target.”

“It’s so annoying though, the park closes in a few hours, we’ve wasted most of the day!”

“Uh, I think we have more pressing matters at hand!” He tapped his hoodie pocket, gesturing at the scanner to emphasise his point.

“Roger, we’ll only go on 3 or 4 rides before we deal with the creature.”

“After, Mabel, we can go on the rides after we deal with this thing!”

“I know Dipper, I’m just screwing with ya.” She chuckled and pulled her hood up, which in her mind made her the stealthiest person in the park. “Where is our big fella anyway?”

“He’s towards the east side of the park, which puts him in... Tomorrowland.”

They wandered over through the throng of happy park goers, all completely unaware of the potentially dangerous monster lurking around. Dipper watched Mabel’s delighted reactions, marvelling at all the wonders the park contained. This place was right up Mabel’s alley, catering to a bunch of her interests all at once.

He himself was a bit more cool on the park,. Rollercoasters were mostly fine, but he couldn’t handle the more extreme rides, and he didn’t care much for the cutesy aesthetic that Mabel just ate up. A soft spot for some of the ‘princess’ memorabilia was something he kept very hidden, since he knew his sister would never let it go.

So while Mabel gawked at the park, his attention was on her, studying her joyful reactions. He spoke almost without thinking. “I’ve missed this.”

Mabel only just caught the fact that he’d spoken, the noise of the crowd and cheery music coming from concealed speakers drowned him out. “Huh, what was that bro?”
“Oh, I was just saying I’ve kinda missed this you know. Just the two of us on an adventure.”

He wasn’t sure what Mabel’s reaction would be, but he was glad when she smiled. “Me too! I mean, Pacifica’s great and all, and we’re a team…”

“But…”

“But, it’s nice to do things the old way. It’s different dynamic. We can still be just ‘The Mystery Twins’ sometimes.”

“Yeah, I like that way of thinking. Though I’m sure Pacifica will kill us both if she ever finds out we said that,” he said with a smirk.

“Oh yeah, I’ve already bought life insurance.”

The trace led them to the large white conical dome that contained the Space Mountain rollercoaster. Slipping past the security guards, Mabel got them in through a locked back entrance. The area they were in was off limits to the public and led them into a maintenance area below part of the rollercoaster.

There, hunched on its short legs in the darkness, was their creature at last. Its head was crooked upwards, and it followed the passage of the coaster as it zoomed through with another load of tourists. Then it went back to eagerly anticipating the next ride through this area.

Creeping closer, the twins tried to figure out what the thing was, and what its goal here was. It was too dark down here to get much of a clear impression. “What’s it doing Dipper? It’s just… watching the ride.”

“Maybe it’s easily distracted, we should count our blessings.” He pointed to the right, and Mabel knew to circle around that way. Another car rolled past, so the twins had to dart out of sight as the creature turned to follow its path. Then it went back to waiting for the next one.

“What’s the plan Dip?”

“Not sure, need more concrete intel on the creature.” Dipper tried to get closer to the creature, edging his way round its back. Suddenly, after taking another step forward, a beeping came from inside his hoodie.

“You have reached you destination,” the scanner read out loudly in a clipped female voice. The creature immediately rose to address the threat.

“Run Mabel! We gotta lose it!” He ran off fast to the left, hoping to lose the creature in the darkness. The creature started charging after the twins, but Mabel stood her ground, preparing her escape strategy. Dipper ran out of sight, so the creature picked Mabel as its next meal.

She stuck her arm out confidently above her and flicked her wrist. “Escape plan Grunkle-Beta Two!” Instead of grabbing onto to the rails of the coaster above with her grappling hook, all that happened was a weak puff of confetti. “Oh dammit Dipper, forgot to switch back to-”

Her breath was taken out of her as the creature smashed into her. It pinned her with one of its massive claws, which up close she could see were laced with a shimmering green substance, probably poison or venom. Instead of clawing at her though, the creature just stared down at her as its eyes began to glow.

Before Mabel could react, she was somewhere else entirely. She felt her mind go blank,
overwritten by another’s thoughts. She felt the crushing isolation of a lonely existence without her brother. All her worst fears became manifested before her eyes. Even some old fears began rising up, like the image of horrific stop-motion clay homunculi, or the twisted sights of Weirdmageddon.

The next thing she knew, Dipper was standing over her, shaking her shoulders. “Get up Mabel, quickly! It'll be back soon!”

She rubbed her forehead, still overwhelmed by what she’d seen. “Dipper, I had a creepy vision, felt like a dream… a nightmare.”

“What, how?”

“I looked into its eyes… so bright…” She shook herself, trying to get over the incident. “I’m fine now, just a little shaken.”

Dipper’s look was not one of concern, but rather deep thought. “Wait, nightmare eyes, greenish hair, bulky… I think I know what the creature is! It’s the Gremloblin!”

“That big freaky sideshow you caught for the Shack? The one that nearly tore the whole building down?! It did have something on its claws.”

“Right, the Gremloblin emits a neurotoxin through its claws, lucky you weren’t scratched.” Dipper started trying to formulate a solution to his plan. He pulled out Journal 4 and a flashlight and turned to the photos stuck near the back of the book. “Here, a photocopy from Journal 3’s Gremloblin page. Let’s see, weaknesses, weaknesses. Well, we know not to use water at least. I should go grab a mirror, that helped last time. I have a silver mirror in the pickup, it’s the one I used to trap the ghost at the Northwest party, Pacifica insisted-“

“Never mind all that Dipper! Get down!” She shoved him out of the way as the Gremloblin barrelled through the fake space scenery they were crouched behind. “Turn that flashlight off, it can see us too easily!”

Dipper got a clear look at the Gremloblin in the flashlight’s beam, noting the same hairy body and fungal growth on the shoulders as he remembered from 5 years prior. “Mabel, give it a whack on the head, trust me!” He focused on their current predicament and did as Mabel said, turning off the light, then she pushed him away.

“Go, run! I’ll handle this, properly.” He nodded and ran off, and Mabel adjusted her bracer. The Gremloblin roared at her, but this time she was prepared. “You want a real challenge buddy? Come and get me! Ally-oop!” She shot a line upwards, and was pulled upwards, landing on the rollercoaster’s track. She didn’t have long to rest though, as the creature below simply sprouted a pair of wings and flew up onto the rail in front of her. “Oops, forgot it could fly.”

It took a shaky step towards her, the rails were hollow in the centre, leaving only the two narrow bars for them to stand on. She had to get the creature off the rail, otherwise a lot of people were gonna get hurt in a collision. Trying a new tactic, she fired her grappling hook line out into the air and grabbed a hold of the rope. Swinging it around her head as an improvised whip, she lashed out at the beast, keeping it back like a Lion Tamer. “Back, yah!”

The Gremloblin put up his arms to block the whip, then lost its balance and fell back to the maintenance area, right next to where Dipper was standing. Before he could get away, the creature grabbed his leg. He tried to scrabble away, but then the Gremloblin cast its eyes upon him.

Dipper too saw his worst nightmare now, gazing deep into those shining yellow eyes. Visions of
his journals in flame, and Ford looking down at him with disappointment, as if Dipper could ever achieve a fraction of what his uncle could. Then it shifted to a more current fear of his, Pacifica in chains, being dragged away by her parents, never to be seen again, or worse, reverting to the way she’d been when they’d first met.

Up above, Mabel tried to figure out how to save him. While lost in thought, she heard the rumble of an approaching car and had to wildly jump away to avoid being hit. She landed on a lower section of rail but had to jump again when the same car turned a corner towards her. This time there was no lower rail, so she shot out a line from her wrist and swung down.

Luckily, her trajectory was on point, as she had a clear shot on her target. Flying through the air, her feet collided directly with the Gremloblin’s head.

Dipper was broken out of his reverie and awoke to see Mabel triumphantly standing next to the unconscious beast. “Ha, he’s sleeping like a baby Dip! One big conk to the head and he’s out like a light!”

Rubbing his neck, he studied the creature. “I did always suspect it had a rather weak skull structure. Fascinating how little it’s changed over the years.”

“Wait, couldn’t this be a different Gremobloblin, Gremibiblon, Grem- whatever you call it?” Mabel said, with no small note of confusion in her voice.

“I don’t think so. There’s the same patterns of fungus growing on it, and as far as I know, there was only ever one. The Gremloblin! I’m almost certain this is the same one that Ford encountered, which is the same one I caught and which ran riot in the Shack.”

“What’s it doing so far out of its home territory then? California is hardly the weirdness capital of the world.”

“I don’t know, most creatures like this are either born in Gravity Falls or drawn to it and stay there for good. Rare to see something venture so far away. Come on, we have to drag this thing back to the pickup, then we can dump it in the woods somewhere. Should hopefully learn stay away from people after an encounter like this.”

“Aw, does that mean no time for rides? Boo, Dipper sucks! Party pooper, party pooper!” She chanted the last sentence a few times, but then rolled her eyes and started hefting the heavy creature out at Dipper’s insistence.

Both twins returned home with pride, happy to have dealt with another creature threat. Dipper had some small worries about the Gremloblin’s presence down south but was still glad to have stopped another rampage with Mabel’s help. They still did make a good team.

As they pulled up in the drive, they heard indistinct shouts coming from inside. Both twins tensed, sensing something was amiss here. Mabel strained her ears to make out the noises. “Is that Pacifica? She sounds like she’s really angry!”

“Quick, let’s get in there, we’ve gotta help her!” The dashed into the house, following the shouting to their computer study. Dipper leant against the door and heard Pacifica’s muffled shouts from within. She was being incredibly loud and seemed to be shouting off a string of profanities.

He gingerly opened the door, but instead of finding her confronting a demon or some terrible threat, she was just sat contentedly at the main desk chair. Cradling a controller in her hands, and
wearing a pair of chunky pink headphones, Pacifica was angrily shouting at what looked like a first person shooter. “And I will destroy you noobs! Don’t try that shit with me again! You’re going down!”

Mabel grinned cheekily at her brother, then crept over to the chair and flicked the headphones off, resulting in Pacifica’s whole body jerking in shock. “Ahh!”

Dipper casually leaned over with his arms crossed. “So, how’s the chemistry homework going?”

Pacifica immediately blushed with guilt. “Uh, going fine, I was just taking a break, you know, stress and all that.”

“Uh huh, seems like it.” He reached over and paused the game screen. “You look like you’re doing just fine Paz. You shoulda come with us though, you missed out on a trip to Disneyland.”

Mabel nodded. “Next time we’re breaking in, those ticket prices are ridiculous.”

Pacifica’s eyes narrowed. “Wait, did you two just go on rides all afternoon?”

“Oh no sis, we did so much more. We bagged a monster, I trialled out a new piece of kit, Dipper got all flustered at the club, and we both faced down our worst fears! In short, we were the Mystery Twins! Blah!” She rubbed her hand in Pacifica’s face, making her giggle at her friend’s goofiness.

Out in the woods, the Gremloblin finally began to regain consciousness. This new wooded environment seemed like a pleasant spot to forage from now on. Before it could even stand up fully though, a jolt of pain shot through the creature’s body. Some kind of electrified net had been fired over him and he collapsed, unable to resist.

The man who’d fired the net stepped out from behind a tree. Those dumb kids had led him right to the cryptid. They’d made his job tracking the beast a lot easier. Now Morbid the Huntsman could return his prize to its proper place.
Chapter Notes

This chapter is divided into three sections, indicated by horizontal dividers and a change in font style, that can be read in any order.

As there are a number of secret codes sprinkled throughout the chapter, I’ve included a cheat sheet in the end notes for anyone who doesn’t want to go through the hassle of solving them.

Cover by Bakaiju: https://www.deviantart.com/baka2niisan/art/Mystery-Teens-2-chapter-23-Cover-808329274

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Sea Spline

Note: Please be advised, substantial elements of this entry were amended at a later date, while I was in a slightly… ‘damaged’ state of mind.

While electrical eels are common enough creatures, explicable by science, urban legend speaks of a more advanced subspecies, able to manipulate electrical fields to a much higher degree. A creature able to fold its body in on itself into various ‘connections’, each one generating a different effect.

I call this creature the Sea Spline (Electrophorus electricus calces), since its body is said to resemble a long cable with ridges along the torso. It bends its body, flexibly allowing it to lock its mouth into each slot between the ridges. This connection into different interlocking shapes somehow amplifies the natural electroplaques.

My research has led me to believe that such a creature is present somewhere in the Bay area. Recent power outages along the coast have no clear explanation, and sightings of ‘leviathan’ on several beaches have come to my attention as well.

The Spline doesn’t seem to have directly attacked anyone as of yet, so I’m considering tracking it down ASAP so we can make sure it’s contained or non-harmful.

Hacking into CCTV footage provided a few glimpses of the Sea Spline, and I’ve prepared a preliminary set of notes so that I’ll be ready when we confront the creature. (Yeah, that worked out perfectly, full marks to me... )
Based on the images I've collected, as well as witness descriptions found online, I estimate the creature has, at most, 5 types of electrokinesis, which will be listed here:

Type 1 – Pulse: Folding itself into the first slot on its body produces a low-level EMP, harmless to humans or other animals, but able to shut down electrical appliances at quite a distance. Reports of power outages seem to peter out at around 5 miles inland, so I've marked that as the max radius of this type of attack.

Type 2 - Sphere: A cocoon of electricity surrounds the Spline, similar to a form of Ball Lightning. Since water is a poor conductor, this has limited use when submerged, but can be useful for warding off landbound aggressors.

Type 3 - Strike: A directed beam of electricity, ranged attack. Reports suggest that the electricity has a low voltage, probably meant to stun small fish to make it easier to attack. I'd reckon about 1000-2000 Volts, capable of causing minor burns, and has longer range than the Sphere. Both myself and Mabel needed med kit attention after being hit on the chest and hand respectively.

Type 4 - Absorb: Can drain energy from nearby electrical sources to ‘recharge’ (the creature naturally generates most of its energy, but in a pinch can use external sources when reserves are low). (Didn't witness this ability, but still a plausible candidate for one the powers.)

Type 5 - Magnet: Witness reports describe people being lifted up into the air and thrown about by some unknown force. Possible electromagnetism can't be ruled out. All wrong, the creature demonstrated nothing of this sort, in fact it lacked the right number of ‘splines’ to even have another ability. Dismissing all mentions of this power as hearsay and rumour.

Addendum: Type 6 - Sense: As demonstrated in our direct encounter, the creature has a latent ability to pick up the electrical impulses generated by the human brain. This is in a manner similar to that used by the 'Ursus Stone' (See Entry dated Feb/17, authored by Mabel), and can be used to spy on human brain processes. It gave the Spline the ability to detect our movements before we even made them, giving it insanely fast reflexes to counter our approaches.

Weaknesses:

- Since the creature is a water dweller, its ability to attack on land seems limited. I predict only around 30 seconds on land before the creature runs out of oxygen and suffocates. (Got that right at least, wish I hadn’t had to see it in action though. Makes me glad I don’t eat fish, ugh.)

- Conductivity of water generally too low, which limits the range of most attacks bar Pulse.

- Size is apparently only 2 or 3 feet, likely evolved for hunting small fish. Will give us the advantage when dealing with it. Wrong wrong wrong! Much bigger than assumed, more like 10 feet.

Threat level: 3/10, tops. Don’t know, 5-10, probably. Sorry, that was unprofessional, with a more level head I’d put it somewhere in the 7-8/10 range, while it has strong offensive capabilities, the defence and range are lacking.

Overall, I reckon this creature will make a nice choice for my next Mystery Hunt with the girls, as soon as I can find some free time we can go track it down.

rigwlgp np yiql ivg jhlad ghuhl, nmmqfh psagemdd oh hnmy
Our recent re-encounter with this creature made me decide to write my own entry on the curious beast. I still have a photocopy of the old pages from Journal 3 but would rather have something in my own hand to refer to.

The Gremloblin is a half-Gremlin, half-Goblin, all-dangerous monster. While generally rather docile in nature, when provoked it flies into a murderous rage, smashing buildings and objects, and has been known to kidnap humans, possibly to eat later.

Known abilities: Flight, nightmare-inducing eyeballs, neurotoxin emitting claws, lots of brute strength.

It managed to escape a cage once when provided a key, so there's at least some rudimentary intelligence, though I'd hesitate to go as far as full Sapience.

**Warning:** Like certain other creatures we've encountered (See Entry dated Dec/16, Kochab, or Entry dated Apr/17, Paper clones), the Gremloblin is highly hydrophobic, but instead of being a weakness this merely triggers an aggressive mutation.

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**Weaknesses:**

- Mirrors can be used to reflect its sight, turning the nightmare back on itself, which sends it into a panic and renders the threat nullified.

- Easily distracted by repetitive sights and motions, loses sense of surroundings and makes it easy to sneak up on. Potentially consider borrowing Grunkle Stan’s ‘World’s most distracting object’ if we ever go up against this creature again.

- A weak bone structure makes it susceptible to blows to the head (likely evolved lighter bones to allow for flight). Mabel managed to knock it out with one clean kick to the top of the head.

- Once unconscious it’s a heavy sleeper, makes for easy transport when captured.

Threat level: 6/10, risky to confront if unprepared, but with the proper precautions this creature can be easily defeated.

Questions still remain about why the Gremloblin travelled so far out of its comfort zone, coming all the way to Piedmont, then as far south as Disneyland!

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**Project Pacifica**

I'm gonna write some of this in ciphers, just in case Pacifica ever leafs through this book. She could probably decode them, she’s smart enough, but I doubt she could be bothered. Patience is not one of her virtues.

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mhe sp yjuql qlmeshi tnsr gmalf, kflmrl kflmrl kflmrl ej hjt tlff kmbspsbm. jq s'ff bjhpobmlt yjuq gursb kfmylq, s dhjw yju it bqmhdy wstnjut yjuq tuhlr
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Work on the project is continuing well, Mabel’s help has been irreplaceable. I’m really thankful for how dedicated she’s been over the years at archiving these old things, has come in very handy. I can’t wait til the 6th, Paz is gonna love this present.

I've decided to update my general profile on Pacifica too, since she’s changed a lot in the last few weeks (for previous impressions see Entries dated Aug/12, Jul/15, and Sept/16):
New appearance, hair cut short (she told me it’s known as a bob cut), new clothes. General attitude has shifted, she’s slightly less arrogant, while also getting frustrated more quickly. The move to Piedmont has taken its toll, but on the whole she’s coped remarkably well, still fiery and confident, the same girl I fell in love with.

Is now a crack shot with a crossbow and can twirl an axe like it’s nobody’s business.

Fitness level: Pacifica rates a 9/10 on the fitness scale. Her years of physical training, such as jogging, swimming, and other sports, have given her an excellent level of body strength. She’s an adept runner, on par with Mabel, though less able to pull off the same expertise when parkouring. Mabel’s renewed trips to the gym with Pacifica will only enhance her abilities in this area.

Mabel’s considering teaching her some martial arts as well, her boxing lessons from Stan should carry over well for Paz, particularly given her endless depths of pent up rage she’s demonstrated on occasion.

Stamina could do with some work, she gets noticeably frustrated on walks/hikes, quickly becoming tired and irritable. I attribute this to her lack of patience, but she does seem to be slowly getting used to this kind of activity. She has the capability, just needs to apply herself mentally.

Intelligence is high, all those expensive schools her parents paid off. Good general knowledge and is getting up to speed quickly on paranormal studies.

Strong observational and pattern recognition skills, was able to spot flaws in the fake escape room ghost, as well as noticing obscure dents when we were in Yosemite. These abilities make Paz good at solving pictorial based puzzles and identifying clues.

Threat level: Against an enemy she’s angry at, 9/10. Towards me, 1/10 normally, but could be 10/10 if she ever reads these notes.

May 3rd

Some of my research notes turned up missing today, I suspect the number one culprit is Mabel, she’s becoming quite the kleptomaniac at times. I asked her once about her pickpocketing, and her reply was that she ‘did it just to see whether she could snag the goods without anyone noticing’. Grunkle Stan will be very happy to hear about this development in Mabel’s criminal tendencies.

Tomorrow I plan to deal with the Spline, hopefully this time Pacifica will wanna join, since we’re not going to an… ahem… strip club… ahem…

Aww, Dipper’s such a wuss sometimes!

That section written in bright pink crayon was from Mabel. Must keep a better eye on this book, got up for one minute to get a drink, came back and she’d already scribbled it in and vamoosed.
Ahem, back to tomorrow. Pacifica seems more eager to join us on another hunt, especially one with a defined target already detailed. Seeing her enthusiasm always makes me smile, it’s great how much she’s come to love all this. Hopefully she won’t be too repulsed by the Spline, she told me she prefers when the monsters we face are ‘cleaner’, whatever that means.

Mabel will probably give it a silly nickname like ‘Spliney’ or something—It’s not funny anymore.

I almost lost her again. I was such an idiot today! I thought I had a handle on these things by now, I did all the research I could, my notes were impeccable, but it still wasn’t enough! I got cocky, and it almost cost me everything.

It was the Sea Spline, that crafty little shit. Not so little after all as it turned out. Damn thing had somehow snuck into the San Francisco Aquarium of the Bay, must have slithered up a pipe. It was occupying a disused pool in an area slated for redevelopment in 2019. Just swimming around, back and forth.

You know, sometimes I wonder… would it be better if we didn’t seek out the strange? If we left things be and never upturned the apple cart? Provoking monsters has often led to disaster in the past, ha, and the future too!

Ah, I’m being bitter, I wouldn’t ever give this up, this is my life! I’m just trying to cope with all of this.

Anyway, back to the Spline. We entered the aquarium and tried to figure out how to neutralise it. There was no way to get it out of the pool, nor could we figure out how to get it to leave the way it came. I approached the poolside slowly in an attempt to study the creature closer. My earlier sketch of the beast won’t need much amendment, though the scale is way off.

My approach triggered a response from the Spline however, it started by emitting a Pulse, reaching around and clamping its jaws into one of the connections - bending like a snake eating its own tail. Luckily it was daytime, or we’d have been plunged into darkness. Panicking, I tried to get away from the water, but the Spline sent out a Strike, hitting me in the chest and knocking me onto my back. Mabel ran to my side but was hit by another Strike when she tried to reach out a hand to calm the beast.

Pacifica ran up next, probably determined to protect us. The Spline stared up through the water (and it had a disgustingly wide grin, more teeth than I’d ever wanted to see crammed into that slit of a mouth). It judged the three of us, probing our minds… and it chose Pacifica…

It targeted her, specifically… or rather ‘Pacifica’… heh… ha ha… hahahahaha!

Sorry. God, I feel exhausted.

Where was I? Oh right, it chose Pacifica. Probably singled her out as the least experienced among us, though if it had ranked us on physical strength I’d probably have been picked.

The Spline lunged at her, whipping its tail around her leg and dragging her into the water. She couldn’t keep her balance, fell straight in. The Spline was probably trying to get her close so it could use a Sphere to knock her out.

The next few moments are still a blur, so much happened in those seconds. Mabel speared the Spline, using her grappling hook like a harpoon. It flailed about with Pacifica still in its grip. I think it must have used another
electrical power; I recall seeing a bright flash. Luckily none of the charge passed through the grapple rope.

Next thing I know, Mabel was jumping into the water too, not sure if she was pulled in or just tried to do something to help Paz herself. She’d do something so stupid and so very brave like that.

I don’t know what happened next, with all the splashing the water was a mess I couldn’t see through. There was a massive bang, and the Spline flew out of the pool. I never did get a chance to ask Mabel what she’d done.

Anyway, it ran out of air pretty quickly once it was out, the thing just couldn’t survive on land. Saw it trying to fold itself up for more attacks, but it was already dying by that point.

I think Mabel was thrown out of the pool too, I remember seeing her smiling on the opposite side of the room, dripping wet. But then we both saw Pacifica… oh Pacifica…

I thought she was dead once before. Blasted into atoms by the Council, or at the least sent to a dimension where she’d surely perish, and I’d never see her again. Instead of breaking down in tears, or raging against the injustice, I shut down. I sat on a rock, stared at the empty desert, and felt almost nothing.

So much was going on, the world was ending, Mabel was AWOL and a secret mind-reader, but none of it mattered next to the sheer nothingness I felt without Pacifica. I am forever grateful to my sister that she helped Paz return to me, that she bridged our realities and saved her life.

I owe both of them so much. What I’d do without them… No, I’m stronger than that. I shouldn’t worry about what I can’t change. The deadline’s coming up for all of us, but I’m determined that this weekend will go off without a hitch. For Pacifica’s sake…

Feeling a little better now, Pacifica came in and reassured me she was fine. I’m more determined than ever not to lose her again.

I broke 3 pens writing the earlier section cause I was very frustrated, so please ignore any messy handwriting or ink splatters. Apologies, I was feeling awful after today, needed to cool my head.

Need to wrap up my recap of today. Pacifica was floating in the water, upright with her arms limply out in front of her. No bubbles came from her lips. It was eerie, neither of us moved, too transfixed by Paz’s trance.

Some instinct kicked in and I dove in and pulled her out. She still wasn’t breathing, so I did compressions. Her skin was so cold by that point, I was terrified that I’d already be too late.

But she lived, coughed up water and got back on her feet. Out of the three of us, she actually had the least injuries. She helped treat me and Mabel, then we had to deal with… the body. Ended up just dumping the Spline’s corpse in a big metal garbage bin, that’s all it deserved.

There, that’s all dealt with now, gonna be more careful next time for sure. Writing it out did help I think. Time to write about better things. Me and Paz confirmed our plans for the weekend, we both still agreed on the location.

I put the finishing touches on Project Pacifica after she went to bed, it’s all ready to be stowed in the pickup. I’m so looking forward to seeing her reaction on Saturday. Mabel still hasn’t let me in on what she’s planning to give yet, she likes to savour the reactions of everyone present.

Tomorrow I’m just looking forward to another day of school to get my mind off what happened earlier, then in the evening we can all relax and prepare. I don’t want it to affect Saturday at all.
April 29th:

Last night Mason took me to see such an amazing sight. There were these special flowers that bloomed super rarely. The lights were so incredible, we spent over an hour just sitting there watching them float away. It felt so nice to be there with him.

I really wanted to make it the perfect evening, so when we got home, I snuck into his bedroom. First time we’ve been able to make love since Spring break, and I needed the release. God it felt great, I’ve missed being so close to him. The big sap really knows how to show a girl a good time when he puts his mind to it.

Course, Mabel had to tag along to see the flowers, then she came in during our ‘private time’ as well. She actually claimed she just couldn’t sleep and was ‘worried for me’ since I wasn’t in her room. She’s an awful liar though, she probably just wanted the hot romance scoop. Girl needs to learn some boundaries, I guess when you’re so close to a twin your expectations on privacy get a little skewed.

April 30th:

Mason and Mabel’s mom took me out grocery shopping today, to show me how it’s done. It was weird, I’ve never had to think about where my food actually came from. It’s one thing to tell a butler you want a different cereal, quite another to go out and find it yourself. Mrs Pines was kind enough to show me where all the different types of food could be found, then left me to choose what I wanted. It took me longer than I’d thought it would to decide how much I’d need, I’ve never had to forward plan my meals before. Mrs Pines had to make sure I got ‘healthy’ food as well, apparently the stuff I had in the cart was way too fattening.

My parents may have trained me in a lot of things related to finance and business, but they neglected to teach the important everyday stuff. They probably expect me to come crawling back to them at the end of this, barely able to function on my own. And if I didn’t have the twins, I might just have already done that...

Mrs Pines seems nice from what I’ve known of her, a bit high strung (with kids like Mason and Mabel who wouldn’t be) but overall very friendly. Mr Pines too, though he’s more gruff than his wife. At least he tried to crack a few jokes to break the ice. Sure, they were terrible, terrible jokes, but I appreciated the effort. My parents would never. They’re both trying to help me settle, even if I think they’d rather have me gone. I totally understand though, nobody wants a stranger showing up at the door and asking to stay.

Mrs Pines did ask me a couple of awkward questions on the drive to the store though, about my relationship with Mason. I know she was just being protective of her son, but it made me feel soooooo embarrassed. Questions like, how did we meet, when did we start dating. She even asked if we’d had sex! What was I supposed to say to that?! ‘Oh sure Mrs Pines, the night before last actually!’? Was worse than when Mabel tries to get romance intel out of me.

On the drive home she mercifully dropped that subject, instead asking me about how I was getting on with school. I told her the truth, that it’s kinda dull right now, at my old school we’d already covered most of the topics the twins are doing now, so I feel like I have nothing to do. Then there’s my lack of friends, so whenever the twins aren’t around I get lonely. She seemed to know what I was going through, she has a better insight than my own mother, that’s for sure. She told me she works in an elementary school, working in admin on the main desk. She sees a lot of kids going
through messed up stuff and has to try and deal with it as best she can. Guess I’m just another lost kid she wants to help.

My music player went missing this evening, but I found it in the garage, perched on top of the family car. I’ve no idea how it got there, might have to ask Mason whether he can install security cameras (would that be too much, not sure whether normal people have those?).

May 1st:

Another tedious day of school today, got saddled with some crummy Chemistry work I have to do. Forget that, what a bore that subject is. At least it’s one of the few classes I share with Mason, that’s something to savour.

While the twins were out today, I tried out their main computer to see if I could run Battlestorm. Only thing I have to say is that I really miss my set up from home, their computer is so slow by comparison.

I got down to 10FPS at one point, what a joke! My laptop doesn’t have much processing power, but it’s still better than the hunk of junk the family have in their study. I thought their dad was a computer programmer, why do they have such a useless system?

Still, I managed to get a few good matches in, when the PC wasn’t overheating from the load. While waiting between matches I had a look round the study too. Found some old VHS tapes from when the twins were kids, surprised they still kept a hold of them. Mostly old cheesy animated movies, not my kind of thing even back then. I don’t get why the characters always had to break into song every 5 minutes, like, we get it, you’re in love, blah blah blah.

Best thing I found was a tape in an unlabelled box. There was a sticker on the side that said it was from an old camcorder, I can’t wait to figure out if it has embarrassing baby footage of the twins, that’d be hilarious.

May 2nd:

Took that tape to the school library at lunch today, they had an old machine in the corner I could watch it on. Turned out to be the tape with Mr and Mrs Pines’ wedding on it, that was sweet. Even old man Stan turned up, though he was only really interested in the buffet. Then the tape cut to a hospital, and I had to eject it as fast as I could.

It was Mabel and Mason’s birth! I thought I was gonna throw up, who films all the gory details like that!?

Well, it turned out the guy holding the camera was Stan himself. I heard him say he wanted to sell the video at the Mystery Shack for a quick buck, everyone gave him angry looks when he said that, ha, he deserved it.

I made sure the volume was low and the screen turned away so no-one could see, and fast forwarded through the gross stuff. There was a hectic bit where Mason nearly died! Mabel’s umbilical cord got all wrapped around his neck, poor little guy. I wonder if anyone’s ever told him about that?
After that, things calmed down, the adults took turns holding the babies, it was cute. They all looked so caring for one another. Wonder if Mom and Dad

After school, Mabel took me to the gym in town. She said that I needed to get back on my exercise regimes, because I hadn’t done much since arriving in California.

She leant me some sports clothes to wear, they were alright, or whatever. Kinda her style, but it was passable as fashion goes. Maybe I should thank her.

The gym was brand new, so it fit all my requirements thankfully. Mabel started by challenging me to a treadmill race, first to run 3 miles. I thought it would be an easy win, but I guess all that urban running she does has given her some skills. Annoyingly, she ended up beating me, so I made us do a bicycle race, then made her lift weights. We ended up at a draw, will have to do better next time.

At one point I was doing press-ups on my own, and lost sight of Mabel. When she came back, she looked like she’d just ran a marathon, and was covered in this golden dust. When I asked where she’d been, she told me not to ask, and that it was on a ‘need to know’ basis. Sometimes it’s hard to tell when she’s being serious.

At dinner tonight (Mabel made ‘Stancakes’, though I’m almost certain the old man didn’t come up with the recipe) I idly mentioned my attempt at gaming from the night before. Mr Pines perked up at this, and it turns out that when the twins were younger he used to play pretty regularly. Guess that explains why they still have such an old heap in the study, he needs it so he can run his old programmes.

He had some neat stuff, one of the earliest shooters, Mood, several old strategy games like Command and Civilization, plus Fog, that puzzle game Mace likes. He even had a game published by Hivemind! It’s a small world.

It was nice to get to know some more about the guy, he seems like a decent soul. I get the feeling that he never normally has anyone to talk to about this stuff, Mabel’s never interested much by video games and Mason’s moved on to newer stuff. It’s more than that though, it’s like there’s a divide between the kids and the parents. Not surprising really, given what I know.

Mr Pines eventually told me about his own visits to Gravity Falls, back when he was a kid. Stan was still running the Shack even all the way back then. The twins’ dad said he’d seen our manor, hard to miss something that important in a town that small. It must’ve been when grandpa Auldman was head of the family business, Dad would have pretty young then too. Thinking of him or Mom like that, like normal kids, is hard. Suppose they had no one to help them break free of the awful cycle of my family.

Somehow Mr Pines managed to miss all the town’s patented strangeness in his visits, wonder how he got that lucky? It must be weird for the twins, not being able to let their parents in on the truth about their lives. At least, living in Gravity Falls 365 days a year, my parents would have had to have been blind to miss that kind of thing. I wonder if the twins ever plan to tell them about the weird things they do? It must weigh on them a lot, keeping all those secrets, planning their outings carefully.
May 3rd:

12

12-9-11-5 20-8-9-19 16-1-26

20-5-19-20

12

18-1-3-9 16-1-3-9-6-9-3-16 16-1-3-9-6-9-3-1

9 7-15-20 9-20!

May 4th:

Now that’s more like it, finally some excitement! Mason tracked some exotic sea creature down to this aquarium. He called it a Spine Sl Big foldy fish thing, I can’t remember the real name.

I did a sketch of the little guy, he was like a snake, kinda cute really. If we ever get a ‘base’ like Stanford’s basement, I totally want one of these guys in a fish tank! The twins each got little burns from its attacks, had pretty sick electric powers. Was quite a light show.
It was Mabel who saved the day, apparently. I don’t know how, I got dragged in by accident, I tried struggling but then the creature stunned me somehow. Mabel managed to get the creature out of the water, then I think she must have dragged me out.

I was only out for a minute or two under the water, not a biggie in this line of work I guess. Mason seemed to be really anxious for me though, hugged me really tight like he never wanted to let go.

Then he went kinda quiet afterwards, went off alone and wrote in his journal. That always calms him down. I get that too, getting your thoughts down on paper helps you cope with it all. After a while, I went to his room, to make sure he was ok. He seemed to be mostly recovered by then.

I’m still kinda buzzing, I can see why the twins do this kind of thing so often. The thrill of it all, searching and finding something yourself, then dealing with it, I just feel high from the adrenaline! After this weekend, I hope we can find the time to do some more Mystery Hunts, they feel special, just the three of us together.

May 5th:

I’m so excited, I can hardly sleep! Mason’s already nodded off on the seat next to me. It’s funny, the guy can stay up all night no problem if he’s doing mystic research, but sometimes he just conks out like a baby. Mabel’s trying to sleep outside, I can see her tossing and turning still though, guess
she’s not used to sleeping on a towel.

I wanna write this entry before I sleep though, I reckon it’ll help me decompress. I still can hardly wait for tomorrow, it’s like a little bundle of joy is spreading through my whole body. Who cares about all the dumb junk my life has gone through, right now I feel great!

Tomorrow I’ll be an adult, properly. It feels like a big step, I’ll finally be my own person. Not a Northwest anymore. They still might want me back, the month is drawing to an end, but that doesn’t matter. They’ll never really have any control over me anymore. Just gotta figure out what I want to do with my life next.

Hmm, good question actually, what do I wanna do? It’s freeing to know I can do anything I want now, but there are a lot of choices to make. Do I go to college? Get a job? Travel (ha, with what money, I’m a peasant now)?

I think I wanna do more with my sketching, Mabel’s been a real big help and I love doing it. I’m just not sure I like making ‘art’, I’d rather do something more practical with it. Creativity isn’t my strong suit, but I still like drawing.

Working in clothes design in a possibility, but even that’s still kinda esoteric. I want to do something that will make a difference. Perhaps I could be an illustrator? Draw little cartoons for kid’s books, ha, that’d be something my parents would never let me live down.

Someday I’ll find the right path. Mason’ll help I’m sure, Mr ‘media and photography degree so I can make a ghost hunting show’ has it all planned out.

There’s something else about tomorrow that excites me. When Mason gave me this Pine Tree pendant a month ago, I couldn’t have been happier. It’s beautiful and has such meaning behind it. And tomorrow, technically, it’ll be an official gift at last. I’ll be one of the Trio for good. The thought couldn’t be more tantalising.

A few months ago, I thought I’d hit a rut, only seeing the twins occasionally, stuck with my parents the rest of the time. Now it’s like everything’s changed, and while it’s not always been a smooth ride, I’m happy with where this journey’s taken me. I’m happy most of all for who I’ve taken it with…

Gotta stay awake… I wanna… tired…

Hey there scrapbook! I’m back with another update. It’s been a busy week, that’s for sure!

Living with Pacifica: Totes amazing! It’s like having a whole new sibling in the house. At first it was a little weird, Paz was being Miss Grumpy Pants for the first week or two, cause everything was new and strange. But now she’s getting used to living with us, and it’s so cool. She’s makes a nice roommate, every night I go to sleep with the scent of her perfume wafting over me!

I’m having a lot of fun winding her up though, sneaking her headphones into the garden, or hiding her pencils in Waddles’ feeding bowl. It’s so funny watching her tear up the whole house looking for stuff! She has no idea it’s me who’s doing it either, she probably thinks that there are gnomes about or it’s some kind of hex, lol :P

I think she looks great now she’s got a change of clothes, but she’s weird, we had to buy a set of multiples so she could wear the same thing every day. Unlike me, she cultivates one set of clothes,
something she considers the highest peak of her aesthetic ‘look’\(^\text{tm}\), then sticks with that for years. A bit like Dipper I guess, though he just does it cause he’s lazy and doesn’t like to wash, gross.

On Monday I got to try out my new Grapple Gauntlet! It was certainly a bit heart-pounding, probably shouldn’t have jumped off a bridge on my first time using it. I told Dipper that I’d practiced, but who has time for that?! Especially with the other thing I’ve been practicing, getting the notes right before the weekend is super-important.

Still, it was a worthy test run, the rope launcher works fine. I need to iron out the kinks on the projectile gun though, still not getting enough propulsion. Maybe Dip can help, he does have some more advanced tech skills with stuff like that. He’s not good at improvising though, he’d have never come up with the idea of sticking my hook onto my wrist in the first place.

It was great shooting through the air, was almost like flying (my number one dream superpower!). Dipper said later that I could be a gymnast. I’d certainly be better on a tightrope than he was at the circus! :D

Also, note to self: learn how to make counterfeit Disneyland passes, I ain’t throwing away that much money ever again!

I took Paz to the gym on Tuesday, she needed it since she’s been eating nothing but burgers and pizza the last few weeks. She has no self-control, since her doo-doo head parents made her only eat ‘fancy’ food. Bleh, fancy is just code for ‘not tasty’ in my book!

But, since she was starting to get chubby, for Dipper’s sake I had to correct that. Can’t have Paz getting fat and becoming ‘un-sexy’ in his eyes, no sir! Not that I mind, more body just means more to love!

I gave her some neato clothes to wear, this purple puffer jacket I had, some leggings, plus my old purple leg warmers. She almost looked like she was about to cry with joy when I gave them to her! It was like when I brought her llama sweater to the hospital. She didn’t say anything though, of course, she’s not one for public affection much but I could tell she was grateful.

I managed to one-up her on a few of the exercises we did, she got all competitive and pent up like usual, but I was just glad to see her engaged.

Unfortunately, I had to deal with the number one problem with that gym. It’s a total breeding ground for those pesky Hirudinian Fitness Leeches! I keep telling them to stay off my turf and find another gym to feed at, but they never seem to get the message. Had to ward them off with my patented dance moves, that always reduces them quick. Should be good there for another month or two, before they dare to come back.

I really should deal with them directly, but their natural forms are just gross. Never going back to the hive again, no thank you. Not if I don’t wanna end up smelling like sweaty teenage boy for another week. Not gonna ask Dipper about it either, sometimes I like knowing stuff he doesn’t. Stonecutter likes to think he’s all high and mighty with his secret knowledge, but without me and Paz he’d be a total wreck.
Been thinking about Pacifi-cabel a lot this week. It’s not her fault she got saddled with all that junk cloggin’ her noggin. But if I know anything about her brain…

It’s that she’s crazy!

mad

cocoa bananas

unso

off the wall

Cray Crazy

bonkers

Absolutely insane

And that’s just for starters! Then there’s all the wacko mind stuff Dipper told me about, making plants do her evil bidding, and who knows what else. Wonder if she can lift objects with her mind, wouldn’t surprise me.

Guess the Ursus stone left a pretty big stamp on her personality somehow, we must’a all been linked together in the Shack basement. Dipper said that she isn’t telepathic, she’s ‘empathic’. She can’t read our minds but can get a keen sense of what we’re feeling. Must be weird then, she can feel everyone else’s emotions, but her own are all messed up cause of being a clone. All she had is blind rage against us.

She’s part me, part Paz, and none of it mixed together well. She’s like… hmm, she’s kinda like if you got two different coloured paints. On their own, they contrast well, can work to make a great composition. But if you blur them together too much, you just get a brown murky soup of paint. If she ever gets her hands on the necklace, with that…

Well, I don’t like thinking about it… about being erased…

Urg, gotta face it some time I s’pose… I am Mabel Pines…

So it’s like this, all my life, people said I’m ‘quirky’, or ‘odd’, or ‘one of a kind’. I think maybe that got in my head a bit too much, so I know I have issues when it comes to individuality. I like being me, and when my personality gets threatened with being taken away… it’s scary. Even scarier than worrying about the future used to be (past that now thankfully).

Just the idea of being a blank drone, or acting like someone else, there’s this pit in my stomach any time the thought comes up. I don’t wanna lose everything that makes me… me. It started with Mason Dipper in a way. When you have a twin, people often expect you to act super similar all the time. That was never us though, we’re different, and that’s why we’re such a good team. It gives us double the life experiences. I’m not like Mason Dipper, and that’s great.

Blargh, all this personal junk clogging up my scrapbook, these are supposed to focus on the happy times.

At least we managed to salvage something worthwhile out of that whole mess… I have a new
brother now? I have a new cousin now? I have a new family member now? We saved Quattro! It’s really cool having him around, he’s like if Dipper never quite grew up. There’s an awkwardness to him, living in the wild for 5 years and being driven by an unrealistic juvenile crush’ll do that to ya. But he’s improving, day by day, especially without all the negative junk Pacifi-cabel tried to instil in him.

He’s still getting used to his new life, but he really does like working at the circus, lots of folks like him who don’t quite belong anywhere else. And he can rely on us if he ever needs support, like he used to have with Tracey (RIP).

(Random thought, like, you know how, Paz calls Dipper ‘Mace’ sometimes? And I guess Tracey could be shortened to Trace. If so, does that mean his full name was Trason?! Ha, that’s hilarious, I should ask Quattro about that someday (respectfully of course (wouldn’t want to offend the little guy (is calling him little offensive too?! (I’ve gone too many brackets deep!)))).

The Romance Zone! (or as Dipper calls it, my stalker page, ha, he’s such a goof sometimes!):

Been a bit cool on dating since I got dumped by Linda. In hindsight, it probably wasn’t gonna work from the moment a giant snake showed up and demolished half the exhibit. Should’ve tried to ease her in more slowly. Next time Mabel.

Still haven’t found a date for the prom, for the first time ever Dipper will actually have someone to go with and I won’t! What is this flip-flop nonsense?! I was thinking again about asking Eli though, more seriously this time. Out of Dipper’s friends, he seems alright, though he is a Grade A nerd of course.

But woof, he’s worth it. Break me off a chunk of his kit-kat bar! Saw him the other day when Paz took me to the arcade again. She went off and played that MMORPG (which I’ve been teasing her by pronouncing it ‘muh-morp-guh’ :P), so I got chatting to Eli. He’s got this cute little laugh he makes when something I say properly gets to him. And you know what they say about what happens once you go black… ;)

List of Exes (updated): Norman (gnomes), Gideon (ew, no), Mermando (someday… someday), Sev’ral Timez (it was for the greater good), Gabe (too creepy with his puppets), Candy (mutual breakup, we’re still cool :)), Christopher, Jane, Sheldon, PJ, El Jed, Kennedy, Heels, Viva, etc. (all pretty normal breakups, no supernatural stuff, plus there are probably some names I’m forgetting, I get around ;)), Offucio (fricking necrotist, yuck), Utarfeson (all part of the plan, what a dweeb), Linda (couldn’t handle the full Mabel)

The biggest news of all was the time we went up against Spliney the Eel!
This was earlier today, he was this slippery, silvery, fish monster, with ridges along his body. He kept twisting around in funky ways, and when he bit a part himself, he clicked together and caused super electricy powers to blast off! It was pretty unnerving honestly, the way he kept bending himself to slot in the different powers.

Dipper, that dummy, wanted a closer look, and that just set Spliney off in a rage. Gave him a pretty nasty burn on the chest. I tried to get in the way and keep it from hitting Dipper a second time. I have my own burn on my palm to thank for my troubles.

Pacifica then decided it was her turn to join the ‘burn ward’ and tried to block both us from taking another hit. That backfired though, cause she got totally pulled in! One minute she was standing beside me, then next there was huge splash and she was dunked under.

Being completely useless, Dipper was no help, so I had to act fast. The lightning blast had knocked my glasses off earlier, though that was probably for the best, since I had to jump in the water straight after. First I used my grappling hook to try and keep Spliney off Pacifica, then I took a deep breath and hopped in the water.

I fired an explosive charge from my gauntlet, but since I still haven’t sorted out the compressed air on the launcher, I had to get in super close. I managed to wedge the charge right on one of the ‘teeth’, so when he tried to prep another attack he munched down and set off the charge. Must have also caused some kind of electric feedback, cause we were both blasted out of the water, it shouldn’t have had that much of a kick.

It was quite a ride through the air, felt kinda giddy before I got back to my feet. Pacifica was still under though, and Dipper pulled her out (yay, we all have drenched clothes today!). Lucky Dipper
knows CPR (lol, and Reverse CPR - ah, precious memories :)), so he was able to save Paz from drowning.

He seemed all shook up afterwards though, Paz was too caught up in enjoying our victory to notice at first. I don’t think she realised how much it had affected him. She’d almost died but was acting like nothing had happened. I guess in a way, that’s a good thing. She didn’t react like, say, Linda would have, getting completely paralysed with fear. She enjoyed the adventure of it all.

We’re rubbing on off her, but she still needs to learn some restraint. With how close things got in there, Dipper’s taking it hard. He’ll come around, he just needs some time. Poor Spliney though, it was horrible having to throw him away into a dumpster, felt like I was gonna puke. He wasn’t hurting anyone, not really. Wish we could have found another way.

Quick ‘pre-bedtime’ update: Tomorrow afternoon we’re driving out some place special the Dip-Cificia power couple picked out! We get to spend the whole weekend together as a trio for Pazzy’s birthday treat! Isn’t that awesome! Even Dipper’s got out of his funk from the aquarium, it’s great seeing him bounce back.

It’ll be fun to see Pacifica’s reaction to her presents, last time there was a gift giving event, at Christmas, it was kinda subdued. We had a lot of other things on our mind, since we’d just found Journal 9 and we obviously wanted to focus on that. Then there was all that anxiety with the stone, blah blah blah. Whatever, it’s over now.

Least I got Dipper some film for his camera, he’s really put it to good use, and come tomorrow Pacifica’s gonna see all the hard work he put into his project. This weekend’s gonna be so lit! No distractions, all of us together, perfection. Nothing’ll ever stop the Mystery Trio!

Chapter End Notes

Sketch credits
Dipper’s sketch: CIS Droid (https://i.imgur.com/mWG1KJd.jpg)
Pacifica’s sketch: Bakaiju (https://bakaiju.tumblr.com/post/186897305673/another-creature-design-for-darkspine10)
Mabel’s sketch: darkpsine10 (Me ;))

Regarding the sketches seen throughout this chapter, I did an interesting experiment. I provided both CIS and Bakaiju with Dipper’s description of the Spline, then each one went off and did their own sketch independently. It was really cool seeing each of their differing interpretations of the creature, and in a chapter like this I put that to good use, having each of them represent a different character’s drawing of the Spline. So a big thanks to both of them for so kindly offering to help out :)

As for Mabel’s doodle, I did that sketch offhand in 30 seconds as a brief ‘proof of concept’ for the other artists, to give a sense of what I was after :P When my sister said she thought it looked cute, I had the idea of including it in this chapter too, to round out the three sections.

Pacifica’s ‘gym outfit’ was based off this art by Bigdad, though my interpretation has shorter hair obviously: https://www.deviantart.com/evil-count-proteus/art/80s-Style-
Since I invested heavily in getting the dating accurate for this chapter, so that the interleaved sections worked well in tandem, I pedantically decided to write a timeline for every Mystery Teens chapter so far, charting the course through the months. Some of the chapters actually mention the date they take place, but a lot of them are just based off implications.

At one point I even consulted the Piedmont High School calendar on their website, to make sure I was getting accurate dates for the Spring break (in the end I shifted it somewhat for pacing reasons). Obviously that was pedantry of the highest degree, so I don’t expect many people to care about this, it was purely for my own satisfaction ;)

Code cheat guide (for the hidden blacklight messages you’ll have to fork out hundreds of dollars for a used copy of the limited edition version of this chapter ;)):

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rigwligp np yiql ivg jhlad ghuhl, nmmqfh psagemdd oh hnmy (confront at your own peril, never assume things’ll be easy) Caesar - Northwest
6-15-18-4 18-5-1-12-25 14-5-5-4-5-4 20-15 13-1-11-5 20-8-9-19 6-1-3-20 1 12-15-20 3-12-5-1-18-5-18 9-14 10-15-21-18-14-1-12 3, 19-8-5-5-19-8 (Ford really needed to make this fact a lot clearer in Journal 3, sheesh) a1z26

mhe sp yjuql qlmeshi tnsr gmalf, kflmrl kflmrl kflmrl ej hjt tlff kmbpsbsbm. jq s’ff bjhpshrbmnl yjuq gursb kflmrlq, s dhjw yju it bqmhdy wstnjet yjuq tuhlr (And if you’re reading this Mabel, please, please, please do not tell Pacifica. Or I’ll confiscate your music player, I know you get cranky without your tunes) Caesar - Mabelpines
Hsv zxgfzoob ivnrmmwh nv lu Dvmwb hlnvgrnhv, dsym hsv fhww gl xlnv drgs fh Im Ifi Nhbgvib Sfmgh. Kza nhfgh mevni urmw lfg zylfg nb low xifhs. (She actually reminds me of Wendy sometimes, when she used to come with us on our Mystery Hunts. Paz must never find out about my old crush.) Atbash
4-1-13-14, 16-1-26 8-1-19 1 8-15-20 2-15-4-25 (Damn, Paz has a hot body) a1z26

12-9-11-5 20-8-9-19 16-1-26
(Like this Paz)
20-5-19-20 (Test)
18-1-3-9 16-1-3-9-6-9-3 16-1-3-9-6-9-3-1 (Racifica Pacifica)
9 7-15-20 9-20! (I got it!)
20-8-9-19 20-5-24-20 9-19 5-14-3-15-4-5-4, 4-15-18-11 (This text is encoded, dork)
13-1-19-15-14, 13-1-2-5-12, 16-9-14-5-19 (Mason, Mabel, Pines)
1-14-4-18-15-13-5-4-1 24 21-18-19-21-19 (Andromeda x Ursus)
a1z26
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F4 M1 R3 R1 D4 R1 R3 M1’ F1 M4 T1 L1 L1 M1 L3 T1 T4 S1 R1 D1 (Pacifica’s gonna love it) Musical notation
“Mason? Maaaaaaaaaason! Come on, it’s time!” He suddenly felt a cold hand reach under his armpit, and his body shook as he was tickled.

“Hahah! Ah, stop!” He lightly pushed away Pacifica’s hand. “I’m up, I’m up! How’d you know that was my weak spot?”

“I’ve got an inside source.” She jabbed a thumb behind her, to where Mabel was already applying sun cream to her arms and legs. She was wearing her black bikini, whilst Pacifica had a similar pink one.

Mason got up from where he was lying across the pickup’s front seats. Pacifica gave him a hand in pulling him up and out of the truck. He fell towards her and she caught him in a hug. “Happy birthday Paz!” He stared for a moment at her smiling face, then took in the beach.

They were along from the more popular areas of Half Moon Bay. It was the same place he and Mabel had dealt with the Necrotist back in November, they’d parked the pickup in the same section of scooped-out rock that formed a semi-oval shaped cave. They would have a nice and quiet day to themselves.

It was the 6th of May, Pacifica’s 18th birthday. Due to the twins living in Piedmont while she’d been stuck in Gravity Falls, they’d never spent this day together before now. To make up for all those missed years, Mason and Mabel had planned a trip out to the beach to spend with her. They’d driven here last night so they could have the entire day here. By chance, Pacifica’s birthday fell on a Saturday this year, so they were gonna camp out on the beach for the whole weekend.

Pacifica donned a pair of sunglasses, then led Mason over to where the towels were laid out. Mabel waved as they approached. “Hey guys, Pacifica, looking good. Dipper, really - the same white shirt and red trunks as the last time we were here? You couldn’t mix it up a little?”

“Hey, I like consistency ok. You two wanna go for a swim? I think I need to get in the water to wake up properly.”

“Sure thing.” Mabel got up from her towel, and Mason took the sun cream from her, quickly applying dollops of the stuff on his arms and face. “Pacifica, you coming?”

“Nah, I wanna sunbathe for a bit. I’ll catch up later.”

“See you round sis, try to not to shrivel up like a Vampire! I know how sensitive your skin can be.” Mason was taking his t-shirt off, about to rub some sun cream over his chest. While it was over his face, Mabel pushed his side. “Last one to the water’s a rotten egg!”

She burst off towards the water, leaving a dazed Mason standing by Pacifica. “I’ll never understand where your sister gets so much energy from.”

“Sugar, lots of sugar. You saw her eat ‘Mabel Pizza’ once, right?”

“Oh yeah, that stuff’s too sickly for me.” She watched Mason finally get his shirt off, then giggled.
“What?”

“What? You just have such a spindly body, like no muscle at all.”

He pouted for a second, then looked down at himself. “Yeah, maybe I do need to work out more.”

“Aw, you look fine just the way you are Mace, noodle arms and all.” She pecked him on the lips, then went back to lounging out on the towel. “Now go have a nice swim, you’re blocking my light.”

“I will, enjoy your sunbathing Paz. Today’s gonna be the best day ever for you, I promise!”

Mason reached the edge of the water, where Mabel was already waist deep. She splashed some water at him, but he was kinda grateful. It made him more awake and alert. “And it’s Dipper! The loser in our race! Too distracted by Paz’s half-naked body were we?” She raised her eyebrows causing Mason’s cheeks to redden. “Hey, I’ve got a joke for you!”

Mason rolled his eyes. “Lay it on me then Mabel.”

“Why can’t fish pass their exams?” She left a pause for effect. “Because they work below C-level! Hahaha!”

Mason groaned. “Ugh, that was so cheesy! I had enough puns like that with Dad on our fishing trip.”

“You know you love my puns really! Come on now, get in here Dip!” She flopped out backwards, ending up beneath the surface. Mason held his nose, then dived in after her.

Pacifica came over to join the twins, and they spent the morning swimming about, playing volleyball, and just enjoying the cool water. Now it was May, the early signs of the summer heat were beginning to show, so the water provided a nice respite from the warmth of the sandy beach.

After lunch, Mason and Pacifica sat on the towels and worked on their journals together, while Mabel left them to go on a walk around the beach. Mason was convinced that the oval cave they were parked by had a supernatural explanation, the way the rock was cut seemed too smooth, and it was weirdly tall, around 30 or 40 feet. Pacifica spent the time writing about more personal things, like how she’d been dealing with the last few weeks here in Piedmont.

As the day wore on, and the sun set over the distant horizon where the sea and sky blended together, the trio set up a small bonfire besides the pickup. Mason and Pacifica sat together on a log on one side, whilst Mabel sat on the other side of the fire. “Hey guys, I think we’ve all had a pretty good day. But you know what would make it even better? Giving Pacifica her birthday presents!”

Pacifica started to protest. “No, really, you guys have already done so much for me already. Letting me stay with you the last 3 weeks, getting me all those new clothes. And the journal, plus my pendant!” She felt around her neck but remembered that her pendant was stowed in the pickup for today. “You guys don’t have to do any more for me.”

Mason scooched closer to her on the log. “Pacifica, this is the first time we’ve ever been together on your birthday. You really wanna miss out on our gifts? This is your special day, and we’ll do
everything to make it even more special.”

Mabel nodded from behind the fire. “Yeah sis, besides, we’ve already got the presents here, you can’t back out now.”

“Ok, I admit defeat.” Pacifica good-naturedly raised her arms. “Hit me up with your presents you dorks.”

Mason was the first to hand over his gift. It was a framed board, covered in dozens of photos. “Mabel worked with me on this, she sourced some of the older photos from her scrapbooks and helped narrowing down the selection. It’s a collection of shots of the three of us together. A reminder of the good times.”

She took the frame in her hands and looked over the images. “Wow, some of these are from years ago! That’s from your 13th birthday! And the time you and me went to the lake alone Mason. When did you take this shot Mabel, is that the road trip we went on?” Mabel grinned at how she’d recognised the photo and nodded. The board included several more recent photos too, like the one she’d taken with Mason in Yosemite, the night he’d given her the pendant. There was also the shot Mabel had taken of them in their night at the Shack back in March, surprised expression and all.

“Guys, this is awesome. I love the way you arranged it all. It’s definitely going on my wall. At least, it will when I have my own wall again. Hmm.” There was momentary silence, as she’d brought up the elephant in the room. In one week’s time, her month away from her parents would be up. None of them really knew what would happen after that, whether the Northwests would let Pacifica stay with them longer, or if she’d have to go back to Gravity Falls.

Mason felt the urge to say something, to broach the topic and have a proper discussion. But Pacifica spoke again before he could speak, and the moment was lost. “Thanks Mason, it’s lovely.” She gave him a quick kiss, then placed the frame down beside herself. “Come on then Mabel, what’s your present? Gonna be hard to top this one.”

She made it sound like a challenge, and Mabel had a sly grin. “Oh, don’t worry, I have something that’ll blow your socks off! I mean, if you were wearing socks that is.” She ran over to the pickup and pulled something out of the flatbed.

“Do you know what this is Mason?”

“Not a clue. I think she said something about ‘practicing’ the other day though.”

Mabel came back with something large hidden behind her back. “Get ready to be amazed. Ta-da!” She swung the object around and held it in her arms. Mason and Pacifica grew excited when they saw it was a guitar.

“Woah, Mabel, I didn’t know you could play!”

“Neither did I bro, but it’s been fun learning how. Now for my present! I call it, ‘Ode to two goofballs’. That’s you two by the way. And a one and a two!” She strummed the guitar strings and began the song she’d written herself. Mason and Pacifica couldn’t help but laugh through the whole performance. Mabel’s singing was loud and passionate, but not exactly on key. Her words were a sprawling love ballad, taking in the last few years of their relationship.

“Oh! He turned to wood, but she wasn’t giving up!
Pulled that leaver, all the townsfolk were like, ’sup!

… Dancing through the night,
Dipper couldn’t fight,
That deeper urge inside,
Pacifica swallowed her pride!

…And that’s the tale of the two best people in the world!”

Mabel practically screamed the last line of the song, and Mason and Pacifica broke into applause. “Woo, go Mabel!” Pacifica jumped up and ran over to give her a hug.

Mason sat back, outwardly smiling. Mabel’s song had been schmaltzy, and there had been some very forced rhymes, but it came straight from the heart. His own heart was overjoyed to see Mabel and Pacifica having so much fun this evening.

Inwardly though, he couldn’t help but think of what would come next week. This new life Pacifica was forging with them was wonderful, and he couldn’t bear the thought of things having to go back to the way they were before, only seeing her occasionally and knowing she was with her awful parents. His worst fear was what Pacifica could turn back into if under the control of their determined presence.

Pacifica glanced over and seemed to notice his pensive mood. Mabel retuned her guitar as Pacifica came over to Mason again. “Hey, something up? I know that look.”

He didn’t want to burden Pacifica with extra worries, not today of all days. “I just… wish this day didn’t have to end so soon. It’s been so great, but now it’s over. And who knows how many more days like it we’ll have together.”

Pacifica could see that Mason was feeling forlorn. “Look, I’m 18 now, technically an adult.”

“But also still technically a teen!”

“Ok, sure. Let me ask you something Mason. What do you wanna do next year? After high school.”

“Um, I was thinking college, maybe pursue the photography more seriously. Why?”

“Cause me and Mabel aren’t gonna be there. We’ll be off doing our own thing, whether college or… something else. So whatever happens, we’ll still be ‘on our own’ eventually. But I don’t believe for a second that you’d forget about us. You’d still be talking to us all the time, by phone or video chat. I’ll still pester you for help on my own work, and you know Mabel will need someone to bounce ideas off. Just cause today ends, doesn’t mean you have to dread tomorrow.”

“Still…” Mason looked off into the distance, away from the light of the fire, into the dark beach beyond. “There’s so much out there we can’t control, too many unknowns. That’s kinda scary.”

“I thought you were ‘Mr Mystery’, you love that sort of thing.”

“This is different. It’s just, our future, it’s… uncertain. You told me once that you thought your whole life might be ‘tomorrow’. But now I just wish today could last a little longer.”

Pacifica didn’t know what else to say, so just took hold of his hand. “Let’s not think about that now. It’s my birthday, and we’ve had a great day. And no matter where you go, we’ll always be together. Forever.” She rested her head on his chest.

“Yeah, you’re right. Tomorrow’s a new day…”
Mabel played a loud note on her guitar. “You two ready for another song? I know Camptown Races, that one’s great for long nights around a fire! You’ve gotta sing along though, that’s the rules!”

They stayed and chatted by the fire for the rest of the night, as Mabel got them all singing along to the few campfire songs she’d practiced. Mason was swept up in the fun, forgetting his concerns for the time being. As he drifted to sleep, with Pacifica lying by his side on the sand, the last thing he heard was Mabel lightly playing her guitar, like a lullaby.

“Mason? Maaaaaaaaaason! Come on, it’s time!” He suddenly felt a cold hand reach under his armpit, and his body shook as he was tickled.

“Hahah! Ah, stop!” He lightly pushed away Pacifica’s hand. “That’s two days running you’ve woken me up like that!”

“Huh, what do you mean? Anyway, come on!” He felt the material of a car seat beneath him and pulled himself up into a sitting position in the pickup. He was surprised to find himself there, when he’d gone to sleep he was out on the sand besides Paz. He looked out, seeing Mabel applying sun cream to her arms and legs, just like yesterday.

Pacifica gave him a hand in pulling him up and out of the truck. He fell towards her and she caught him in a hug. “Woah, another hug, we should start every day like this!” He stared for a moment at her face but saw something was wrong. She was starting to frown.

“Are you ok Mace? Maybe it got too hot in that pickup? Aren’t you forgetting to say something?” She twirled a finger through her short hair.

“Um, am I?” He looked around the beach, not seeing any remnants from their bonfire. The logs should still be there after only one night, no one would have bothered to lug them away.

Pacifica placed a palm on his forehead. “You sure you’re alright? I mean, surely you can’t have forgotten what day it is today.” She had a look of sheer condescension on her face, but Mason couldn’t figure out what was going on. “The whole reason we’re out here? May the 6th? My birthday!?”

Mason was suddenly dumbfounded. It couldn’t be the same day again, could it? He looked over at Mabel, slapping cream on her tattoos. She’d done it the exact same way the day before. And he’d woken up the same way in the pickup… Before he could think anymore, he noticed Pacifica’s withering look. “Uh, Happy Birthday Pacifica!”

Maybe what he was remembering as ‘yesterday’ had all been a dream? Yeah, that’s right, a really vivid dream that felt totally real. He shook his head, trying to get his mind in order as Pacifica donned a pair of sunglasses. She led Mason over to where the towels were laid out. Mabel waved as they approached. “Hey guys, Pacifica, looking good. Dipper, really - the same white shirt and red trunks as the last time we were here? You couldn’t mix it up a little?”

It was just like he remembered; Mabel hadn’t put a word wrong. “I... um…”

“What’sa matter bro, cat got your tongue? You need a dip in the water, that’ll wake you up!”

“Oh, yeah, you’re right. Swimming, that’s what we’ll do.” Mabel got up from her towel, and Mason took the sun cream from her. He turned the bottle over in his hands, lost in thought, before
rubbing some of the cream on himself. “You’re gonna stay here Pacifica, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, I wanna sunbathe for a bit. How’d you know?”

“Call it intuition.” Before taking his t-shirt off, he studied Mabel’s reactions. She was watching him out of the corner of her eye. He realised she was waiting for him to take his shirt off, then she’d shove him and run off. This time he took a step backwards before removing his shirt.

“See you round sis, try to not to shrivel up like a Vampire! I know how sensitive your skin can be.” While Mason’s shirt was over his face, Mabel reached out over to him and pushed his side. “Last one to the water’s a rotten egg!” He made note of how she’d done the exact same thing, even though he’d moved away.

Mabel burst off towards the water, leaving a very dazed and confused Mason standing by Pacifica. “I’ll never understand where your sister gets so much energy from.”

Mason didn’t follow up the conversation this time, but still heard her giggle as he removed his shirt. He knew she was laughing at his spindly body. “Uh, gotta go Paz, bye!”

She watched him dart away, clearly something was bothering him. It was like he was distracted.

Mason reached the edge of the water, where Mabel was already waist deep. She splashed some water at him, but he already felt awake and alert this morning. “And it’s Dipper! The loser in our race! Too distracted by Paz’s half-naked body were we?” She raised her eyebrows, but Mason kept stone-faced. “Hey, I’ve got a joke for you!”

He remained silent, which slightly unnerved Mabel. “Uh, why can’t fish pass their exams?”

She left a pause for effect. Before she could continue with the punchline, Mason blurted it out. “Because they work below C-level!”

Mabel put her hands on her hips and stuck her bottom lip out. “Hey, you ruined the delivery! How’d you know that one anyway?”

“Dad, Dad told me. On our fishing trip, yeah.”

“Hmmff, well I’ve got way more puns in store, there’s no way you’ll know all of them! That’d just be ‘Shellfish’! Ha! Come on now, get in here Dip!” She flopped out backwards, ending up beneath the surface. Mason halted before following her under. He’d just lived through the same events twice, had known the outcome before it had happened. Maybe he’d just had some kind of prophetic vision, and this was the real thing? Regardless, whatever was going on, it was still Pacifica’s birthday. He was determined that this was still going to be the best day ever.

Pacifica came over to join the twins, exactly as Mason knew she would, and they spent the morning swimming about, playing volleyball, and just enjoying the cool water.

After lunch, Mason and Pacifica sat on the towels and worked on their journals together, while Mabel left them to go on a walk around the beach. Instead of writing about the oval cave, Mason browsed through his notes, looking for anything regarding time travel or precognition. He didn’t turn up much that sounded like his current predicament.
As the day wore on, Mason tried to relax, to tell himself that today was all normal. He helped the girls set up the bonfire besides the pickup. Just as before, Mason and Pacifica sat on a log on one side, whilst Mabel sat on the other side of the fire. Before Mabel could bring up Pacifica’s birthday presents, this time he decided to play a little game.

He whispered into Pacifica’s ear. “Hey, Paz, I’ve got something to show you. I can predict the future.”

“What? Are you serious?”

“Trust me, in a minute, Mabel’s gonna offer to give you some birthday presents.”

“No, you guys shouldn’t! You’ve already done so much for me already. Letting me stay with you the last 3 weeks, getting me all those new clothes…”

Mason held up a hand to interrupt her. “Ah ah ah, just wait a moment and watch. Mabel will bring up the presents. I’ll hand you mine, then I’ll show off my prediction.” He shifted away from her slightly. She was blatantly confused, but he needed to see how this played out.

As if on cue, Mabel spoke over to them. “Hey guys, I think we’ve all had a pretty good day. But you know what would make it even better? Giving Pacifica her birthday presents!”

Pacifica hesitantly responded, not sure what Mason’s angle was. “O-Ok, hit me up with your presents.”

Mason went through the motions of giving Pacifica the photo-montage he’d made for her. Everything ended mostly the same, Pacifica commented on the same photos, there was that awkward silence, then she gave Mason a quick kiss of thanks and placed the frame down beside herself. “Come on then Mabel, what’s your present? Gonna be hard to top this one.”

Mabel had that same sly grin that Mason knew was coming. “Oh, don’t worry, I have something that’ll blow your socks off! I mean, if you were wearing socks that is.” She ran over to the pickup and pulled something out of the flatbed.

Mason leant over and whispered to Pacifica again. “Ok, this is it, future powers.”

“You’re not serious?”

“Trust me. Mabel’s getting your present, and I’ve never seen it before this moment. But I’m gonna tell you exactly what it is.”

“Why? Why are you doing this? Mason, if this is some game or prank-“

“It’s not, I just wanna see if things play out the same way.” Pacifica closed her mouth but stared at him with suspicion.

Mabel returned from the pickup with something large hidden behind her back. “Get ready to be amazed.”

Before she brandished the instrument, Mason whispered a quick sharp word in Pacifica’s ear. “Guitar!”

“Ta-da!” Mabel swung the object around and held it in her arms. Pacifica’s eyes narrowed in confusion as she saw the guitar.
Mason recited what he’d said before, trying to match his tone exactly. “Woah, Mabel, I didn’t know you could play!”

“Neither did I bro, but it’s been fun learning how. Now for my present! I call it, ‘Ode to two goofballs’. That’s you two by the way. And a one and a two!” She strummed the guitar strings and began the song she’d written herself.

As she played and began singing, Pacifica turned to Mason with an accusing look. Her look turned to shock as he started mouthing along with Mabel’s lyrics, a look of serious concentration on his brow.

“…And that’s the tale of the two best people in the world!”

As Mabel practically screamed the last line of the song, Mason started enthusiastically clapping. Pacifica could only clap slowly, totally unsure of what had just happened. “That was… really something Mabel. Nice work.”

She didn’t get up and go to hug Mabel, who was looking noticeably less happy than after she’d finished the song the last time Mason had watched her play. He suddenly felt a pang of guilt for what he’d done but carried on anyway. “Pacifica, now she’s gonna make us sing Camptown Races.”

“You two ready for another song? I know Camptown Races, that one’s great for long nights around a fire! You’ve gotta sing along though, that’s the rules!”

They all sang along together, but Pacifica kept shooting sideways glances at Mason. He realised he’d messed things up, that tonight wouldn’t end as happily as the one he remembered. Still, after the singing, he tried to pass the ‘predicting the future’ off as a little joke. Pacifica wasn’t sure if she believed him, but in the end tiredness won out. Mason found himself once again drifting to sleep to the sound of Mabel’s guitar, wondering if today had been some massive fluke, like super déjà vu.

“Mason? Maaaaaaaaason! Come on, it’s time!” He felt Pacifica tickling his armpit once again and knew already that he was lying in the pickup. Definitely not a fluke then. This time he needed advice, had to figure out what was going on.

But, it was still Pacifica’s birthday, he had to get some things out of the way first. He leapt out of the pickup, not stopping to hug Pacifica this time. “Morning Paz, Happy Birthday and all that! Enjoy sunbathing!” He went over to Mabel, who was rubbing in the sun cream. “Yo Mabel - you, me, the ocean, now.”

He grabbed her arm and dragged towards the water. “Woah, Dipper, what are you doing?! I wasn’t done with the sunblock!”

“Later, I’ll explain everything later.” Pacifica watched the twins head down to the water. She’d found it odd how Mason had just brushed her off on today of all days.

Mason got in the water, not even bothering to take his shirt off this time. “Ok, Mabel, we need to talk.”

“Dipper, why are you acting so cray cray this morning? Is it something to do with Pacifica?” She whispered into her hand. “Is it a sex thing?”

“What? No, nothing like that! I think I’m stuck in a time loop!”
“Stuck in a wha!?”

“Look, let me do a test. Tell me the first joke that comes to your head.”

“Ok, this is weird but ok.” She puffed out her cheeks in thought for a second. “Hmm, how about this: Why can't fish pass their exams?”

In a straight deadpan, Mason answered. “Because they work below C-level.”

“What. The. Frick?!?”

“I’m telling you, I’ve lived through today twice already! I woke up in the pickup, lived through Pacifica’s birthday, went to sleep later, then when I woke up I was back in the pickup again!”

“Are you sure Dip? Maybe it’s some kind of dream vision thingy you saw?”

“No, I tested that yesterday, everything seemed totally mundane, no signs of weirdness whatsoever. I think it’s some kind of loop, centred on me.”

“Woah, this is crazy. We should tell Pacifica, then maybe-”

“No! We can’t tell her! This is her birthday remember. I don’t wanna ruin it for her, even if it gets reset later. She deserves to have the best day ever, regardless of what’s happening to me.”

“If you think that’s the best idea, I won’t tell her. What are you going to do though?”

“I don’t know, there’s nothing in my journal about it. I can remember the sequence of events pretty well for the day, but I don’t know if that’s gonna be any use.”

“Maybe Grunkle Ford could help? He’s dealt with tons of weird time stuff, I’m sure!”

“Hmm, the only way to contact him is via satellite link. My laptop has the connection details, but it’s back at home, an hour’s drive away.”

“It might be worth it, to fix whatever this is.”

Mason looked over towards Pacifica, lounging out on her towel. “Stay here with Paz, Mabel. Try and have fun without me. As soon as I have the answers I’ll be back.”

He floored it across the highway, making for home as fast as he could. It was already midday when he got home. He dashed past his parents, who were understandably surprised to see him back so soon without the girls. He brushed them off, feigning an illness and telling them he’d pick up the girls tomorrow morning.

Once in his bedroom, he booted up the laptop and started trying to connect to Stan and Ford’s network. It was a patchy connection at the best of times, not to mention the time zone difference often made it hard to sync up their conversations. He just hoped he could get through before falling asleep again.

He really didn’t like leaving the girls back at the beach, he felt like he was being a terrible person, ruining Paz’s day. But if this loop thing was serious, then he needed answers.

He sat back in his desk chair, awaiting the connection. He felt suddenly exhausted from the hectic drive and tried to stay focused. Any minute now, then he’d have some answers… any minute
“Mason? Maaaaaaaason! Come on, it’s time!”

“Aw crap.”

Mason ran through the same procedure as the last loop, getting Mabel alone in the water and spilling the beans on his problem. It was annoying having to explain everything to her again, but each time the day reset her knowledge would have to start from scratch.

“Maybe Grunkle Ford could help? He’s dealt with tons of weird time stuff, I’m sure!”

“And that’s it, now we’re caught up with the last loop.”

“Huh? You’re making even less sense now Dip.”

“Ugh, last time we had this conversation we got to this point, then I drove home in the pickup. I dozed off waiting for the call to connect to the Stan ‘O War! That plan’s off the table now.”

“Woah, this time stuff is trippy. Still, at least if you had to get stuck in one day forever, you got lucky with today.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The sun is shining, we’re all together. It’s not like it’s a high stress environment.”

A thought suddenly struck Mason as he digested his sister’s words. She did have a point. “Hey, yeah, you’re right. Maybe this isn’t so bad after all? I think I have a new plan. I’m gonna run the loop a couple more times, look for any events that don’t mesh, like maybe one thing you guys say changes each time, and I just need to find the change!”

Mason felt bad for lying to Mabel, but he didn’t want her to know his real plan. Sure, he’d go through the loop and look for errors, maybe that’d help. But he’d decided that if he was stuck, he might as well start enjoying himself. It was a beautiful day after all.

“Promise me you won’t act any different to usual? I need everything to run the same as before, so it’s as close as possible to the original.”

“You can count on it bro, I’ll act like this conversation never happened!”

He knew he could rely on Mabel’s silence, though she was bad at lying she could deflect pretty well. With all the activities they did today, he was sure she’d get occupied and wouldn’t say a word to Pacifica.

“Hey dorks, watcha talking about?” He jumped as Pacifica swam up behind him. Now she was floating about at his waist level, making him blush at the awkwardness. “Aw, I won’t bite Mace, I’m not a shark.”

“Woah, it’s like ‘Mer-Pacific’, that’d be so cool!” Mabel started rambling with Pacifica about how neat it would be to have a fish tail, then recounted the story of Mermando. It was something new for Mason, the first big change to the loop other than his mad drive home. He started to feel like he could get used to this.
Mason spent the rest of this loop making small changes to events. Rather than write his journal with Pacifica, he sprung the photo-board on her early. When Mabel went for her walk along the beach, he and Pacifica accompanied her. Little things, but they gave him a different perspective on the day. He wanted to have a broad view of things before the next loop struck, so he could start poking at the edges of events and leading to bigger shifts.

That evening, rather than letting Mabel spring the guitar on them, he took it pre-emptively, and brought out to surprise her instead. She’d given him a sly look then, probably sensing that he’d used his advanced knowledge to one-up her.

While they joked and sang along with Mabel, Mason was thinking up strategies, devoting half of his brain to plotting out timelines. He decided the next day would be useful for research.

Tonight, before he went to sleep beside Pacifica, Mabel came over to them, breaking from the routine of softly playing her guitar. “Hey, bro, can we have a quick sibling talk?” Pacifica gave them a nod, and Mason walked over to Mabel. “How’s today been, did I make any mistakes?”

“Uh no, Mabel, you were fine, the usual you. Nice work.”

She beamed up at him. “Phew, I was scared Paz was gonna notice me acting different.”

“Ha, yeah, you’re more subtle than I was.”

“What do you mean, you seemed pretty natural today.”

“I’m talking about one of the other days, a few loops back I started slipping and mentioning stuff I shouldn’t know. Tomorrow should be good though, gonna study the loop more, start memorising timings and such.”

“Timings? Why do you need those?” She was starting to see through his façade.

“Just… so I can make sure everything happens exactly the same way each time.”

“Wait, I know what you’re up to!”

“No.”

“You-“

“No.”

“Are trying to-“

“No!”

“Stay in the time loop, aren’t you!”

“Oh boy. Look, I’m just gonna relax a bit, like you said, ‘low-stress’. I’m sure it won’t hurt to enjoy myself a bit.”

Mabel looked decidedly unimpressed with his decision. She looked like she was about to say more but checked something with him first. “You’re going to bed soon, aren’t you?”

“Oh, yeah.”
“Then this all resets?”

“That seems to be the working hypothesis.”

“Then come find me when you’ve got your head out of your ass, and I’ll tell you why staying here is a stupid idea” She angrily huffed off, leaving him behind despite his calls.

He returned to Pacifica, who’d seen the argument. “Everything ok?”

“Not really. I’ll… deal with it tomorrow…” He already knew that was another lie. They were starting to pile up.

“Mason? Maaaaaaaaaason! Come on, it’s time!” He felt the reassuring tickle of Pacifica’s hand reaching under his arm.

“Hahah! Ah, stop!” He lightly pushed away Pacifica’s hand. “I’m up, I’m up! How’d you know that was my weak spot?”

“I’ve got an inside source.” Mason’s plan for today was to recreate his first version of events exactly, and to commit the narrative to memory. For that, he tried to mimic his first reactions, copying his responses and tones to each time he conversed with the girls. There was one thing he wanted to change, he tried standing slightly apart from Mabel whenever he took his shirt off, to avoid getting pushed by her.

Over the course of the day, he figured out some useful options. He knew he could get a 10 minute private chat with Mabel at the start of every day while they swam together. After that, Pacifica would always be around, so if he needed advice or needed to fill Mabel in on the situation, that was the only time he’d risk it.

As for Pacifica, if he let Mabel go off on her walk that left him alone with her for a good half an hour. The rest of the time, all three of them were together, that is unless he went off and changed things.

Other important things he figured out were how far he could conceivably reach on foot or in the pickup, giving him a feasible range for anything he wanted to do. He was also glad that their stretch of the beach was relatively unoccupied by beachgoers, he’d have hated to memorise a bunch of interactions with strangers.

Mason had given up writing any notes in his journal after the first loop, quickly catching on that anything he wrote would be erased when the day reset. A couple of times that day he almost found himself mentioning something about the time loop to Mabel, before remembering that this version had no knowledge of it. Her words from last night still gnawed at him, he wondered what she could have to say about his condition.

Pushing that to the back of his mind, he dedicated himself to soaking up the day, wringing every ounce of joy out of every part of it. Once he was done with Mabel’s last rendition of a popular 80’s song, he settled down for another night, having already come up with some ways he could switch things up on the next time events took place.

On the next run through, he opted to play water tag with the girls instead of volleyball and had a lot of fun being chased around. It reminded him of the times they’d played it up in Gravity Falls over the years.

When it came time for ‘Mabel’s walk/Pacifica’s journal time’, he went for a complete shift, getting
the girls fruity cocktails and drunkenly reminiscing about various times together. At the bonfire
that night he’d cut off Mabel’s present giving idea and gone with a spooky story evening. That had
been a lot of fun, some of his and Mabel’s adventures made great tales to scare Pacifica, who
wasn’t used to the horror genre much. Mabel could always give Pacifica her present another time.

The day after that, he went for a more laidback approach, letting Mabel lead most of their
activities. So rather than a journal writing break, she took the couple to get ice creams, then left
them to have a romantic sunset walk. Mabel’s matchmaking ideals were sometimes heavy handed,
but on a day like today it was exactly what both of them wanted.

They didn’t even set up the bonfire on that night, Mason simply content to wander around with
Pacifica through the night.

On and on Mason went, trying more and more daring moves, like taking the girls climbing up to
the top of the high cliffs at the back of the beach. There were great views of the coast, and they
spotted the pickup from high above. It would’ve been quite a drop if they’d fallen.

Another day passed, another time for Mason to forget about life’s burdens and relax. Sometimes
they’d set up the bonfire and hear Mabel’s noisy playing and singing, other times he’d wander the
sands with Pacifica.

He started wanting to test the boundaries of what he could do, so one day he chose to avoid the
usual morning routine and pretended to fake an illness. That gave him a chance to meander across
the beach alone and consider his current state. While it was undoubtedly fun trying out all the
different activities he could spend with the girls, there was a sense that he was spinning in place
somewhat. A few of the nicer nights with Pacifica had made him want to progress, to see where
their lives would take them next. But he was always struck by that same fear that they’d lose each
other, her parents would clamp down with an iron fist or they’d grow distant at college.

Staying frozen in amber for now was a preferable to the alternative. That seemed logical to Mason.
Mabel had started to notice things were going on though. His disinterest in going through the
present giving routine every night was something she picked up on. He would never normally pass
up an opportunity to give a gift like that to Pacifica.

Her perceptiveness of his emotional state saw past his outward enthusiasm a lot of the time, he just
couldn’t disguise the way he was inside, constantly thinking about how the way he said things
could change the course of the day. He tried to ignore her watchful eye and feel the joy of the day.

The sun was beating down as he returned to the pickup. The girls were nowhere to be seen, just
their towels beside the oval cave. He knew from earlier loops that they were probably either in the
water or getting snack.

He spied something glinting on Pacifica’s towel, something shiny catching the light. It was the
golden llama on the cover of Pacifica’s journal. This was a chance he’d never had before. While
he’d had occasional peeks inside her journal over her shoulder while she wrote, he’d never had the
ability to just browse the pages as he did with his own journal.

He hesitated before opening the book, considering how he’d react if someone did the same with
Journal 4. While he wrestled with this, he ran a finger down the loosely hanging bookmark
fashioned from her old pink hair tie, then played idly with it, flicking the end which had formed
into a small tassel. He came to the conclusion that consequences were something he didn’t have to
deal with right now, so started flipping through the pages.

There were expertly neat notes describing the most important events Pacifica had gone through
since that weekend in March when Mabel had dropped in out of nowhere. He was impressed with the level of her writing; it matched his own style quite well. There were fewer entries than he averaged, though to be fair Pacifica didn’t go looking for mysteries in her spare time.

Even then, her recaps of events tended to focus less on recounting every detail and weakness of some supernatural beast, and more on the emotions she’d gone through, and how things had affected her. There were none of the encoded messages or ciphers Mason regularly employed, she didn’t have the patience for encrypting what she had to say, or just wasn’t as paranoid as he was about keeping certain things secret.

The later entries weren’t as finely written as before, the lines of text were less straight, and there were more scribbled out words and corrections. It was clear how much the move to Piedmont had impacted her emotionally. This was all reminding him too much of his own thoughts on the matter, so he flipped towards the front of the book, hitting the first page where she’d scribbled out her last name. It had been a powerful symbolic gesture and he’d been proud to see how far she’d come.

If her parents came back into her life, would the progress be reversed? Or had she simply been through too much to ever go back? He was scared of the answer. He flipped forwards, looking for a distraction, but halted on a page showing something he didn’t recognise.

Seven eyes stared up at him from a hooded alien face. This must have been something she’d encountered without him, Mabel had told him that she and Paz had had a few adventures together, just the two of them. This thing must be from one of them. The page’s main title described it as an ‘oracle’.

He couldn’t rip his gaze away from those staring eyes. It felt like they were judging him, for letting himself get enamoured with this time loop, for giving in at looking at Pacifica’s journal. Oracles did deal with the future after all, they perceived things outside of the normal flow of time. Maybe it had more meaning than he fully knew.

Suddenly feeling morose, he slammed the book shut, not wanting to be discovered with it if the girls came back. He spent the rest of that day guiltily avoiding them, eventually falling asleep on top of the tall cliffs.

“Mason? Maaaaaaaaaason! Come on, it’s time!” He felt Pacifica tickling his armpit as she always did and decided that today he was going to have some fun. Instead of pushing her hand away, he pulled her into the pickup, so that she fell on top of him.

“Morning Princess.” He brought his lips up to hers, kissing her repeatedly with quick pecks. His arms found their way around her back, keeping her as close to him as they could.

Pacifica broke the kiss, but he continued lavishing them on her cheek and neck. “Mmm, Mason, not right now. We’ve got the whole day ahead of us.”

He returned to kissing her on the mouth again, suddenly desiring much more. “No, just this once, let’s enjoy ourselves. It’s hot today, I think we should take some of these clothes off, don’t you think?” He felt her body melt as she embraced this early morning make-out session. Reaching around her back, he started untying the bikini top, craving everything from Pacifica.

He heard someone approach the pickup and knew already what she was going to say. “Ugh, come on you two, I wanna go for a swim, and you’re coming! Maybe the water will cool your heads.”

He looked up above Pacifica’s head. “Mabel, not right now. We’ll catch up later.”
“But I wanna-“

“I said later Mabel!” Pacifica was surprised by his harsh tone. “Why is it you’re always clamouring for us to do lovey stuff together, but then such a prude when we actually do anything?!”

He could see that he’d hurt her by saying that. Mabel scrunched up her face, but then took a serious look. “Fine, you two have fun without me then!” She stormed off towards the water.

“Mason, that was so crazy! I can’t believe you acted that way with Mabel!”

“Shh, it won’t matter later. Right now, I wanna plant a Pine Tree in the Pacific Northwest.”

Thus began a series of loops that Mason would later consider his ‘asshole’ phase. No longer caring about cause and effect, he took great pleasure in pushing the limits of what he could get away with. Without having to worry about the consequences, he could finally tease Mabel the way she always did with him. Where she mocked his nerdy pursuits, he would now shoot back, mocking her tattoos, or sweaters, or how she would always barge in on private moments. It was cathartic to let it all out, but he felt undeniably guilty after a few days in that mould.

He found another source of amusement trying out the various ways he could ‘have fun’ with Pacifica without getting cockblocked by Mabel. He hadn’t had many opportunities to indulge himself that way since their nights on the hiking trip. It was a rather base way to make sure Pacifica had a good day, but it worked. However, after a few loops of that he began to feel uncomfortable. Playing with her emotions that way was making him feel dirty, and he didn’t want to see her as just a sex object.

He got more and more reckless, taking the pickup for crazy drives as fast as he could, or pickpocketing things from other people on the beach. He was starting to find it harder and harder to get the same buzz of enjoyment, so these risks helped keep him occupied.

It couldn’t stave off the way he was starting to feel though. He’d tried for a long time to keep Pacifica happy today, that had been his priority from the start. But inside himself, he just couldn’t muster the same positivity anymore. With every day exactly the same, there was no room to discover new things and his options were rapidly diminishing. He went back to acting normal again, looking back as his jerk phase in horror, ashamed for lapsing into that.

He tried multiple more times to reach out and contact Ford for help, but he could never stay awake long enough to make the call. He’d sought other options, researching everything he could find online about temporal phenomena. Sadly, nothing seemed to give him a solution.

One night he tried to stay up as long as possible, drinking boatloads of coffee and willing himself to stay awake. But even then he eventually succumbed to the void of sleep.

“Mason? Maaaaaaaaaason! Come on, it’s time!”

As things wore on, he began to despair at his circumstances. He’d exhausted most of the options of things to with each day. Trying out each activity multiple times made the enjoyment wear off pretty quickly.

The earlier events were the most repetitive, he almost always had to spend the morning swimming in the sea, that was hard to get out of without more drastic alterations to the day. He’d started to hate reciting the same lines each time, he’d long since given up having true conviction in what he
said. It was just a tedious routine now. It was the time spent in the evenings with Pacifica he cherished most, then he could just hang loose and not think too hard about following a script.

This morning he’d spent it much like the first, swimming in the morning, then journals with Pacifica. Instead of perusing his own notes, he spent that time glancing at Pacifica’s. He could have sworn that each time he peeked over he saw the seven-eyed Oracle staring back in judgement. He’d avoided the girls’ company that evening, claiming that he felt more tired than usual.

Mason now sat hunched by the edge of the water, just at the limit of the bonfire’s light. The quiet strumming of Mabel’s guitar drifted over the beach. One thing he’d discovered over these days was an interesting detail about Mabel’s guitar playing. Whenever he sat together with the girls at the campfire, Mabel would pull them all into singing raucous campfire tunes at the top of their voices. It would be exuberant and chaotic, always tiring him out.

But if he left her alone, she’d play a soft, soothing melody to herself. It really was quite lovely, and Mason reminded himself that if he ever got out of this loop he should tell Mabel how much he enjoyed her playing.

He clutched a handful of sand, then watched as the grains slowly trickled back out onto the beach. Was his life now like an hourglass, slowly reaching the end, but then turned over before the last grain could drop? Or was he just doomed to wait until every grain on the entire beach slipped through one enormous glass? Would he have to try out every possible permutation of the day, wasting away on infinite possibilities?

He’d tested whether anything was carried over on each loop. He’d swiped Mabel’s knife from the truck and cut a small nick on his arm. By the next loop it was gone. Only his memories were carried over.

One thing he never wanted to test was ending the day in another, more permanent way. He’d gone up on the high cliffs a few times and stared out over the edge. One wrong move and he’d fall, and from that height that would be it. It could end up simply resetting the day again. But if he was wrong, then he’d be gambling his life away over a mere guess at how this all worked. So he always backed down from the cliffs, never wanting to take the final step.

He took another handful of sand and held it up in front of his face. Behind his hand, the stars were out in full force, as clear a night as you could wish for. The grains trickling in his hand and the stars above were equally numerous, underscoring how insignificant he felt in that infinite spread.

“Hey dork, is this seat taken?” Before he could look up and respond, Pacifica had sat beside him, looking up at the stars. “Something tells me you’ve got something on your mind.”

She smiled warmly at him, a gaze he appreciated now more than ever. In all the ways he’d gone through this day, not once had he told Pacifica the truth. This was her day, he wasn’t gonna ruin it with time travel nonsense. But she wasn’t an idiot, she could tell he was going through something, even if she didn’t know what.

And seeing just how much she cared cemented something in Mason’s mind. He’d worried before that Pacifica could revert back to her old ways under the influence of her parents. That smile though showed just how much she’d changed, able to see through his worry and trying to make him feel better. She’d never turn back now.

“It’s a lot of things Paz. The future, the past… the present.” He felt her hand rest on top of his.

“They’re really beautiful, aren’t they?” She was looking up towards the twinkling lights. “I see
your fave, Andromeda.”

“I’d say ‘remind me to get you a telescope for your next birthday’, but, well…” He deeply sighed. “You ever wonder about them Paz? So many of them and so distant. It feels daunting sometimes, knowing there’s so much out there we never get to touch… to feel.” He felt her grip instinctively tighten around his hand.

“I reckon it’s not worth worrying too much about. So many worlds and times, so many ways each choice can go. On forever and ever. You don’t have to go up there to find that kind of complexity. We’re just one little world suspended in a strip of sunlight. I reckon that’s enough for us. We have each other, that’s what matters.”

He wondered if this was the moment he’d finally tell her about his looping. “Pacifica… there’s something I have to tell you.”

“Is it something nice?”

“Not… exactly.”

“Then we don’t wanna spoil today. It can wait.”

“It can? For how long?”

“Forever and ever.”

She leant over and rested her head on his shoulder. In that moment, he wanted so desperately to grow up with Pacifica, to live his life alongside her. There were only so many ways today could go, and he’d already experienced most of them.

Suddenly the wide expanse of the beach felt tight and claustrophobic. He couldn’t hang around with Pacifica watching movies and playing games on the couch. He couldn’t go out on a date for a meal or a night out. He could never watch her grow and change and become even more of an independent person.

He felt his eyes start to flicker closed and tried to desperately to stay awake. This moment had shifted his whole view, and all he wanted was to stay here beneath the stars. “P-Pacifica…”

“Shh. Goodnight Mason, sleep well. I love you.”

“Mason? Maaaaaaaason! Come on, it’s time!” He felt Pacifica tickle his armpit once more, and sadly pushed her away.

Affecting a serious look, he reached up and cupped her cheek. “Pacifica, there’s something I have to do. Today might not be the best day ever, but I have to face some things.”

“What- what do you mean Mason? You only just woke up.”

“Please, wait here. I love you, so much.” He kissed her, then passed over to Mabel.

“Morning Dipper. Really - the same white shirt and red trunks as the last time we were here? You couldn’t mix it up a little?” Mabel was surprised when Mason threw his arms around her.

“I want to talk Mabel, you were right all along.”

“Uh, I was? Yay?”
He parted the hug, feeling on the verge of tears. “I just feel so empty now. I need to tell you a lot.”

He escorted the confused Mabel up to the grassy cliffs, somewhere he knew they could be alone. “Ok, basics. I’ve lived through today about hundreds of times before. Every day, no matter where or when I fall asleep, I wake up down by the cave, back in the pickup again.”

Mabel’s eyes boggled. “Hundreds of times! What? Slow down!”

“I can prove it, fish pun, C-level, shellfish, blah blah.” Mabel’s obvious surprise caused a tiny smile to creep back onto his face. “I confided in you a few times, asked you for advice. I told you I’d be working non-stop to escape the loop. I lied.”

“What do you mean Dip? What did you do?” It wasn’t a hostile question, Mabel’s voice was soothing, and she clearly wanted to help. But it pushed him over an edge, and he couldn’t hold back the tears any longer. He buried his face in her shoulder, weeping uncontrollably.

He felt her arms come around his shoulders. She propped his face back upright. “You’re a really ugly crier, you know that Dip?” He sniffed as she wiped a tear away.

“It’s too much to bear anymore. I’ve been going round and round today, trying to squeeze every ounce of joy out of it. Now it’s dry and shrivelled up. Sometimes I was a jerk too, didn’t care about how it would affect you because it would all be forgotten. Pacifica said something last time, made me realise that I want to spend the rest of my life with her, not just this tiny fraction of time.”

Mabel was still catching up with what he was going through but seemed to intuit what he’d been doing over the endless versions of today. She winked at him. “So now you’ve finally got your head out of your ass and have come for help, huh?”

He laughed through the tears and wiped his face. “Ha, that’s what you said last time I told you about all this. You said that time you had something more to say.”

“I reckon I know what I meant. Wait, was that other Mabel still me? I am the same person now?” She shook her head. “Time travel man, it’s too much for me to handle. So trippy.”

“What’s your advice then? I have to know Mabel. I thought I could just ignore it and enjoy myself, but I can’t take it anymore.”

Mabel stared off at the distant waves crashing on the beach, then cast her memory back. “5 years ago, I wanted things to stay the same forever too. I thought if summer never ended, I’d never have to face the fact that I had to grow up. Change is natural Dip, even if it sometimes hurts or seems scary. I didn’t see it back then. Because of that, we all got a free trip to Mabel-Land.”

She paused, letting Mason remember their time in Bill Cipher’s bubble world. There had been undeniable temptations to stay there, but ultimately they’d decided to leave, to face the future as a team. Mason should’ve known how much this time loop would remind Mabel of that; he was making the same choice she’d initially made.

“I’m… gah, I was stupid Mabel. I should’ve listened to you the first time, not buried my head in the sand. You must think I’m so selfish.”

He bowed his head, but Mabel emphatically shook hers. “No no, I totally understand Dip. You got a taste of losing something you held dear and you panicked. I did the same back then. It runs in the family.”
“Mabel, I’m so sorry, I didn’t see.”

“It’s alright. You were worried about what’s gonna happen next with Pacifica.”

“Yeah. Yeah! How’d you know?”

“It’s super obvious Dipper. We’re all worried and no one wants to talk about it. I never thought you’d react like you did though, guess I shouldn’t have pegged you as the super-rational one all the time.”

“I didn’t wanna lose her Mabel, I thought that if her parents wanted her back, that would be the end of it. They’d shut her down, make her go back to the way she was when we first met her. The immediacy of the deadline just made me so anxious, so I never wanted to let it happen. But last time I looped, she made me realise something. She’s better than I gave her credit for. I didn’t trust that she could resist, but now I do. And I want to see that, I want to be beside her every step of the way as she becomes her own person.”

“Look at my arm Dip.” She held up her right arm and pointed to a tattoo. It was the golden Pine Tree. “I got this this to remind me how much we trusted each other. It reminds me that you never gave up on me, even at the ends of the earth. Our lives are tied up in Journal 4, that bond we share. Paz shares it now too, you gave her the pendant.”

Mason slowly nodded, finally understanding what Pacifica had told him on the first day, about always being together despite being possibly hundreds of miles apart. “Seems the future’s always messing up our plans, right Mabel? I mean, all that Journal 9 stuff back in February was just another thing that made you all anxious. Now Pacifica might be leaving… But it’s no good ignoring it.”

Mabel squeezed his shoulder. “You can do it Dipper, you’ll always have our help if you’re having troubles. You don’t have to shut us out. So, if we’re ever gonna get to see tomorrow, how’s this loop work then?”

“Well, the only thing that doesn’t get reset is my memory. No changes to my body stick, it’s a perfect temporal reversion. I’ve tried going to contact Ford for help, but something about the drive home tires me out and I always fail before I connect. I can cover a couple of hours in the pickup, but I don’t think leaving the beach will help much.”

She digested his overview. “And it’s always the same, no differences in how me and Paz do things? He nodded, confirming her statement. “And you’re sure there’s nothing strange that could be causing it?”

“I’ve been through today so many times now, I’d notice something out of the ordinary. It’s just a normal fun day. We swim, we chat, you always play your guitar.”

“You know about that! Aw, but I was keeping it a secret.”

“Time loop remember, I didn’t know the first time. You’re really good at it though, I love it when you just quietly strum to yourself.”

Mabel blushed, not used to that kind of compliment from him. “So, there’s absolutely nothing weird or out of place at all?”

“I’m sure, one hundred percent. I’ve combed every inch of the beach looking for stuff, there’s just endless sand. I just wake up back in that stupid pickup, by that stupid oval cave, getting stupidly tickled. Always the same.”
“Wait, oval cave?”

“Yeah, you know. That big scooped out bit of the cliffs, down where we parked last night.”

“You don’t think that could be related do you?”

“Hmm.” He thought about for a sec. He had noticed that it was abnormally smooth and precise, he didn’t know of any natural method that could have created it. “If there is something there, it must be in some form I can’t detect. It’s just a mundane cave as far as I can tell.”

“Maybe you could do a scan with the goggles, those can detect loads of weird energy stuff!”

Mason looked down at his feet. “I left them back in Piedmont. I didn’t have any need for them out here.”

Mabel guiltily looked away. “Uh, that’s not actually true. I brought them.”

“You what?!?”

“I wanted to use them to… to keep an eye on you and Paz.”

“Wait…” Mason’s mind ticked over, trying to parse this. “Oh, I get it, blackmail material, you were gonna spy on us! Not cool Mabel.”

“It was kinda that, kinda that I knew you two’d go off alone at some point.” She shrugged. “Your romance is like my soap opera, I wanted to see you two being all gooey and in love. I mean, I wasn’t gonna use ‘em for sure, just there as a backup in case I got bored.”

“I wonder if on the other loops if you ever ended up actually using them.” He tried to recall if he’d ever seen Mabel with them, but his mind had almost always been on Pacifica when they’d been alone together. “Well, I guess it’s a good thing you brought them. Hidden in the pickup I presume?”

“Rightyo bro! Let’s go scan that cave! Though, Pacifica will probably notice we’re up to something.”

“I was afraid of that. We’ll just have to be subtle, ok?”

Mason fished the goggles out from beneath one of the pickup seats, then went over to the cave. Mabel was employed in ‘Operation: Pacifica-straction’, taking Pacifica on a lengthy walk around the beach. She’d not wanted to go at first, having wanted to spend the day with both of the twins. But Mason now had the time to examine the mysterious cave. He’d never thought that much of it the first time they’d come here, other things had him occupied back then.

He ran his hand over the rocks of the cliff, which were scratchy and rough. As he reached the oval cave, the rock immediately became like glass, as if it had been sanded down until it was perfectly smooth. He donned the goggles and started scanning the area in various different modes. Nothing on X-ray, infrared, or ultraviolet. He tried an energy scanning mode. It usually didn’t work very well; most appliances and machines only gave out small traces of excess energy that the goggles couldn’t pick up. But his vision was suddenly covered by a massive glowing shape.

He stood back from the cliffs, trying to take it all in. Extending from the cliffs was a bright orangey energy trace. It extended out over the beach in a similar shape to the cave, making a large
3D shape. It must have been some kind of extra-dimensional energy. He looked down at the sand, seeing that the traces went beneath the beach too, before stopping at a rounded base.

Rather than being an oval, he now realised that it was shaped like a giant egg. Whatever it was must have intersected with their plane of reality. The cave wasn’t scooped out, rather it had been overwritten by the egg. He panned over to the edge of the energy trace, noticing that it covered most of the pickup.

He was especially interested to note that the truck’s cabin was completely covered in the energy, right where he’d gone to sleep. The girls had slept outside on the beach, their towels were out of the egg’s range. Now he finally knew why he’d been the one to suffer this endless repeating.

Staring up at the blob of energy, he tried to think of a way to neutralise it, to cancel out his imprisonment in today. He pulled the goggles down over his neck as Mabel came running across the beach to join him. “Yo bro, I ditched Paz at the ice-cream stand, she said she was gonna wait in line then come back here. Did you find anything?”

Mason nodded, finally smiling fully again. “You’re not gonna believe this Mabes! Have a look through these.”

He passed her the goggles, then amusedly watched her reaction. “Woah, it’s a big glowy ball of energy!”

He nodded. “It’s some kind of egg-shaped energy trace, probably bled through from another dimension. Cultures around the world speak of ‘World Eggs’ in their mythology. The Greeks and Egyptians for example, they said that their primordial deity hatched from a cosmic egg.”

“So it’s a big cosmic egg timer!”

“I was gonna say hourglass. At the end of every day, when I go to sleep, something about the energy must reset and flip me back to the morning.”

Mabel removed the goggles. “You got a way to fix it?”

“Not sure yet. Maybe I can set up an inverter cone using the pickup’s battery, might take some reworking–“

“So this is what you two have been doing!” Mason froze as Pacifica came up behind him with arms crossed. “This is some mystery junk isn’t it? You two thought you could hide it from little old Paz huh? Well I’m here now, go on, tell me what you’ve been up to!”

“It’s complicated, I can’t- you wouldn’t understand!”

Pacifica shouted back at him. “I’m not an idiot Mason! Don’t patronise me! Tell me what’s going on right now!”

This was it; the one moment Mason had dreaded most in this entire cycle of time. The thought of ruining Pacifica’s special day with weirdness and his issues. No! No dammit, this was supposed to be her day, not about him! Maybe he could run away, wait another loop and start again, or try and lie his way out of telling her the truth, or blame it on Mabel, or-

“Mason? Are you… are you alright?” He realised that he’d started crying while stuck contemplating this disaster. Like he had on the cliffs, he felt himself losing a battle with his emotions. He’d worked himself up about this for so long, his core mission over all these versions of today had been to keep Pacifica happy above all else, to give her the best birthday she’d ever
have. He fell to his knees, pointing his head down at the sand and letting the tears flow.

Pacifica knelt down next to him, putting her arms around his back. He quietly tried to let out what he was feeling. “It’s not fair. You deserve better than this. Today was meant to be about you, not my stupid problems.” He pounded a fist on the sand fruitlessly. The piled up emotions of countless loops came out all at once.

Mabel came over and put a hand on Pacifica’s shoulder. “Hey, sis. I’ll fill you in. I think Mason needs some space.” Pacifica instantly understood the gravity of the situation, Mabel almost never used Dipper’s real name. The two girls walked silently towards the lapping waves, leaving Mason to collect himself.

He should have known this was inevitable, he couldn’t hide it from Pacifica forever. He grabbed a clump of sand and tightened a fist around. He wanted to feel the raw grit chafe against his skin. Determination filled him. This would be the last loop.

Colourful wires crisscrossed the sand, leading from the hood of the pickup to the edge of the ‘egg field’. The trio had set up a conductive strip around the circumference of the egg’s extent outside the cave. Mason hoped it would be enough.

Pacifica had understandably taken some time getting brought up to speed on what was going on. She’d been concerned for Mason, distraught by the idea that he’d basically been alone for what must have been weeks or months. He tried to hide how much this turn of events was affecting him, burying himself in the work of setting up the inverter. Letting Pacifica know about the issue felt like a failure to him, so much of what he’d tried to do with the loops was tied up in keeping her happy.

While Mabel was starting up the pickup’s engine, the two of them had a short time alone. Pacifica stopped stringing out a section of wire, turning to face Mason instead. “It’s not your fault, you know. Mason, you never asked to be stuck like this. I don’t blame you for trying to keep me insulated from all of it, but you should know by now that we’re a team.”

“I know, I know. This sort of secret keeping nearly ended the world when Mabel did it. But after what happened with the Sea Spline… I wanted to protect you. I was just scared and worried.”

“You don’t have to be anymore. Like I said, you didn’t do anything wrong. I’d always have helped, if you’d just asked, goofball.” She held his hand, and he was glad that he hadn’t completely ruined her day.

They finished completing the wire circuit, and Mason hoped the pickup could provide enough energy. In theory, he just needed a spark to trigger the egg’s collapse. “Ok Mabel, floor it!” he hollered over.

They heard the pickup’s engine start to chug as it stayed in place. Mason pulled Pacifica away from the wires, there was a risk of overheating or the charge getting loose. As the engine revved up, the wires began to glow, confirming that the circuit was engaging with the egg. He hastily threw on the goggles and watched the glowing light shimmer.

The surface of energy began to ripple and flex, expanding and contracting as the circuit began to affect it. “This is it! Paz, stay back, if something goes wrong…” He kissed her one last time, then stepped into the boundary of the flowing energy. He looked back, seeing both her and Mabel looking expectantly at him.
Waves of energy began to wash over him as the egg’s energy field began disintegrating. His body was wracked by sharp electric tingling, and it forced down onto his knees again. Was this the end of the loop? He could only hope that once the energy ceased that his timeline would return to normal.

Rhythmic bursts of energy hit him, and he couldn’t hold onto his consciousness for long. The last thing he saw before sleep overcame him was time slowing, before becoming still. He stared at Pacifica’s face, a single tear beginning to fall down her cheek onto the sand.

“Mason? Maaaaaaaaaaason! Come on, it’s time!” He sighed, as he woke up on the morning of the 6th of May for the final time.

He ran through all the expected beats, playing in the water, writing in his journal besides Pacifica, setting up the bonfire. All throughout the day he didn’t know whether his plan had worked and if he was now free. Not wanting to take the risk that this he’d mess up his last chance at this day, he played everything by the book, bringing out all the long rehearsed lines.

This time though, he had one change that he wanted to make. He gave Pacifica the photo-board as usual, then waited for her reactions to reach a specific point.

“Guys, this is awesome. It’s definitely going on my wall. At least, it will when I have my own wall again. Hmm.” There was the momentary silence he expected, neither of the girls wanting to touch the topic they all knew was making them worry.

But after going through so much, Mason finally knew what he wanted to say. “Girls, I wanna say something. About next week. I know it’s gonna be scary and new, and none of us know what’ll happen. But I figure, hey, that’s life! We move forward one step at a time, never knowing where life will take us. And that’s wonderful. Endless possibilities, endless chances to change ourselves. I was so scared at first too, but both of you made me realise that I really have nothing to worry about. “

He glanced over pointedly at Mabel. “We can’t stay in a single moment forever, it’s just not healthy for anyone. Even the most perfect day can get tiring if you keep living it the same way.” Mabel looked quizzical, but seemed to grasp what he was getting at, so nodded slowly from behind the fire.

He turned to his side, facing the girl he loved more than anyone else. “Paz, we might not always be ‘together’ on the path tomorrow brings. But we’ll still be there, whenever we need someone to rely on. I could never lose you, because you’d never let that happen. And you helped me to see that.”

He kicked out at the sand, then smiled brightly. “At least, that’s what I think. That probably sounded too serious and pretentious, right?”

Both girls looked happy and warm by the fire. Pacifica gave him a kiss. “Sounded just about right to me.”

“Thanks Paz. Mabel, I think it’s your turn now.”

Mabel stood up abruptly, with a massive grin on her face. “Come on guys, let’s lighten the mood. I have something that’ll blow your socks off! I mean, if you were wearing socks that is.”

“Wake up Dip-Dop, you can’t laze around all morning! We’ve gotta drive home soon.” Mason felt a rough kick to his side, jolting him out of his sleep.
His eyes suddenly widened nearly as far as they could. Beneath him he felt a towel resting above the sand. He rolled over, and instead of seeing the tight cabin of the pickup, he saw Pacifica stretched out next to him.

His mouth fell open in shock, but he was kicked by Mabel again. “Get up Sleepy-Head! You too Pacifica, no lazing around this morning, I wanna get home! I got sand in my guitar and it needs cleaning.”

Pacifica wiped her eyes and woke up. She smiled when she saw Mason’s face next to her. Yawning, she sat up on the towel. “Morning Mason. Did you have a good night?”

Mason felt his cheeks straining at how much he was smiling. “The best, Paz.”

Later that night, Pacifica was sitting around in Mabel’s room, reading some romance novel Mabel had lent her before bed, when she heard a light knock at the door. It wasn’t like Mabel to announce her entries, she usually strutted about the house regardless of other people’s privacy. She set down the Cheesy book and got up to answer the door.

She found Mason there, looking oddly distant this evening. “Hey Mace, you ok? I was just waiting for Mabel to get out the shower before I turned in for the night.” She noticed he was clutching his journal tightly in his arms.

“Yeah, I’m good. Just very tired after yesterday.”

“So what’s wrong? You look kinda spaced out.”

He put the journal down on Mabel’s desk, then flipped through to the latest page. She leaned over and saw that his last page ended on a recounting of the Spline incident, the next one was blank. “Usually I write a little something at the end of every day if I’m at home. Not much generally, just a little recap most of the time, more if we go Mystery Hunting. But today, I looked at the blank page, and I just couldn’t fill it.”

Pacifica tried to study his facial reactions. Something was weighing heavily on him, but she couldn’t tell what. “Don’t you wanna write about our time at the beach? I thought you loved writing sappy romance stuff.”

He smiled at her little joke. “I’m just not feeling tonight, not after… well, it’s not important. I just didn’t want to write about my day. I’ve had an idea though. Since yesterday was your birthday, and it was all about making sure you had a good time, I thought you’d like to write the entry, to let me know how well it all went.”

“Mason, of course I’d do that. I’m honoured that you’d let me write in your journal, I know how precious this is to you.”

“So, you’ll let me know how you felt it went?”

“Of course.” She grabbed a pen and wrote the title at the top of the page. “Here’s a start: May 6th, the best day ever…”

Chapter End Notes
The initial idea for this chapter was inspired by, of all things, the song Forever and Ever from Winnie the Pooh’s Grand Adventure. I felt the themes of the song, about trying to hold onto a single moment in time despite that being impossible, resonated well with the themes of Gravity Falls. Eventually I came up with the loop concept, and the rest flowed from there.

It kind of got away from me as well, at 12,000 words it’s the second longest chapter I’ve written so far (after Alignment, the finale of Season 1), but I needed the extra length to help establish the loop, and to make Mason’s ‘imprisonment’ feel justifiably lengthy.

Originally when formulating the ideas for this one, I considered making Pacifica the focal character in the loop. I decided that focusing on Mason instead would be more interesting, since I hadn’t really examined his character arc for a while (the previous chapter which gave him equal development with the girls was written after this one, Chapter 23 was written before every chapter from 15-22).

I never planned a ‘Mabel version’ though, since her perspective had been shaped differently by the events of both the show’s finale and Season 1 of my fic, so it wouldn’t work for her to face such a trial again.
Old Haunts

As Dipper made his way downtown, he wondered why the girls seemed to enjoy going to the mall so often. He found it pretty uninteresting, if there was anything he really needed he’d just get it online, no need to traipse out to a store for hours on end.

But Mabel and Pacifica did so love to go out and hang together after school. They’d often frequent that arcade-bar place, then peruse the stores before heading home. Today, Dipper would have to interrupt their fun ‘girl-time’. There was something that needed to be investigated, and he wanted to do it as a team.

A quick search through the stores led him to a clothing boutique, where he found Mabel sat on a bench by the changing rooms, attention entirely on her phone. For some reason she was dressed in a peach floor length formal dress. He couldn’t for the life of him figure out why.

Still not noticing him as he approached, he saw that Mabel was wearing some spangly five-pointed star earrings and had added a new bright purple streak of dye to her hair down one side. He stood immediately in front of her, then coughed. She looked up from the phone in surprise. “Dipper, what are you doing here? We’re supposed be on a ‘girl’s day out’.” She looked mildly annoyed, as if he’d infringed on some sacred event between the girls.

“There’s been an anomaly. I think we should check it out, all three of us. Where is Pacifica?”

Mabel jabbed a thumb towards the changing rooms. “Where d’ya think Dip? She’s trying on another one, she’s already been through 6 that she didn’t like. I’ve only tried 2. Not feeling this dress though, I’m not keen on the frilly bits.” She flicked a band of lighter material that surrounded the neck of the dress.

“But you’re you, I thought you loved all those frills and whistles?”

Mabel blew a lazy raspberry. “Nah, this time I want something that says, ‘mature and responsible’.” Dipper burst out laughing, and Mabel couldn’t help but join in.

“So what are you getting dresses for anyway? Is there some big function I’ve not been told about?”


“Oh right. That’s… a thing… why should I care again? Every year you bring some new boy, and I just make awkward small talk the entire evening.”

“You should care,” a voice from behind the changing room curtain said, “because for once in your life, you’ll finally have someone with class and poise to hang around with.” Pacifica stepped out from behind the curtain, and Dipper couldn’t take his eyes off her.

The outfit she wore was a tight dark-blue dress, shoulderless, and with a pencil skirt that stopped well above the knee, leaving very little to Dipper’s imagination. She also had vibrant red lipstick on, presumably to test out how she looked in the full get-up, and she carried herself elegantly on a pair of high heels. To Dipper’s eyes, she couldn’t have looked more stunning.

“I don’t know, I think it makes me look fat. Let’s try another one Mabel.”

“Ugh, not another one Paz, you look fine!” Mabel groaned from the bench. She raised her
eyebrows. “Just look, Dipper clearly loves it, don’t you Bro-bro?”

Dipper blushed as he tried to avert his gaze from Pacifica’s body. He kept seeing her Pine Tree necklace glinting out of the corner of his eye, which inevitably brought his gaze back to the way the dress hugged her figure.

Pacifica didn’t seem to notice, staring off into the middle-distance lost in thought. “The colour, it’s too dark, I need something a bit lighter.” Suddenly she shook her head and focused. “Wait, Mason, what are you doing here? I wanted my prom outfit to be a surprise.”

“I mean, technically it still will be, since you don’t like that dress.” Her scowl showed that she hadn’t appreciated his little joke.

“You wouldn’t know real fashion if it hit with a truck, Mace. You’re a *crocs and socks* guy for pete’s sake!”

“Hey, at least what I wear is practical,” Dipper protested. “I still remember all those times you nearly tripped on those old heeled boots you used to wear.”

“Fair point,” she conceded. “So, was there a reason for you interrupting the two of us?”

“Oh right, I’m here because something important’s going on. Least, I think something important *might* be going on. I’ll start at the beginning.” He reached into his hoodie and retrieved a small metal box with a blinking screen. “It’s my anomalous energy scanner, this afternoon it started picking up some odd readings.”

Mabel rolled her eyes. “Not that thing again. It’s bad enough when you wake us up in the middle of the night to go chasing after weird energy stuff. We almost never find anything.”

“This time I think it might be serious. I got multiple spikes of energy all at once, which isn’t too unusual. But the location of the spikes was. The first one was at school.”

Mabel didn’t seem concerned by this and shrugged. “Not too strange, Piedmont High attracts Vampires, sentient computer viruses, interdimensional demons—“

“That’s it, that’s it exactly! Dimensions! Guess where one of the other energy spikes was.” Both girls glanced at each other, not seeing what Dipper was trying to get at. “Alright, I’ll just tell you. Down by the bay, industrial district, a particular ironworks…”

Mabel put up her hands. “Wait, wait! Are you saying this is something to do with the rifts? The ones that lead to that… other dimension… the one the Ursus came from?”

Dipper nodded solemnly. “Right. The other spikes were in the San Francisco financial district, at the Polaris tower, and out in the desert by the Hartnell mine. Conclusion: A whole lot of extra-dimensional fallout from our tussle with the Ursus is spreading and setting off my detector.”

“Yeah, but guys, didn’t you like, kill that Intelligence with your mind powers or something? When you went all scary glowy?” Pacifica was the only one of the trio who really remembered the dramatic events that had taken place in the desert, since both Dipper and Mabel’s memories of their ‘super-powered’ moment were a blank.

Dipper nodded. “That’s what we thought, the guiding intelligence was destroyed. But it’s possible that some remnants survived and are leaking into our reality. We already saw at least one Kochab that can operate in our dimension, it stands to reason that more could come through.”
Mabel puffed out her cheeks. “What can the three of us do? Is there some way to ‘heal’ the rifts up permanently?”

“Nah, there’ll always be some small remnant of the tears. But we can check each one to make sure they’re non-active. I already checked out the one at school earlier, other than the spike in energy it’s completely dormant. These rifts must all be linked somehow, each one sharing the same energy fluctuations. We just need to check each one, scan it for any strange signs, then find out if any one of them has had an incursion. I need you two in case we actually run into something dangerous.”

Pacifica sighed, then headed back behind the curtain. “Guess that means our prom dress hunt is over for today then. Mabel, get dressed and meet us at the Hyper-Coyote.”

Dipper called after her. “Sorry Paz, you know how these things are.”

Poking her head out of the curtain, she gave a small smile. “It’s ok dork, where would the fun be without stuff like this?”

When Pacifica left the mall, now back in her normal outfit, she found Dipper sitting on the side of the curb by the pickup. He perked up when he saw her approach. “Mabel still taking forever then? She always was fussy when it came to getting changed.”

Pacifica didn’t reply, and simply sat down on the curb next to him. “Hey Mace, can we talk?”

“Oh, sure. Whatever you want Pacifica.” He was slightly taken aback by how serious she seemed. “You feeling ok?”

“Maybe… Kinda… only a few days…” She trailed off, not wanting to talk about the impending end of her time in Piedmont.

“Yeeeeaaaah, I know the feeling.” Dipper had recently had a lot of time to ponder this very quandary. “We just have to have faith in each other.”

Pacifica sighed. “Today’s just making feel a little low. It shouldn’t, I was having fun with Mabel… but…”

“But?”

“I just wanted to relax and unwind. To get a nice dress that made me look pretty.”

“But Paz, we don’t even know if… if you’ll be staying for prom.” He tensed up slightly, feeling like he was disappointing her by bringing up the subject so directly.

“It’s like they say Mace, dress for the job you wanna have. Might as well not act any differently until my parents make a decision.”

Pacifica let out a long sigh. “Sometimes it’s nice to just act like we don’t have to worry, you know. Buying dresses, going on normal dates. We haven’t done enough of that recently. Mysteries and adventure are great, I wouldn’t give them up for the world. But it’s these little moments where we can just be a couple of regular kids that I savour most. I guess when you came today, and we had to stop what we were doing, it reminded me of how it’s gonna feel when I do that for good.”

Dipper put his arm around Pacifica’s shoulders. “Hey now, who said anything about it being for good Princess? Your parents, assholes as they are, can’t control you forever. You’re an adult now,
it won’t be long till you can be rid of them, you’ll see.”

She leant her head over onto his shoulder. “Mmm, maybe you’re right Mason. What do you think about something for the prom in Lake-Foam green…?”

“Anything for you.” He chuckled, not really understanding her cryptic comment about the colour of her dress, but glad anyway to see that their conversation had helped a little.

Behind them, Mabel finally emerged from the mall. To Dipper and Pacifica’s surprise, she was wearing the exact same blue dress Pacifica had been trying on a few minutes ago. She saw both of their confused faces. “What, it’s a cute dress? I’m gonna try it out today, not like it’s an intensive mission, we’re just closing some rifts. And the heels, have to finally get used to these.” She took an unsteady step forward. “Woah. Gotta get good, don’t wanna embarrass myself in front of Eli.”

“You’re going with Eli?!” Dipper couldn’t help but be surprised, since she’d never shown any interest in his friend before. Despite the exposed tattoos all up her arms, in the dress and heels his sister looked a far cry from her goth look of 2 months ago, she was fully back to embracing her more feminine side. He guessed he could see why Eli would be interested in a date with her.

“Well yeah, I asked him the other day. He was hilarious, started hyperventilating a bit. I think he has a small crush on me.” She took another awkward series of steps, then collided with a lamppost on the side of the road. “Ah, maybe I should actually put my glasses back on, I’ll be fine on a dance floor, but it won’t do to be bumping into everything on a Mystery Hunt.”

Dipper helped her get to the pickup without any further collisions. “I’m just still confused about when you had time to talk to Eli. I didn’t think you shared any classes.”

“We don’t, he hangs around the retro bar though. Paz plays games, and I play with Eli.”

“I’m not gonna ask what you mean by that.”

Pacifica got up and helped steady Mabel’s swaying. “Ready to plug up some space leaks, sis?”

“Guess so, if there’s a slim chance of the world ending, we might as well be right at the centre of things!”

“Are you sure this is the right place Dip? Looks less spookier than the last two times we were here.”

“Well, those times we were either hunting a dangerous creature, or the time after that when we came for a high stakes trade-off with a council of evil brains. And both of those were at night.” Dipper surveyed the bland grey building, that in the light of day looked as harmless and ordinary as he’d said.

Pacifica put her hand on Mabel’s shoulder. “Yeah Mabel, relax, this time there’s not gonna be any robots to smash, just radiation… hey, should we be wearing hazmat suits or something?”

“Nah Paz, it’s too low level to affect humans.” Dipper lifted up his scanner. “Right, let’s see what we’ve got here.”

“Step aside bro, I’ll have us inside in no time flat!” Mabel cracked her knuckles and prepared her infiltration tools, but Dipper put a hand on her shoulder.
“Ah, Mabel? We don’t have to break in this time, I can do the scan from here.”

“Oh. Carry on then Dip-Dop. Guess we just… stand around while your thing does its thing.”

The three of them started awkwardly pacing around the empty parking lot of the ironworks, which was empty today since damages from their last confrontation here were still being repaired. Eventually, Pacifica decided to try and help Mabel get used to walking on her heels, though her natural clumsiness made it a slow process.

Dipper leant on the side of the pickup, watching the pair goofing around and having fun. A short while ago he would have felt a pang of melancholy or wistfulness at this sight, similar to what Pacifica had gone through earlier. But now he was content to live in the moment.

He pulled out his journal, and did a rough sketch of the two girls, Mabel’s legs all gangly and uncontrollable, while Pacifica frantically tried to keep her in order. With hips swaying wildly to keep balanced, Mabel set off in a circuit around the parking lot. Pacifica came over and leant beside Dipper. “I think she’s finally starting to get the hang of it. Crazy to think she wouldn’t have been seen dead in heels just a few months ago.”

“We’ve all been through a lot in that time. Things change.”

“What’s this, you getting all deep on me Mace? People might actually mistake you for being insightful about people.” She bumped his side with her hips.

“Heh, just an observation. Last time we were here at this ironworks, Mabel was keeping tons of things secret from both of us. Now look at her.” He gestured out with a hand. Pacifica watched Mabel take several more tentative steps forward, and she grinned cheerily back at the couple. “Everything’s better between us now.”

Pacifica rested her chin in her hand. “I guess that means that this rift thing is our last punishment we have to go through for our lives to be clear of all that junk.”

Dipper cocked his head to side. “Huh, what do you mean?”

“I mean, it is kind of our fault after all. All that Ursus stuff cause Mabel kept secrets, and you both used that future journal. Now we have to clean up the mess before we can move on.”

“Yeah, sounds about right. It wasn’t a clean break after Weirdmageddon either, we had a lot of stuff to fix in that last week of summer, it flew by so fast.”

Dipper stared off into the distance, and Pacifica suddenly felt a twinge of concern. “Hey, you ok? You look like you’re going to the ‘conspiracy’ zone.”

“Hmm, oh.” He started smiling. “Talking about summer, I just had a thought. Even if you go back to Gravity Falls at the end of this week… we’ll be coming up there for the summer at the end of May anyway. It’s not like you’ll have long to wait to see us again.”

Pacifica raised a weak smile. She obviously didn’t want to go back to her parents, but if that turned out to be a necessity, at least she’d have her support back relatively soon.

A high-pitched beep came from the scanner, which Dipper had stowed on the pickup’s flatbed. He checked it over, then shook his head. “It’s a nope-aroo from this site. The scanner’s still picking up frequent spikes that register over the whole network of rifts, but this site and the school are clean of any spreading effects. Conclusion: We’ll have to try the next location.”
Pacifica yelled over at Mabel. “Hey, twinkle toes, we’re done here!” Mabel started heading back to the pickup, but Pacifica thought she was going too slowly. She got up beside her, hoping to steady her along, and was startled when Mabel leapt into her arms. “Ah, what are you doing!?”

“You have to carry me, I can’t take another minute waddling around!” Attempting a bridal carry and grumbling, Pacifica hefted Mabel across the rest of the space to the pickup. Dipper just laughed at the whole situation.

Pacifica dumped Mabel into the cabin with a grunt. “I’m never doing that again.”

“You know you love me really Paz,” Mabel said with an exaggerated wink. “Where to next Dipper?”

Dipper rounded the pickup and got in the driver’s seat. “Ah, this might be the tricky part.”

The Polaris Research Institute tower had not been served well by nearly 3 months of being unoccupied. There were numerous smashed windows, and most of the interior floors had been completely cleared out by police search teams.

Immediately after the Alignment had been dealt with, and Pacifica safely sent home to Gravity Falls, the twins had made a stealthy infiltration to the tower. Most of the floors below 25 were uninteresting office rooms, a façade set up to distract any visitors to the building from its true purpose. Above that were several levels devoted to the Council of Ursus’ logistics and planning. Mabel had taken much glee in burning any sensitive documents that could have led to the Institute’s research being replicated.

The uppermost floors required the most attention. The top 4 floors of the building were no longer part of the structure, having been secretly a rocket the entire time. All that remained of those floors were chunks of space debris. Mabel and Dipper had gathered up every last piece of advanced technology on the floors beneath that, making sure they left no trace of the futuristic origins of what had been constructed here.

Dipper salvaged a handful of components, some of which had later either gone into his scanner, tracker bracelets, or the failed alpha-wave generator. The rest they destroyed beyond repair - they didn’t want any outside organisation getting their hands on the sort of advancements hidden away by Polaris.

Now the building was left decrepit. The front had been boarded up after a government raid cleaned out the tower, and it was going to be torn down at some point to make way for a new, hopefully less evilly inclined structure.

The trio pulled up across the street from the tower, in the same spot Mabel had parked when they rescued Dipper from the tower back in January.

Pacifica looked through police tape to the empty foyer, which had started rotting away from mould and damp in a remarkably short time period. “S’pose that’s what happens when the top of your tower launches off into space, then the entire board of directors vanishes off the face of the Earth.”

“In one case, literally,” Dipper recalled.

Mabel surveyed the building and was uncertain about stepping foot inside. Her recent knack for urban exploration had given her some insight to traversing old structures, and she was wary about trying to make her way through a place that was obviously at risk of collapsing. Especially not in
high heels, which were hardly the optimum choice for parkour. “Where’s the rift then Dip? I don’t remember us finding one here.”

Dipper slapped the side of the scanner, making sure it was calibrated properly. “Hmm, scanner seems to think there was a lot of abnormal activity back in February around the time of the Alignment. I think the Council must have had all 7 future journals here to decode their Calculations. They were probably experimenting with getting them all to ‘resonate’ properly, we know that can bridge the dimensions.”

The trio entered the foyer, and all of them had to try and ignore the musty smell. Pacifica examined the lift shaft at the rear of the foyer. The elevator was at a crooked angle and the cables seemed to have snapped. “Well we’re not getting up that way. Can you scan the rift from here?”

Holding out his arm, he tried to increase the scanner’s range. “Just about… there, got it! If I keep my arm held straight up for the next… half an hour, I should have enough data!”

“Gimme that, you dork.” Mabel snagged the scanner off him, attached it to her grapple gauntlet, then fired off a shot. She disconnected the rope, leaving the scanner stuck to the ceiling, where it could get a clearer signal without Dipper losing all blood flow to his arm.

“Oh. That’ll do it. Thanks Mabel, this’ll be easier than I thought, won’t have to scale 40 floors. Where exactly were you keeping that gauntlet in such a skimpy dress?”

Mabel waggled a finger. “Ah ah ah, a good sleight of hand master never tells.” Her masterful skills were already on display again, as the gauntlet had already vanished off her wrist. She came to sit on the old main desk in the middle of room, crossing her legs and sighing loudly. “So far me and Pacifica haven’t really been needed much today Dip. You sure we couldn’t have just sat this one out? Hey Paz, can I borrow your compact, I wanna see how my hair’s doing.”

“Sure Mabes, I think it looks great though.” Mabel took the compact and examined her new purple streak. “And hey, would you really rather go dress shopping than visit all these great places Mason takes us?” She sarcastically panned around the decomposing room, which brought a small giggle from Mabel.

“What about you Dip, do you have an opinion about my funky new do?”

Dipper gave a half-hearted smile and tried to think of something to say. “Um, looks ‘vibrant’… I guess, I dunno.”

She rolled her eyes knowingly but smiled. “Yeah, that was pretty much what I expected.” The three of them laughed. “Guess I wouldn’t wanna miss this ‘bonding time’ with you guys. Seize it while it lasts.”

“Exactly!” Dipper hit a fist into his palm. “I’ve been looking up loads of neat stuff for our next ‘proper’ Mystery Hunt, potential creature sightings, whispers in the underworld, anything that could lead to us getting a hit before the weekend rolls around.”

Mabel’s smile softened slightly into a more sympathetic expression. “But hey, you should take care of yourself Dip-man, you’ve been sleeping a bit erratically these last few nights.”

“Oh that, guess I’m still getting used to not living through the same events over and over again. Bound to mess up my sleep patterns.”

“Huh?”
“Oh, nevermind, forget I said anything.” He waved away the girls’ obvious confusion. “I’m fine, trust me. Journal research is like breathing for me, I couldn’t do without it.”

“Still Mason, you don’t wanna burn yourself out by not sleeping at all this week. And don’t just say ‘I’ll sleep next week when Paz isn’t here.’” Dipper opened his mouth to speak, but perhaps wisely shut it again when faced with Pacifica’s steely gaze. She lifted the hair off his forehead and kissed his birthmark. “Don’t be a total dork, dork.”

After a while the scanner let off a familiar trill of beeps indicating that the building was clear of anything breaching their reality. Dipper yanked on the rope and caught the scanner. At the same moment, a much louder deep blaring alarm sounded from somewhere. “Cheese it! The fuzz!” Mabel left the couple in the dust as she sprinted out of the foyer as fast as she possibly could in her heels.

“Should I ask why that’s your sister’s natural reaction to an alarm going off?”

“Probably best not to. Anyway, that alarm’s likely triggered to register anything operating on a similar wavelength to the sort of thing that happened back in January. Probably connected to the local police department. Conclusion-“

“A whole lot of fun being chased outta here!” Pacifica smirked at Dipper and grabbed his hand, as the two of them ran after Mabel.

“So this is it? Last place to check? Figures it would be here.” Mabel hopped down onto the desert floor, taking in the sight of the place where they’d finally saved the universe. A few rusted girders poking up out of the dirt were all that remained of the portal frame. One half-buried robot stuck out, but it was too badly damaged to ever operate again.

Dipper was repeatedly slapping the scanner. “The rock here must be too thick, the rift I’m detecting is underground, probably the Obelisk cavern itself. Must have shifted all the energy towards itself and away from where the portal used to be somehow.”

“Like how the magnetic north pole shifts over time?” Pacifica kicked out at the dust. “Ugh, dark caves underground, you really know my idea of a perfect good time Mace.”

“Can’t be helped I’m afraid. It’s not too bad down there, the sandstone lets a lot of light through to the Obelisk chamber, it’s only a short walk through the dark. Mabel, you coming?”

He called over to his sister, who was knelt down at an empty part of the desert, that was once the spot where the central portal aperture had been. She half turned her head back. “Just a second.” She was trying to concentrate, dozens of memories were swirling around her head, and she wanted to be able to remember fully what had happened here. It was a bit like the feeling she’d got when overwhelmed by memories in the Shack bedroom, that same flow of random information that refused to cohere. The full knowledge felt just out of her reach, so she sighed and gave up. “Ah well,” she said to herself. “Doesn’t matter what happened then, what matters is where we ended up.”

She ran over to join the others, and they headed into the Hartnell mine complex. It was still as deserted as it had been during their previous visit, even more so for Mabel, who could no longer pick up all the ghostly traces of the departed miners. They descended into the mine via the rickety lift, and the twins pulled out flashlights to illuminate the way.
Dipper cupped his hands around his mouth. “Hoot hoot! Hoo! Woo!”

“Uh, Mason, what in the ever-loving hell are you doing?”

“Oh, echo sounding, helps to find the chamber. Because of the way it fused into the rock it’s completely soundproof, deadens the echo.”

“Cacaw!”

“Ah!” Pacifica jumped a little as Mabel made similar goofy noises. She shook her head with a smile. “You two are crazy, you know that?”

Both of them turned and winked in unison, which just made Pacifica’s smile widen by how much of a ‘twin’ thing it had been. Dipper halted in the tunnel and felt along the rock wall until he found the small crack that lead to the Obelisk chamber.

All of them shimmied their way through the gap and entered into the cave lined with smooth black volcanic rock. Pacifica was pleased that Dipper hadn’t been lying about the light levels down here, and audibly gasped when she saw the towering 3 sided central pillar of the cave. “Wow, as rocks go, that’s one impressive piece of, I guess shale, or maybe granite? I don’t know Geology’s not my strong suit.”

Mabel hesitantly reached out and touched the grey Obelisk, then quickly removed her hand. “Phew, no trippy mind voyage. Was worried for a sec there.”

Dipper came over and tapped the stone with the end of a pen. “I chipped off a small sample last time we were here, it didn’t quite match any other types of terrestrial minerals, but it wasn’t anything particularly special. Stuff like this turns up in meteors from time to time, but never in this large a concentration, or as one solid mass. It’s that that’s weird about it. Not to mention the psychic amplifier stuff Mabel stumbled on to, that stuff was super unique”

“Darn tootin’,” Mabel said, nodding.

Pacifica ran a hand across the smooth material that lined the walls halfway into the cavern. “And this stuff? Like obsidian? And it starts so abruptly.”

“It’s different to something like a lava tube. My working theory is that this whole cavity in the sandstone was caused by the Obelisk phasing in from somewhere… else.” Dipper said the last word with his ‘maximum spooky’ tone of voice to emphasis the mysteriousness.

“So Dipper, what’s the scanner saying? This place is cool and out of the sun, but I don’t wanna have to spend all day down here.”

“Oh right, I forgot.” He brought the scanner out of his hoodie and held it up in front of the Obelisk. “Ok, seems like it’s responding much the same as… oh… oh no.”

“Mason? What is it?”

“This is it, the source of the energy. I think- something’s coming through!” He pulled the girls to the back of the cave, as far from the Obelisk as they could get. The black stone began emitting a soft blue light, though the Obelisk itself didn’t shine with the fiery light it had back in January.

Mabel fell over onto her backside due to heels on the unsteady ground. “Oof. Thanks bro, real nice, you just had to go and… go and…” Her brief flash of grumpiness was instantly wiped away as the space in front of the Obelisk erupted into bright sparks.
The chains connecting the Obelisk to the cave walls began to shake, blown by whatever was forcing its way through the rift left behind from all the portal activity. The air in front of the central pool began to warp as a tear formed in reality, barely visible to the trio, but its affects keenly felt. Pacifica’s pendant too started to react, twisting around and signifying a dangerous concentration of ‘weirdness’.

With no extra fanfare, suddenly two slender humanoid beings were present in the chamber. They were made of constantly shifting bolts of blue lightning and had triangular heads. With voices slightly out of time with one another, the two beings spoke the same words. “Location: Earth. Target: Acquired.”

They dispassionately stared straight at Dipper, who gaped at the energy beings. “Oh my god! I know these two! Couldn’t leave well enough alone? I told you last time, I made up my mind! You can’t feed off my emotions any longer!”

“Uh, Mason, care to fill us in on the ‘Blues Brothers’ over here?”

“Yeah, they’re making the hair on my arms stand on end, too much tingly static.” Mabel flattened a palm over her tattooed arms in vain, but the subtle effect of the electricity remained.

Standing tall in the centre of the room, Dipper tried to look tough again as he had during his last encounter with these beings. “They’re from a dimension of higher energy. Don’t worry, they’re not toxic to matter like the Ursus. They were here to siphon off nutrition from my varying emotional states.”

“Wait, what were you of all people getting worked up about Mace?”

“Uh, that’s, uh.” He blushed, causing his tough façade to slightly drop. “It was cause I was being all stupid about my feelings for you Paz, these guys liked how flip-floppy I was being and wanted to make me their personal battery-“


Dipper dismissively waved a hand. “Pfft, you work on emotional energy, totally harmless if you simply resist, watch and learn- Hff!”

Dipper was blasted clean in the face by a bolt of energy, sending him sprawling onto his back. He gave a sharp intake of breath. “No. The lightning, Spline, it’s like the Spline!” He reached out in the dark cave for Pacifica and gripped her arms tightly. “I don’t, I can’t-“ He was hyperventilating now, and closed his eyes, trying to focus on the feel of her skin.

“I’m here Mason, it’s ok. I’m here, solid.” To his surprise, the next sensation he felt was the touch of her lips against his. She tasted sweet, like roses, since she still had her lipstick on from earlier. “I’m here.”

He exhaled deeply, now calmed down from his bout of anxiety, and let Pacifica pull him back to his feet. “Ok, maybe my hypothesis about their energy was a little off.” He felt over his face and head, thankful that the blast hadn’t burned him like at the aquarium.

Mabel stood to block the energy beings, whose electricity was now bright crimson, from hurting Dipper or Pacifica. “I know what they’re doing! It’s the Obelisk, it’s making them stronger!” The subtle powers of the strange Obelisk had reared their head again. First sending Mabel’s mind across time and space, then granting her insane mental powers - now they were allowing these
extra-dimensional beings to affect the physical world directly.

The trio leapt to the side as another burst of electricity singed the rear cavern walls. Dipper roughly hit the floor and Pacifica seemed at a loss for how to help. Only Mabel remained, staring defiantly at the alien visitors.

Dipper tugged at her arm. “Mabel, standing there’s not gonna help! I don’t think ‘good vibes’ and ‘positive feelings’ are going to beat them this time! We have to take them down for good!”

“Oh great, that means I can stop holding back!” Dipper heard a click as Mabel lifted her wrist, which suddenly bore her gauntlet again. “Watch out!” She flicked her wrist, sending a jet of silver dust at the beings, who let out static screams of pain. “Yes, firing mechanism finally works!”

“What did you do Mabel?!” Pacifica asked as she helped Dipper back to a standing position again.

“Shot out a little bit of silver dust, solidified their ectoplasm. I ain’t afraid a no interdimensional beings! Simple trick, quite useful in certain- LOOK OUT!” She shoved Pacifica to side as the beings lashed out in multiple directions, sending lightning whizzing around the cavern.

“Now they have physical form we just have to destroy them!” Dipper rolled on the ground, then tried to kick one of the energy beings. His foot impacted with the ever-flowing ‘surface’, but there wasn’t much of a response from the creature. He had to quickly recoil as they flared up again with more shots of electricity.

He ran, trying to put the Obelisk between himself and the beings. Round the far side he bumped into Pacifica. They hugged tightly, trying to minimise their profile so less of their bodies were visible behind the pillar of stone.

“Hey hey hey, over here! Listen to me and look at what I’m doing! Yoohoo, follow me!” From across the cave, Mabel was being as loud and obnoxious as possible, drawing the attention of their attackers away from the couple.

Dipper whispered to Pacifica. “I’m sorry, like you said earlier about the rifts, this is all my fault. Those creatures were after me cause my dumb teen hormones were making me act weird around you.”

“Hey, it’s not like you knew they were gonna come back and try and kill us. Besides, I’d say it’s my fault more. If it wasn’t for me being so dependent on you, making you video chat me all the time so my insecurities didn’t flare up…”

“No, no! I never minded that, I loved it in fact! It’s not you it’s me! Like if I hadn’t got reckless with the Hyper-Coyote, your parents never would have found out about us!”

“Well, if I hadn’t forgotten about messaging them, they wouldn’t have found out either! I was too blinded by focusing on your injuries!”

“The only reason I got so injured was cause I was trying to keep you safe! Like when you nearly drowned at the aquarium!”

“What about the time you got knocked out by the animal spirit, or tricked by Pacifi-cabel, I had to save you!”

“It’s all my fault!”

“No, it’s all my fault!”
Their squabbling was cut short as the two beings rounded the Obelisk. They came from both sides, leaving the couple nowhere to run.

“Pacifica, I’m sorry! I love you with all my heart and I never wanted anything to happen to you, I ruined your life!”

“No Mason, you saved my life, I wasn’t living with my parents, I was barely surviving, in misery from day to day! This is better than that slow death!”

Dipper and Pacifica tightly embraced, kissing each other in final passionate moment of defiance against their fate.

The two advancing beings suddenly gasped and jolted in pain. Their ‘bodies’ collapsed onto the cave floor, revealing that each one had a shoe embedded in their backs. “Finally, those stupid high heels came in useful!” As the electrical energy faded away, Mabel retrieved her shoes. “Nice work you two, distracting them with all your sappy emotional talk.”

“Wait, was that what we were doing?”

“Wasn’t it obvious Dipper, you did say they fed off emotions after all.”

“Oh… right.” He watched the forms of the beings who’d returned to torment them fade away to nothing, likely dissipating back through the rift to whatever plane they’d originated from.

“Hey Mace, I think I have a theory.” Pacifica held out a hand and helped Dipper to his feet. “They came after emotions right? Then I think I know why they chose now to show up again. This last few days we’ve all been thinking about… about what happens at the end of the week. They were probably like moths to a flame, no wonder they wanted a piece of us.”

Pacifica stood awkwardly, once again hesitating when the subject came up. Dipper wasn’t sure how to comfort her, but Mabel rolled her eyes and stepped in. “You guys: think about this week like it’s the summer. Every year we get the anticipation, then 3 awesome months. And every time when it drew to a close, I used to get anxious about it too, like we’re all feeling now. I never wanted to leave all our friends and family, or to give up Mystery Hunting for another year, but it was always the same cycle. But now I’m finally over that fear, all those worries don’t matter. Not when I have you guys beside me, we can break the pattern. The end of summer doesn’t mean what it used to, we can go out and find supernatural stuff whenever now.” She gestured around the cavern. “And look at where you are Paz, you’ve already done so much to change how things are gonna be from now on. That’s the way you have to look at it.”

Dipper was taken aback by his sister’s maturity. “Wow Mabel, that was really sincere and profound. Who are you, and what have you done with my sister?” She chuckled and slipped her shoes back on. “So Paz, what do you think?”

She was staring at the glossy black floor of the cave, twiddling with her now still pendant with one hand. She closed her eyes for a second, then breathed out. “One step at a time.” Dipper saw a sudden fiery passion behind her eyes, and her cheeks slowly lifted as her mouth curled upwards. “I can’t wait till we’re old enough to just up sticks and ride about the country looking for weirdness to root out. Come on, let’s get out of this dingy cave and go be teenagers together.”

She put her arms around the twins’ shoulders, and Mabel cheered. “Group hug! Grug!” The three of them gladly made their way back out towards the light of day, a day they could spend however they liked. “So Paz, I make that seven times in the last year now that I’ve rescued you from ‘certain doom’. Ah, it feels good to be a winner.”
“What, no way! I must have saved you more times than that. What about when I figured out what the ghost at the escape room was?”

“Doesn’t count, we weren’t in real danger. Now, that time I saved you from Dipper’s Were-Coyote phase, that was some proper deadly action.”

“I think we can both agree on one thing though: Mason is the one who needs the most rescuing.”

“A-greed.”

Mabel made a large exaggerated nod and Dipper laughed. “Hey, as long as you guys are only arguing about this, then - Conclusion: I call that a victory for all of us.”
Taken Back to the Falls

Leading them through the billowing tent flaps, Dipper’s paper clone, Quattro, took the trio through the circus. “I’m so glad you guys came, this is going to blow your minds!”

Quattro’s obvious enthusiasm wasn’t lost on the three teenagers, who were glad to see him acting so upbeat. Getting used to working at a circus after living on the run for five years wasn’t something most people went through after all.

“Hey there little guy, I’m sure whatever it is, we can help,” Mabel said with supportive grin. She noticed that he’d ditched the rain poncho he’d worn when they’d last visited, he must be getting used the new arrangement. Having most of the circus’ facilities connected by covered tent tunnels meant he no longer had to fear getting water on him and causing a meltdown. “Hey, Quat, what do you think of my new hair?” She flicked her hair so he could get a look at the section she’d dyed purple.

“Um, it’s… vibrant? I dunno.” Mabel chuckled to herself, Quattro definitely was Dipper’s clone alright. Ahead of her, the young clone went off on another ramble. “This is such a big thing, I never expected... well, you’ll see! I didn’t know what to do, but you guys are experts.”

Dipper nodded seriously. “Of course buddy, I’m sure it’s nothing we can’t handle. Pacifica, you coming?” She was hanging back slightly, watching Quattro. “What is it Paz?”

“It’s funny, I remember when you were that same kind of anxious and excited. Just weird to see it again, you’ve got so much more confident lately.”

“It’s all thanks to you Paz, having you by my side.” She giggled as he kissed her.

Down the corridor Quattro made an ‘ew’ face, and Mabel teasingly covered his eyes. “This must be kinda weird for you, huh?”

Quattro nodded. “A little, yeah. But Pacifica seems nice, I can see why I... why he likes her.”

They reached the end of the hallway, reaching a place Mabel and Dipper knew. The last tent flap would take them into the cryptid hall. “Ok, get ready guys. This is it.” Quattro swept away the plastic flap, and the trio filed into the room.

Most of the room was empty, many exhibits still needed replacing after the Kochab rampage. But behind the bars of one cage, was a familiar figure, dressed in purple with blonde hair stretching down below her waist.

Lying on her side on the floor of the cage with her knees held tight to her chest was Pacifi-cabel, who looked much the same as when they’d last met. Her hair was more bedraggled, but otherwise she’d kept up her dedication to always looking like a beauty model. It didn’t help her much in the cage though, she looked pitiful in such a setting.

The trio expected words of insult or demands to be set free. “I need your help,” she said, in a quiet, fragile tone.

Stunned, none of them said a word. “I told you this’d blow your minds!”
There was silence in the tent as everyone struggled to figure out what was going on. This poor girl, who Pacifica and Mabel had inadvertently created, was something they didn’t know how to deal with. It wasn’t like they could rehabilitate her, her mind was too fractured for that. Nor could they just dispose of her, she was a living being with wants and desires of her own, who’d only come in to existence because of their mistakes.

Quattro tried to offer an explanation. “I found her at the edge of our circus ground, in a crashed white van. She ‘sensed’ me out again like she did before. We locked her up in here just in case, but she hasn’t offered any resistance.”

Dipper stepped towards the cage, affecting a cocky tone. Unlike the girls, he was glad to see Pacifi-cabel restrained. “Well well well, if it isn’t little miss body-snatcher. Finally decided to show up again? Looking to try and take over my sister’s body, huh?”

He felt a light punch to his arm, and whirled round to see Pacifica glowering at him disapprovingly. “Mason, don’t be like that, it’s not helping. She looks like she really needs our help.”

“Well, remember, she’s the person who tied me up and left me trapped in the woods! The same one who tried to kill us with an axe, take over Mabel’s mind, and pushed Tracey to his death!”

“And that’s kinda our fault!”

Dipper’s mouth fell open, then he realised what she’d meant. It had been the girls’ actions in the shack back in March that had led to Pacifi-cabel being the way she was. He sighed. “Look, I’m sorry, it’s just… what she did wasn’t anyone’s fault but her own. And maybe we can try to ‘fix’ her mind, but she’s still dangerous.”

“I know that Mason. But look at her, she’s hardly a threat now, is she? Maybe we could at least try to do something? Although, I don’t know what exactly, you two are the mumbo-jumbo magic and science experts.”

Mabel, who hadn’t been focusing on what her friends had been saying, approached the edge of the cage, and looked down warily at the captive clone. “Hey… I’ve been thinking about you, a lot. Out in the wild all on your own. I hope you’ve been doing ok.”

Pacifi-cabel looked up with contempt. “Just dandy, thanks. Couldn’t have been better, cowering in back alleys, scrounging for supplies, it was peachy.”

“I wanna help you, it doesn’t have to be this way. Maybe together we can find a solution, try and help you get better?” She tried to reach through the bars to grasp Pacifi-cabel’s hand, but the clone flinched away.

“You don’t get it Mabel,” she dejectedly said. “My life is one of constant pain, two minds squeezed together against each other. It’s like my head is too full and pressing on the inside of my skull! There’s only one fix to this, and that’s me taking over your body. I doubt you wanna go through with that. In fact, since I have your memories, I know you won’t want that.” Mabel’s face paled, and she took a step back from the bars. Pacifi-cabel seemed resigned to her fate. “Thought you’d react like that. I can still feel you, all of you. Those emotions drifting on the air.”

She looked at each of the trio in turn, using her empath powers to gain some sense of how they were feeling. “With you Mabel there’s a cautious optimism - I think you have some hope in ‘saving’ me. Dipper’s more cynical, probably for good reason. Pacifica, she’s slightly disturbed, probably sees me as a reflection of who she used to be. And none of you have any kind of trust that
I won’t stab you all in the back.” She shook her head. “But none of that’s important now anyway. I have to put aside what I want. Or else more people might die.”

Dipper’s eyes narrowed. “Explain. If you’re not here for Mabel, then why come back?”

“Because, dear brother of mine, I can’t do anything on my own. I’m too close to the problem, if that makes sense.”

“No, not really,” Dipper mumbled

Pacifi-cabel deeply sighed, then summoned up the memories. “After our little ‘meeting’ at the dam, I couldn’t exactly hang around. You knew my weakness - I couldn’t confront you head on now you know how easy it is for a little water to kill me. So I went back to where this all started, good old Gravity Falls. I thought I could retrieve the Ursus stone myself, get it from wherever you, Pacifica, had stowed it. I thought it’d be easy, a walk in the park. But then I realised that your parents wouldn’t be expecting you - for whatever reason you live in Piedmont now?”

Pacifica nodded. “That’s a long story. I’m taking a, shall we say, ‘long needed getaway’ from my parents.”

“Yeah, they nearly got killed by a Were-Coyote!” Mabel chimed in.

“I’m supposed to only be gone for a month… that month ends at the end of this week.” It was currently the 9th of May, Pacifica’s deadline was the 13th. Of course, she could try to ignore it, but she knew how long her parent’s reach could stretch. The trio were all trying to deal with that fact and to come to terms with the things they couldn’t change. It didn’t mean they had to like it, but they’d take things as they came.

Pacifi-cabel on the other hand was bemused by all of this. “So you guys were living together? That’s so weird, like cocoo banana level weird. Whatever, I was trying to muster up the courage, to figure out what I needed to do or how to act to get into your house. I knew I couldn’t just stroll up to the gate and pretend to be the real Pacifica, I’d seem like a totally different person to them.”

Pacifica smirked. “That’s probably not so far off as to what’ll actually happen when I go back. Go on then, what happened next?”

“While I was waiting, out in the woods, just standing around, I was hit with this random pain. It was a horrible stabbing feeling, all over out of nowhere! I thought I was gonna die it was so bad. But then it faded. And that’s when I knew that none of us were safe in Gravity Falls.”

“Us?” Dipper questioned.

Pointing a finger at Quattro, who’d been passively observing the conversation, Pacifi-cabel elaborated. “Us! Me and Quattro, everything else kept in this damn freak show! Whatever’s going on up in Oregon, it’s killing anyone out of the ordinary! After my ‘attack’ I started looking into it. Turns out that I wasn’t the only one to get struck down with it. Dozens of creatures and magical beings have been fleeing from the town in droves, because there’s something slowly killing them. Happened to me a few more times as well.”

Dipper’s brow furrowed in concentration. “Describe the pain, in detail.”

“Ew, Dipper, that’s just morbid!” Mabel protested.

“I need to know what’s going on, properly. Please, Pacifi-cabel, continue.”
“It’s hard to describe. It’s like… you remember when we used the time-jump tech with Merak, our bodies felt like they were being ripped apart? I have your memories of that Mabel, I know you thought it was some of the worst pain you’d felt. Well this was worse and stretched out so that every single second of existence it felt like I was about to die. Radiation poisoning, Dipper, that’s what it was.”

“Radiation?!” Dipper blurted out. “You’ve gotta be kidding!”

Pacifi-cabel ignored him, and just continued to explain. “It affects the supernatural much more than any normal human. It’s like we’re already ‘tuned to the same frequency’. There was that same casual dismissal of the ‘normal’ people like the twins and Pacifica that the paper clone harboured.

“You’ve probably encountered some of the refugees, so many couldn’t stand the pain and ran away. It goes against their instincts, that dumb Gravity Falls weirdness attraction is hard to break free of.” Dipper thought back, remembering the Cycloptopus or Eye-Bat sightings, creatures that never normally left the town. Mabel too remembered finding the Gremloblin, that one-of-a-kind being that called the Falls home, who’d travelled hundreds of miles for no reason.

Well, maybe now they had that reason. Sceptical of her claims, Pacifica narrowed her eyes. “Oh yeah, and where’d all the radiation come from? Everything seemed fine last time I was in Gravity Falls.”

“It was only just building up then, things have got much worse now. I don’t know why it’s gotten stronger, but I think I can guess where it’s coming from. Mabel’s probably already started to figure it out. One word: Rifts.”

Mabel looked away, unable to keep eye contact. “Ugh, I hate to say this, but she might be right. We all know that Gravity Falls has had a lotta rips in spacetime. Maybe this is something to do with Grunkle Ford’s portal, or Weirdmageddon? Maybe we didn’t fix it all up neatly with a bow back then, and now all this is happening? We know that these things can flare up, we just dealt with those tears from the Alignment!”

Dipper shook his head. “I’m still not convinced. Sure, we’ve seen a few migrating creatures, but you’re expecting us to believe in some ‘mass exodus’? I don’t think so, we’d have heard about it.”

“That’s why I need your help. Not all the strange creatures who try to leave the town actually make it. They’ve been disappearing, captured before they can make their escape. Where they end up, that’s a mystery. I can’t find them on my own, my empathic powers aren’t enough for me to discover where they’ve gone. But you, Mabel, you could do it, reach out with your mind and track them down… if you had the Ursus stone…”

Dipper threw up his hands. “I knew it, this is all it’s been leading to! It’s a trick, she just wants the stone!”

“I promise you, I only care about helping my… kin. I’m not like you three anymore, I’m one of them… a monster.” Even Dipper couldn’t help but feel sympathy for the defeated girl, who seemed to always be caught between two worlds. Half Mabel and Pacifica, half human and magical being, not belonging with either.

Pacifica tried to take a rational approach. “Ok, let’s say we hypothetically retrieve the stone. Mabel finds where all the residents of Gravity Falls have vanished off to. How do you expect us to fix the radiation though?”
Pacifi-cabel’s next statement just left her confused “Mabel, Quattro, you remember the garage where I got the wonder twins to hold you?”

Mabel nodded, unsure of what the relevance was. “Uh, yeah. Was filled with junk, looked like it had been abandoned for ages.”

“You didn’t know, but it was in Palo Alto. Back in the 80’s that house and garage was owned by one of the early tech developers working on home computer systems.”

“And what the frickety-frack does that have to do with anything!?” Mabel’s mind was racing, struggling to catch up with any possible meaning Pacifi-cabel was trying to get across.

“Up in Gravity Falls there’s a man, I think he’s working to try and increase the radiation. He approached me, with thugs, tried to win me over. That’s when I ran here. There’s a reason I knew the house would be abandoned. The owner of said house and the man spreading the radiation are one the same. The house used to be owned by one Fiddleford H McGucket.” For the second time that day, the trio were left speechless.

They left Pacifi-cabel’s cage behind, and all four of them got into a group huddle. Dipper was the first to speak. “Ok, I don’t know how seriously we should trust any of her claims, but it’s true that we have been seeing a rise in paranormal ‘sightings’ recently. At first, I thought that just meant we were getting better at finding them, but maybe there is some root cause. It’s worth investigating.”

“But what about McGucket?” Pacifica inquired. “Surely he can’t be involved, the guy’s been clean for years. Maybe it’s like you said, a ploy to get the Ursus stone, or some other trap.”

With a sympathetic tone, Mabel spoke. “But guys, she’s clearly been shaken by what she saw in Gravity Falls. I think we should trust her, she has no reason to lie about some big eco-disaster. She’s scared and alone, and she came to us for help. Are we just gonna turf her out back onto the street?”

Pacifica put her hand on Mabel’s shoulder, gently trying to convey the full ramifications of her words to her friend. “If that’s the case, then we can’t just dismiss her out of hand. And you know that means, Mabel, if she’s telling the truth, we have to… have to be suspicious about McGucket…” Mabel’s expression was clearly displeased by the accusations levelled against him.

Quattro waved his hands about, getting the trio’s attention. “Wait wait wait! We are talking about Old Man McGucket, right? That crazy old coot who married a racoon? What’s he got to do with ‘space-time rifts’?”

“Oh, that’s a long story Quattro. Guess I’d better give you the outline.” Dipper launched into explaining the history of McGucket’s involvement in the secrets of Gravity Falls. How he’d helped work on the portal in the Shack basement, lost his mind slowly due to his own invention, and ended up the sad wreck living in the dump, before the twins helped restore his memory. Quattro already knew about Ford, but they hadn’t told him most of the details regarding his work in the 80’s alongside McGucket. “…now he lives in the old Northwest Manor up on the hill, he bought it out after the family lost part of their fortune.”

The young clone mulled over all the information, trying to process these secrets about the Author’s past and relate them to the current situation. “So, Pacifi-cabel thinks McGucket is… what, doing something portal related?”
“But McGucket’s nice!” Mabel protested adamantly. “We fixed his memory years ago! I don’t get why he’d be doing something that would cause so much harm.”

Dipper was frustrated by his sister’s naive trust. “He’s been bad before! He’s built terrible things in the past, like robots that nearly killed us, or the memory gun! We can’t dismiss the idea had he’s reverted. Even if he’s not doing it intentionally, and this radiation is just a by-product of some experiment, for the good of everything living in the town, we have to shut him down.”

Mabel stared at the floor, melancholy written all over her expression, but didn’t push the argument. She exhaled deeply. “Guess that means we have to get the stone back… it’s in your parent’s house, right Paz?”

Pacifica nodded. She had a thoughtful look on her face but wasn’t saying much.

Dipper spluttered indignantly. “Are we really going to do this? I mean, seriously, follow the plan of a psycho clone!? No offence, Quattro.” The clone dismissed it with a wave.

“I believe in her, she can change! Quattro’s proof of that, he’s moving on, making a new life!” Mabel argued back. “That stone’s the only way we can figure out where these missing creatures have got to! I’m the only one who can find them!”

“So what, we go up north and steal it from Paz’s house?! We can’t just break in! That place is probably all wired up and covered with security cameras! Mom and Dad would never let us go all that way either, it’s the middle of a school week.”

“I know a way we can get the stone.” Pacifica quietly muttered.

“But Dipper, we can’t just ignore this! What if it spreads, or some of the displaced creatures from up north cause a load of havoc! We’ve already seen the Gremloblin, it could get worse.”

“So we just blindly leap into danger?”

“Never stopped us before!”

Quattro tried to say something, anything to cool down the conversation, but the ferocity of the twins’ anger made him reconsider.

“I can’t believe your siding with her!”

“She’s a person Dip, just like anyone else! She deserves some kind of respect!”

“She’s a killer! Remember what she did to Tracey and tried to do to us! And how are we even supposed to find out about McGucket, we can’t break into his house too!”

“I know a way to get the stone.”

“It’s not fair to judge her, we made her like that!”

“She still chose to be that way!”

“I KNOW HOW TO GET THE DAMN STONE!” Both Dipper and Mabel ceased their argument immediately, cowed into silence by the outburst that had come from Pacifica. She was taking shallow breaths, trying to calm herself down. Instinctively, she played around with her pine tree pendant, the mindless distraction bringing her some level of comfort. “God, you two bickering is gonna give me a migraine, I swear. We can kill two birds with one stone, get the Ursus necklace, get us a reason to go back to Gravity Falls, heck, even get us a way into McGucket’s mansion. I
just have to- have to-

She tried to finish the sentence, but the words caught in her throat. Their previous noisy debate completely forgotten, each twin held one of Pacifica’s hands. She took a deep breath, then, barely above a whisper, spoke the words she’d been thinking of ever since Gravity Falls had been mentioned. “I have to go back to my parents.”

Mabel silently nodded, but Dipper instantly started shaking his head as soon as he realised what she’d said. “No, out of the question, you can’t!”

“It’s nearly the deadline Mason, they’re probably going to want me back at the end of this week anyway. This way, I can take the opportunity to smuggle the stone out. Plus, your parents will have to let us go, they’ll see how important this is.”

“But you can’t go back them, they’re awful, awful people. I can’t… can’t lose you Pacifica.” He put his hand on her cheek and she appreciatively held it.

“I know Mace. I don’t want to do this, it’s the last thing I’d ever choose to do. But I don’t see another way we can investigate this problem. Who knows, maybe Mom and Dad have finally seen the error of their ways and are gonna let me do whatever I want.” Dipper stared at her with an incredulous look. “Ok, maybe that’s off the table, but we still need to do this.”

“If that’s what you want to do Paz,” Dipper sighed. “It’s your choice now.”

“Then what are we waiting for? Let’s go get ready,” she said seriously.

“But Paz!” Mabel cut into the couple’s quiet chat. “What about all the things you wanted to do here in Piedmont! You were settling so well, and it’s been so great having you live with us, and the prom’s coming up in a few weeks, and- oof.” Pacifica hugged Mabel tightly.

“It’s all gonna be fine Mabel. I’m sure this will work out, eventually. Come on, me’n Mace’ll go get our paper friend.” The couple linked hands and headed back to the cryptid tent.

Mabel felt a tug on her sweater and looked down to see Quattro. “I wanna come with you guys, if something bad’s going on, you need all the help you can get!”

She knelt down and put a hand on his shoulder. “You’ve already done so much to help. The three of us can handle this. There’s the radiation too, we don’t want you getting hurt! You deserve to rest after all you’ve been through.”

Quattro looked forlorn, but then a smile broke out. “Good luck… sis.”

“Plus, if Pacifi-cabel, like, tries to murder us or something, Mom and Dad’ll need some backup kids!”

Dipper returned, dragging Pacifi-cabel forwards as Pacifica put her in handcuffs. She wasn’t exactly enthused to be out of her cage. “Look, if you’re gonna make me come with you, I have one thing to say. Pacifi-cabel no like. Here’s a hint, I don’t get along well with deadly radiation!”

Pacifica clicked the cuffs closed around her wrists. “Relax, hopefully we’ll fix this before you get another ‘hit’ or whatever. What I wanna know is why Mabel carries handcuffs, I can’t tell if it’s just her uncle’s influence or that she’s way more daring in bed than I imagined.”

Dipper addressed the group, trying to put across some kind of leadership. “Goodbye Quattro, you’ve been a real help. We have experience, we have our journals – we can solve this together.
Now come along Pacifi-cabel… hey, do we have to keep calling you that?” The current name they were all going with had been chosen at ‘peak Mabel goofiness’, back when they had no idea what would come of her creation.

The clone thought for a moment. “Alright. Call me… Andromeda.”

As Pacifica had suggested, it had been easy to convince Mr and Mrs Pines to let the twins leave in the middle of the week. Both adults knew that Pacifica needed their help if she was going to face her parents again, so allowed their children to drive to Gravity Falls. Before leaving, Pacifica took one last look over the few possessions she had in Piedmont. Hopefully intending to return soon, she left her laptop behind, along with the photo board Dipper had got her for her birthday. All she’d be bringing today was her Llama Journal, which besides her pine tree necklace was probably her most treasured object.

Unlike the last time one of the twins had made the journey, this time each twin took turns driving. This meant that Mabel was able to have a nap after 5 hours of driving, leaving the last stretch to Dipper.

Before they’d left home, Dipper had collected some equipment they’d need for the mission, such as his anomalous energy scanner, and some new pieces of kit he wanted to test out. To keep the newly christened Andromeda in line, Mabel had acquired a spray bottle, which she’d filled with water. She’d specially modified it, so it only shot out a very minute amount of liquid, enough to give their captive clone a stinging feeling if she started to act aggressively towards the trio.

After the long drive the familiar thick forests surrounding the town greeted them. Since Mabel’s visit the flowers had fully blossomed, and all the trees had full leaves again. It was barely different to what Dipper knew from the summer months. Pacifica didn’t register much, having lived here all year round for most of her life anyway.

Arriving around midday, many of the stores in the Gravity Falls high street were open for business, and Dipper spied several tourists taking pictures of the town. The Mystery Shack was probably heaving at times like this. He wished he could simply stay and take in the town but knew that he couldn’t delay.

He stopped the pickup outside the ugly grey Northwest home, with its high walls and neatly trimmed lawn. He felt an unbearable level of disgust looking at that building. He switched off the engine. “So. This is it.”

Pacifica nodded solemnly. “I’d better wake Mabel up.” She shook Mabel’s side a few times, and she drowsily sat upwards.

“Huh, are we there yet? Oh, we are.” She remembered the boxy house from back in March. It looked no more inviting now that in had then. The whole structure was designed to set itself apart from the rest of the town, like their old manor in miniature form. There was no sense of passion in the building’s design, it was all function over form. “Ok, so let’s go over the plan. Pacifica… goes in there, then gets the stone and heads over to McGucket’s to investigate. Me’n you Dip’ll take Andromeda to the Shack, then start scanning for any unusual energy, agreed?”

Dipper was still staring out at the house but shook his head. “Yeah, right. We’ll head over in the Hyper-Coyote after this.”

“‘Hyper-Coyote’, seriously? I cannot believe you named this piece of scrap that!” Andromeda crossly spluttered.
Mabel wagged her finger. “Ah ah ah, your Pacifica side is showing.”

“Hey, I actually like the name,” Pacifica stated. “I’m gonna miss this old wreck of a truck.”

Dipper took one of her hands and held it tight. “Miss? Hey, Paz, don’t talk like that. If all goes to plan, you’ll be in and out of there in no time.”

“We have to be serious Mason. Even after we sort everything out with this radiation stuff, I still have to see what my parents decide.”

“Can’t we send in ‘Origami’ here instead?” He angrily jabbed a finger at Andromeda, who stuck her tongue back out at him.

“She doesn’t have the right demeanour. She’s mostly Mabel on the inside, remember, she hasn’t had years of strict lessons drilled into her. If we want any chance of getting through that door, it has to be me. Besides you really trust her to bring the stone back?”

Dipper let out a long sigh. “I forgot about that. I just wanna make sure you’re safe.”

She leant over to him, and the pair kissed. It lasted for a long time, since neither one wanted to go. Andromeda studied the act curiously, as if trying to understand their relationship.

“Hey guys, if we’re gonna do this, let’s not waste time,” Mabel sadly said, and they broke their kiss. Pacifica turned to face her, and the two girls hugged. Mabel’s usual ‘death grip hug’ style was absent, the emotions too high for that. “Bye Paz.” She choked on the words, overcome with the moment.

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“I couldn’t have asked for a more supportive sister, Mabel. Keep good care of your dumb brother for me.” Mabel laughed despite her tears, and Pacifica turned back to face Dipper. “I… don’t know what to say.”

“Me neither. You’re still absolutely sure you wanna do this? If you don’t want to go in there, I can turn the truck around, you only have to say the word.”

She kissed quickly once more, just a quick peck on his lips this time, then whispered in his ear. “I’m sure. Mason. I love you, and nothing will ever change that. Not my parents, not how far apart we are, nothing. Bye guys.”

Andromeda rolled her eyes across the cabin. “Yeah, yeah, can we get this over with? I’m kinda on a schedule here?” All three of them stared daggers at Andromeda, who backed down.

Pacifica slowly opened the pickup’s door. Tucking her Llama Journal under her arm, she stepped out onto the curb. Dipper sadly pulled the door closed again and stuck his head out the window. “I love you Princess. We’ll head off then, to the Shack.”

“No, stay. I think it’ll help sell this.” She gestured at the house behind her, then turned around to face it. Mustering every ounce of courage she could find within herself, she made her way up the path to the front door. Passing through the entry gate, she took each step towards the front door agonisingly slowly.

At last she stood right by the door. All she had to do was knock, and her life would be over. Not looking back at the pickup, she tapped lightly on the door three times. Several seconds passed, and as each one passed the pit in Pacifica’s stomach grew deeper.

The door abruptly opened, revealing her father standing in the entry hall. His eyes drifted down
towards her, then widened in shock. “Pacifica? My dear, you’ve returned early!”

“Um, yeah. Hi… Dad… I’m back.” She gave a pitiful little wave and grimaced.

Preston Northwest’s eyes scanned the surroundings, settling on the red pickup still parked across the way. “Did he drive you here?”

When Pacifica was younger, she’d built up defences around her personality, all that cold detached iciness that discouraged anyone to get too close and see how insecure she really was on the inside. As time had gone on, those same defences grew more and more performative as she spent time away from her parent’s influence. She didn’t have to hide who she was around the twins, it was all just for her parent’s sake, to get them to still believe she was staying in line. Now, attempting to revert years of improvements to her personality, she adopted an air of formality. “Yes, father, he drove me here. They’re just making sure I make it in safely. But I won’t be seeing Mason Pines or his sister again.” She stuck her nose up. “I’ve seen what it’s like, out there in the world. And now I’ve come home, to you.”

Preston studied her for a moment, then smiled. It wasn’t exactly an inviting smile, Pacifica doubted he could have ever pulled that off. But it was still a sign that he trusted her. “My daughter. What a wonderful choice you’ve made. Come, come in.” She glanced back at the pickup quickly, before Preston closed the door behind her. “Priscilla! Pacifica is home!”

Her mother came quickly down the stairs, before grabbing Pacifica into a hug. “Oh, it’s so good to have you back!” she wailed. Priscilla released the hug and looked over her daughter. “What are you wearing?!! This kind of style just won’t do. And I can’t believe you cut your beautiful hair! It’s a travesty!” This was one thing Pacifica actually agreed with her mother on, she would like to have her hair longer again. “But you’re back, that’s all that matters. Now we’re a family again.”

Pacifica thought the words couldn’t have sounded more hollow. The only people she really considered ‘family’ were out there in the Hyper-Coyote, about to head off on some mad adventure to find the radiation source. If her parents really knew what she’d been up to these last few weeks, fighting monsters, getting excited at the prospect of seeing new bizarre forms of life, or even her sleeping arrangements at the Pines’ house, they’d have both blown a blood vessel. She was grateful that neither of them had noticed that she was still wearing the Pine Tree pendant.

“What is that?” She was jerked back to the conversation, and though for a moment that one of her parents had noticed the pendant after all. But her father had simply pointed the pink journal under her arm. She’d hoped they wouldn’t notice it and tried to come up something that could convince them it wasn’t worth worrying about. “It’s my, uh… diary. I’ve been keeping a log of my thoughts.”

“May I see?” She really didn’t want to hand the journal over but knew that resistance would only bring further questions. She passed it to her father, who flipped through the pages. Expecting the book to be taken away, what he said next surprised her. “Interesting. This is some commendable work my dear.”

“Huh?”

“It does the mind good to get thoughts down on paper. I see that your time away was not entirely wasted.” He handed over the book, which she quickly and gratefully took back. “Now go prepare yourself in your room, dinner will at 4:30. You are dismissed.” Both of her parents filed out of the hallway, leaving her alone.

That was it, no mention of her missed birthday, no questions about her school work, not a single
word of inquiry about how she’d been living for the past month. As far as Preston and Priscilla Northwest were concerned, they had their daughter back, and nothing more was needed on their part.

They weren’t punishing her. They weren’t grovelling at her feet, determined to satisfy her desires so they could win her over. They were completely apathetic, assuming that she hadn’t changed in the slightest. And if Pacifica hadn’t changed her behaviour, then why should they? It truly showed how little they cared for her as a person, her wellbeing was irrelevant. In their minds, simply by her returning they’d already won.

The indifference was appalling to Pacifica. Any reaction at all, even if it was bad, would be better than this. She knew now that coming back here had been a mistake. Her parents were never gonna see her for who she really was. Tempted to simply walk back out the front door, she had to remind herself that she had a reason for being here.

Following her father’s command, she headed up to her old bedroom. Not much was different about most of the room, the four-poster bed was still neatly made from the last morning she’d spent here, just before heading off to meet Dipper in Spring break.

Her desk had changed though. Her monitor setup, her expensive computer, those were all gone. Her parents had finally taken away the one small window of leisure she’d been allowed. Rather than make her sad for losing all that equipment, this only strengthened her resolve to leave. She turned her attention back to the mission at hand and laid down on the floor to look under her bed.

Thankful that her parents hadn’t decided to look under there, she reached down and took the Ursus stone from where she’d casually dumped it back in March. In hindsight it had been insanely risking just tossing the necklace down there and hoping no-one would look for it. She hadn’t even tried to hide it well, anyone glancing under would have spotted it instantly.

No matter, she had it now. She rolled the smooth rock over in her hands a few times. It didn’t ‘speak’ to her like it had when she’d been occupying Mabel’s body. As far as she could tell, it was just a lifeless ball. She knew better though and tucked the necklace into the pocket of her jeans.

Now she had this, there was nothing keeping her in this house. She could stay, try and salvage something from her parents. But she already knew that was a non-starter, they simply wouldn’t engage with her on a proper level.

So, she opened the glass doors that led to her balcony. Her parents hadn’t even bothered to lock it since she’d left. The balcony didn’t overlook much, just the edge of the town before it opened up into the woods. She stepped up onto the rail surrounding the balcony, then jumped out over the wall that circled the house. Rolling on the soft earth, she gracefully got back to her feet, applying a move Mabel had taught her in their parkour sessions once.

Pacifica took one last look at the house, then headed off to fulfil part two of their plan. She decided right there and then that she’d never be coming back to this lousy house again.

Across the town, the twins and Andromeda pulled into the long drive up to the Mystery Shack. Mabel still felt a slight buzz at seeing the battered building, and Dipper now shared the same feeling of excitement being here after so long brought. He tried to quash those emotions of longing. For the time being he had to focus on the task at hand.

He stepped out of the Coyote, energy scanner in hand. Already he was picking up several large abnormal readings. It was like the whole valley was soaked in a low-level field of energy, that
seemed to spike every now and again. So far Andromeda hadn’t suffered another bout of pain, but it was likely only a matter of time. It seemed there was some truth to her words after all.

Mabel looked around the clearing. Outwardly the town seemed the same as it had always done, with no signs that anything was wrong. She pulled Andromeda out of the pickup by her arm. “Come on now, Andry, we gotta get set up in the Shack.”

“Ugh, can’t I stay in the blasted truck, you don’t need me to do this.”

“Ah ah ah, don’t make me use the water bottle again.”

“Besides,” Dipper explained, stowing the scanner in his hoodie, “the Shack is shielded from magical attacks thanks to the Unicorn barrier. It’s probably the safest place in town for keeping you away from any harmful radiation.”

Andromeda rolled her eyes and allowed herself to be led forwards. “Fine, I don’t wanna spend too long here though.”

“Why not?” Mabel was intrigued by her reluctance to enter such a familiar place.

“It’s complicated, ok! I mean, I was kinda ‘born’ here. Lots of strong emotions in this building too, and memories that I don’t know if they’re mine or yours or Pacifica’s. Structures always leave traces, resonances. Homes especially so. Argh, let’s just get this over with.”

Before either twin could stop her, she barged through the door into the Shack that led to the living room. She halted, taking in the room. Most of the memories she could sense were of enjoyment or contentment.

Many times, the Pines family and their friends had spent time together here. Andromeda could even directly remember many such occasions. Mabel’s memories of them were mostly clear, though a few half-remembered events were signs of Pacifica’s bleeding through accidentally. There was also a deep sadness and frustration she could feel leaking up through the floorboards, all the emotions coded into the basement below.

“I need more.” The wash of emotion suddenly felt intoxicating. She didn’t know how to manage this odd power she’d inherited from the stone. It substituted feelings she’d never actually felt herself, things like a sense of belonging, that she only knew as a distant memory from before her creation.

She didn’t get any further into the Shack though, as Mabel grabbed a hold of her arm from behind. “Hey now, cool it. We’ll take this slowly. Now, let’s introduce you. HEY!” Andromeda jumped as Mabel started shouting at the top of her lungs. “HEY! SOOS! IT’S MABEL AND DIPPER!”

“Shh Mabel! You don’t have to shout so loud.” Dipper shut the door behind him and headed around to the gift shop and museum side of the Shack.

There were a number of tourists milling about, a tour of the Shack had likely just ended. Soos was sat behind the cash register, dressed in his casual question mark t-shirt. His eyes lit up when he saw the twins. “My doods! What are you guys doing here? Is it summer already, did I lose track of time? Hehe, that’d be so like me to do. And Dipper, you made it this time!”

“Hey man! Pterodactyl bros in the house!” Despite the pressing situation, Dipper couldn’t pass up a fist-bump from his old friend. “It’s been too long dude.”

Behind them, Mabel led Andromeda into the gift shop. The clone seemed unfocused, still too absorbed in picking up the emotions in the room.
“Hiya Hambone, hope you can stay a bit longer this time. Neat new purple hair, reminds me of my animes. Oh, and hey P-Dog, long time no- wait, there’s something off here.” Soos rested a hand on his chin.

“See, I told you he’d figure me out.” Andromeda smirked as the owner of the Mystery Shack slowly started to comprehend what was going on.

“Hold up! You’re not Pacifica at all, are you!? Woah, I’m freaking out here doods!”

“Hey Soos, it’s fine,” Mabel reassured. “This isn’t Pacifica. Meet: Andromeda!” She said the last line with an excited flourish but didn’t expect Soos’ panicked reaction.

“Oh my gosh, Pacifica has a twin!? Who in this town doesn’t have a secret hidden sibling!? Do I have a twin too? Is there a Soosford out there?!”

Dipper facepalmed. “Oh man, this is gonna take some explaining.”

After giving Soos a rundown of Andromeda’s creation in the basement, the twins turned to the topic of the mysterious radiation. “Hmm, now that you mention it, it has kind been ‘quieter’ around here. We used to get Gnomes rifling through the trash, but that stopped a few weeks back.”

Dipper hit his fist into his palm. “Then it is true! Damn, Pacifi-ca- I mean, Andromeda, guess I owe you an apology.”

“Damn straight, Dip-for-brains. This is what I’ve been trying to tell you. Now we’ve gotta fix it.”

“Right,” Dipper nodded. “Soos, Pacifica’s already looking into McGucket, as well as picking up an… artefact that might come in handy. Mabel and I have to track this radiation to find the source.”

Soos nodded, as if he knew what Dipper was talking about. “Cool doods, I’ll just let Melody know you’re here.” Soos disappeared behind the curtain that led into the museum. The twins were both slightly confused where she’d been anyway.

A few seconds later, Melody came striding in as steadily as she could. Today she was the one wearing the ‘Mr Mystery’ outfit, with the suit and fez. Despite how heavily pregnant she was, she still looked phenomenal in the part. Stan’s old 8-ball cane made a useful walking stick, so she didn’t need Soos’ help to stay upright. “Hey kids, I hear you’ve got some ‘big ‘wibbly energy thing’ to deal with? Did I get that right honey?”

Soos came out behind her and emphatically nodded. “Exactly right. Wibbly energy’s just the worst.”

Though Mabel was excited to see Melody and Soos, she’d started tapping her foot impatiently. “Dipper, are we gonna do this, or what? Every second we hang around, more woodland creatures could be hurt, or being kidnapped!”

“Alright, alright, I’ve already set up the anomalous energy scanner. I was kinda expecting the source to be right here in the Shack basement, but it’s not reading much about background level. Strange, what with all the dimensional energy that seeped through down there, you’d assume it would be a hotspot of activity. Guess we now just have to cover a large enough area of the town to triangulate the true source origin of the radiation.”

“Are we just gonna drive around in the Coyote till we find something? Will be tricky since we
can’t go off-road into the trees.”

“Actually, I have something else in mind. I think you’re gonna like this sis.”

Sat on the porch sofa, Mabel waited as Dipper retrieved some equipment from the pickup. Andromeda was sat beside her, the twins wanted to make sure one of them was watching her at all times. Compared to Mabel’s slumped back, slightly bored posture, she was sat rigidly straight. Mabel assumed it must be part of her ‘Pacifica’ conditioning, always taught to look presentable. The real Pacifica hadn’t bothered with that kind of pointless formality in ages.

Dipper gestured that Mabel should come over, then started setting up something in the clearing in front of the Shack. “Here we are Mabel, what do you think of these?”

He handed over a piece of metal, one of a set of four, that were all roughly cylindrical. Each one was painted a bright orange, with flame decals. Turning over the metal in her hands, she suddenly realised where she recognised it from. “Wait a second, this is part of that ‘electro-defence’ thingy, isn’t it? The fore-arm and ankle bracers. I thought you junked all of this stuff months ago?”

Dipper checked over the other armoured cylinders, making sure they were functional. “Well, most of the armour was scrap after your little rampage in the library, definitely. Helmet was fried, chest pieces wouldn’t connect. But, one part of the system still works - the flight system.” Mabel’s eyes started widening as he spoke. “I figure that we’ll get a better spread on the scanner if we sweep over the whole forest.”

Mabel initially said nothing, but, grinning, simply slotted the metal armour onto her arms and legs. The ones on her arms covered most of her tattoos, but she was happy that her golden pine tree was just visible above the metal.

“So, what do you think? You wanna be part of the inaugural flight?” Dipper eagerly asked

“Dipper. Dipper. This is amazing. Last time I didn’t get to enjoy the flight, it was over so fast, and my mind was kinda elsewhere.”

Dipper ensured that the flight units were securely clamped down onto her. “Since I couldn’t salvage the helmet, you won’t have the heads-up interface. Don’t worry though, up there you won’t have much to crash into, and there won’t be any hostiles. Navigation won’t be too important, and you can steer with the arm units.”

She passed her glasses over Dipper. “Here, look after these, don’t want ‘em falling off while I’m in the air. As long as I don’t have to read any fine print up in the sky I think we’ll be alright.” Next, Mabel pulled off her sweater, leaving herself in a plain white vest top. She handed the sweater over to Andromeda, still sat on the porch. She held it out in her hands like she wasn’t sure what to do with it. “I figured that since you have my memories, you’re probably missing having a sweater.”

Andromeda looked down at the purple sweater, which had a blue puppy playing basketball on the chest. Her hand squeezed the soft wool for a second. “Thanks, I guess. Whatever.”

“Oh, that’s definitely your Pacifica side showing! Catch you later, sis.”

Andromeda called after her. “For the record, I think this is a terrible plan! I still remember how awful the last flight went!”

Dipper gave one last check over the rocket systems. “Ok, the directional mechanism is controlled
via a mental link, you simply think about increasing speed, and the rockets increase in strength.”
“Think fast, go fast - got it. And the all the cool flamey paint, was that your idea too?”

“Actually, Pacifica thought of that. She wanted them to be a bit more personalised that ‘ashen cobalt grey’, or whatever they were originally. These were supposed to be a gift to pay you back for the journal and everything else.”

“Aw, that’s so sweet of her. I’ll have to thank her later when I get back.” She glanced over at Andromeda, who was still bemusedly looking down at the sweater, then back to Dipper. “I hope she’s doing ok with… you-know-who.”

Not looking away from his work, Dipper started tightening a harness around Mabel’s chest, which attached the scanner so that it left Mabel’s hands free to steer herself. “Here, one last thing.” He tucked a small silver sphere with an indentation like a speaker grille into Mabel’s pocket. “Sonic grenade, courtesy of our friends at Polaris. Just in case you get caught in a pinch, since I didn’t repair the electro-proton cannon in the wrist units. By the way… I have faith that Paz is doing fine. We’ve gotta believe in her.”

Mabel nodded as Dipper stood back. She tested out the units a few times, sending out little sparks of fire. “Time to see if I can trust in your rewiring, lol. If I go down in flames, I’ll blame you Dip,” she said with a wink.

“Ha, don’t worry, I’ve tested these myself. Got a little singed and crashed into a tree, but I’m sure you have better coordination.”

“Bye then Dipper… bye Andromeda.” The clone gave a non-committal wave, still seemingly entranced with her woollen gift. Mabel stepped back into an open space and stretched her arms and legs in preparation.

“Ready Mabel. Take-off in 5, 4, 3…”

Mabel beamed at the two of them. “This is gonna be so fun! See you guys-“ Her conversation was cut off by the exhaust of the rockets blaring out. Mabel shot off into the air leaving a bright streak of fire behind her. Dipper rushed forwards to stomp out a small bit of flame that had spread on the grass.

Satisfied that he hadn’t caused a forest fire, he heard Andromeda say something from behind him in a neutral tone. “And away she goes.”

Coming back to the manor was a strange experience for Pacifica. On the one hand, it was a building constructed with the labour of hundreds of betrayed workers, a symbol of decadence that set the Northwests up above the rest of the town, the clearest legacy of her family’s dark past.

On the other, it was the home of her childhood, a time she had mixed feelings about. While she had her every want provided for, she was also more a prisoner than she’d ever been afterwards. Back then she hadn’t realised it and had been pretty happy with how her life had been progressing. It felt naïve looking back - how little she’d really yearned for back then beyond the next slice of extravagance.

The main gate was unlocked, so she made her way up the drive. From the outside, the manor was identical to how it had been when her parents had been forced to sell. She had returned a handful of times after that - McGucket had kindly allowed to her to pick up any heirlooms she wanted, or just to have somewhere that felt familiar. He had no malice towards her, even if she initially considered
nothing more than a dirty hobo. Funny that, how a man who’d had nothing in life was more caring
towards her than her own parents.

She’d not stepped foot on the inside of the manor for some time though, over the years the Mystery
Shack became more important as a retreat from her family life. McGucket had reportedly converted
some of the wings into large construction workshops and was focused on bringing his outlandish
robot designs to life.

For the first time, Pacifica wondered if that was such a good idea. She’d seen some of McGucket’s
work in action back during Weirdmageddon. Would it really do the world much good to have more
of those out there in the world? The old her probably wouldn’t have considered those
consequences, only focused on the bottom line where profit was concerned.

A flock of peacocks were startled and scurried off as she reached the front door. McGucket must
have left them to flourish in the grounds unsupervised, since there were more than she ever
remembered. It was starting to get late, and she wanted to get inside before night fell, so she wasted
no time in ringing the doorbell.

In the moments while she waited for an answer, she watched the sun slowly begin to set beyond
the trees. It bathed the forest and town in a soft orange glow, that she only now realised was really
quite pretty. Up here situated high on the hill overlooking the entire town she could see for miles
across the endless tree lined valley.

She was once again hit with a pang of conflict. So much beauty was visible from here, but at what
cost? Clearing the trees around the manor had been a monumental effort, and so many suffered
directly because of the choices of her ancestors, the choice to put the Northwests up on a pedestal
for all to see.

Focusing back on the vista, her eyes were drawn upwards. There was an odd streak of brighter
orange that contrasted slightly with the sky. She shrugged it off, must have been an aeroplane. The
streak then veered downwards, disappearing into the treeline. It would have looked like a meteor
or falling star, she thought, had it been night-time.

Finally, she heard the latch on the door unfasten. Standing looking down at her was the gruff, no-
nonsense face of Tate McGucket, Fiddleford’s son. He had a cap drawn low over his eyes, as usual.
a man of few words, his eyebrows perked up slightly at seeing Pacifica. “Miss Northwest. This is
an… unexpected visit.”

Pacifica curtsied, trying to act as non-suspiciously as possible. “Mr McGucket, greetings. I know
it’s been a while since my last visit-“

“3 years, 5 months and 8 days to be precise.”

“Yes, well…” She’d forgotten that Tate’s rather non-descript appearance belied an intelligence that
rivalled his father’s when it came to technical matters.

“As I recall, you came in early December 2013 to collect some Christmas ornaments. After that
you didn’t show up again. What do you want now?” he gruffly intoned.

“I… my parents and I are going through what you might call a ‘rough patch’. I’m trying to…
rediscover myself, and part of that involves memory therapy.”

“Memory therapy?” Tate disdainfully sneered.

“Yuh-huh, it’s a technique a friend taught me - you go to a source of a lot of traumatic or fond
memories, which helps dredge them all up so you can move on. She tried it back in March and it worked wonders.” Pacifica enthusiastically grinned, hoping it would sell the deception well enough to get herself inside. “I’d have thought your family more than any would appreciate the value of a clear mind.”

Beneath the cap, Tate’s eyes darted back and forth and his whole demeanour was antsy. “You chose an odd time. My father is involved in some critical work at the moment that mustn’t be overly disturbed. Perhaps it would be best if you came back another time…”

He started to close the door, but Pacifica forced an arm out to hold it. “I’m only here for one day!” She blurted out. The door opened again, and Tate raised an eyebrow. “After today I’m leaving town, so it has to be right now. Please Mr McGucket, I’ll only be a few minutes, I swear. Can’t I just get a quick look around the old place? Please?”

Tate’s shoulders softened in defeat. “Very well. No more than 30 minutes though.”

“Thank you, thank you, thank you! I mean,” she coughed, “I appreciate your courtesy.” While she had been completely bullshitting about the ‘memory therapy’ junk, she did find it really peculiar to step into the vast entry hall of the manor. It was here that her defiance against her parents had first been set in stone (or rather in mud on the carpet), so she was grateful that the McGuckets hadn’t altered it much. It still felt too large as the first room anyone entered into, a statement that you were nestled deep within the clutches of the Northwests.

Pacifica actually recalled being scared of this room as a really small child, too open and daunting. There were too many nooks and crannies that the lights didn’t reach in this vast space. Knowing exactly on whose backs this hall had been built didn’t ease up the slight feeling of dread she felt either. She tried to shake off all those old ‘ghosts’ so she could focus on the more solid problems of the present.

“Could I possibly see one of your labs?”

“Why the hell would you wanna do that? My father’s work is highly confi-“

“To see the differences! You’ve likely overhauled some of the rooms, seeing how much they’ve changed will put a lot of my memories into perspective.”

Tate McGucket once again sighed and led her up the staircase at the back of the hall. Most of the halls seemed to be unlit, though to be fair they had only been set up with simple candle sconces and primitive gas lamps. The McGuckets probably didn’t bother with keeping the whole place pristine if they were only gonna use certain areas.

They came to a room that had used to be a large lounge. Looking at it now, she realised that it was likely larger than the entire ground floor of the Pines’ home in Piedmont, which made her vaguely ashamed to have wasted so much space. A long wooden dining table was set up in the middle of the room, festooned with numerous pieces of arcane equipment and research notes. A quick glance at one of the loose sheets of paper revealed nothing but tiny scribbled mathematical formulas and graphs she couldn’t interpret.

Her eye was drawn to a large board set up on a tripod, that was covered by a sheet. “What’s behind this?” She eagerly asked, affecting her most charming grin. Tate just straightened it, so it fully covered the board.

“I think we’re done here. You gotten all your memories sorted out?”

“Um, not sure, uh, maybe I should-“
“Yeah, no. It’s time you left.” Tate interrupted her, and a mild sensation of lingering annoyance that someone of a ‘lower class’ had dared to speak up to her rose up in her chest, before a secondary wave of shame at that thought came over her. She was supposed to be a better person than that now, she reminded herself. “Come on, I’ll lead you out-“

“Tate, there ya are! Been meanin’ to get you to assist in my darn fangled calc-yoo-lations!” Pacifica knew that voice, and slowly turned around to see Old Man McGucket himself striding into the lab. What she wasn’t expecting was that he was accompanied by a massive brute wearing, of all things, an eyepatch. That large man looked rather bored with the current situation but was following McGucket closely like a lapdog.

Tate suddenly seemed flustered. “Dad, I was just getting around to it. The, ah, effects research is continuing apace, I just need to run a few more tests before we can conclusively determine the cause on the newest specimens. But your hypothesis seems almost certain now.”

“Why that’s sweller than a warm fur blanket in the depths of December! Everything’ll be right as rain in no- eh, who’s this you have with ya Tate?”

He’d finally noticed Pacifica, standing quietly off to the side trying not to be noticed. She stepped forward into the light and tried to put on a convincing smile. “Hello, Mr McGucket, I was just on my way out.”

“Well swaggle my horn! If it ain’t young Miss Pacifica! Been too long since we last partook of such casual congress! Hmm, I reckon you look kinda different from before.” He snapped his fingers. “That’s it, new boots! I always notice a quality pair of shoes.”

She awkwardly laughed, not sure whether the old man was joking or if it was an actual compliment. “Uh yeah, ha ha, you got me, these are new.”

McGucket nodded. “A small change to the outside can often be a sign of true inner revolution. Least, I think that’s an inspirational quote I read on a box of cereal somewhere!”

That comment brought Pacifica’s attention to how McGucket presented his outward appearance. The hunched old man hadn’t changed much in 5 years, he still wore the same brown overalls and long wide-brimmed hat, and hadn’t trimmed his white beard. He had a few more wrinkles perhaps, and he now wore those green lensed spectacles constantly, but the overall impression was familiar. If he was hiding some ‘dark motivation’ behind that cheery grin, then he must be concealing it incredibly well.

There was one major change, however. His right arm, previously bandaged, was now completely replaced up to the shoulder. Instead there was some sort of bionic arm, bronze coloured and made of copper or brass. “What’s with the freaky arm?”

“Oh, that. That girl, whatshername, Sweetie? She helped me fix ma arm!”

“You mean Candy?” Pacifica wondered what one of Mabel’s overbearing friends had to do with this old tinkerer.

“That’s what I reckon I meant! She’s a whizz with robotics, don’tcha know. ‘Improvement of human bein’’ that’s what she called it. Took her on as an apprentice for a time. Before… well, she’s off doing her own stuff now.” McGucket trailed off, and everyone in the room stood awkwardly in silence. “Anyhoo, best you mosey along young’in, me and ma son have some important work to attend to. I’m sure you can find your way out, was your fancy house once after all. Now Tate, I’d like to go check over the attraction point-“
Pacifica couldn’t follow the rest of their conversation as McGucket placed a hand on his son’s back to lead him out of the room. For a brief moment, she was left with the heavyset man with the eyepatch. Adopting an air of superiority, she crossed her arms and addressed the man the same way she’d used to address her servants. “So what are you, some kind of bodyguard, that it?”

With a grunt, the man spoke. “Something like that. I’m Morbid. The old man pays, I fulfil a job. Nothing more than that.”

“Huh. Well, like the boss said, we’d all better ‘mosey along’ out.”

The man smirked. “Right blondie, whatever you say.” He started heading out, and Pacifica began to relax. She tensed up again as he turned at the door. “Word to the wise though. If you were having any thoughts about messing with my employer… well, let’s just say I take good care of my clients.”

Morbid stared down at Pacifica, but she didn’t waver, used to dealing with people trying to cow her into submission. “I see. Well don’t worry Mr, Morbid was it? I have no intentions of upsetting this particular applecart.”

“Then we understand each other. Nice journal by the way, I see you keep good company.” He brushed out of the room after that, leaving Pacifica very confused about the comment. She’d almost forgotten herself that she was still carrying her Llama Journal under her arm. Now this ‘bodyguard’, or whatever on earth he was, seemed to know what it was?

At least he’d left her alone, with basically free reign of the manor. It was time to get what she came for.

Andromeda had asked Dipper if they could wait for Mabel in the attic bedroom, and he begrudgingly escorted her up there. He sat on his bed, studying her reactions. From his point of view, she appeared to breathe deeply, like there was an intoxicating scent in the room. He knew it went deeper than that though, her empathic nature made her attuned to the subtle emotions associated with a place like this. Like someone lying on the shore, she couldn’t help but let the waves wash over her.

Since they had some time alone, Dipper decided to get some answers to certain aspects about Andromeda. “So. Andromeda. How are you… doing?”

The clone rolled her eyes, then sat down on Mabel’s bed. “Wow, really cutting to the heart of the issues bro, so subtle. You could take these off for starters, I’m not gonna run.” She jangled her handcuffs up at him.

Reluctantly, he leant over and unlocked the cuffs. “There, happy now? I was serious though, how are you handling… well, everything. Being back here, spending time with me and Mabel. It’s gotta be straining for you.”

“Aw, Dipper actually cares this time,” she said rather harshly.

“Come on, there be must be something you wanna talk about! What it’s like seeing Soos and Melody again, how you feel about Paz going back to her parents, what you’re thinking about-“

“I’ma gonna stop you right there.” She held up a hand and he ceased his line of inquiry. “I don’t care about any of that stuff. All I want is my body back, that’s my one overwhelming desire in life.”
Dipper frowned. “You know I can’t allow that. Mabel—“

“I know. I know exactly what Mabel wants, because I remember her entire life. I have the same fears too, but without the will to fix myself I’d just crumple up and die.”

“Is that metaphorical crumpling or…” The piercing glare she gave him made him immediately drop the subject. “Look, maybe it doesn’t have to be that way. We could get Mabel to clone herself with the copier, make you a new body, then switch you into that with the carpet! That way you wouldn’t have to hurt the real Mabel.”

Andromeda sighed. “You think I haven’t thought of that already Dip?! Wouldn’t fix anything anyway. The new body would still have a paper mind, too small to fit everything in. The carpet would just port over all my issues into a fresh package. That’s why I need a human brain, one that’s powerful enough to contain me. And even if I swapped into a new body, then we’d have the same problem all over again when the new clone’s mind gets put in this body. I know you don’t like that but taking Mabel’s body is the only plan I think’ll work to heal me.”

“You’re absolutely sure you can’t keep living like this? It really hurts that much to stay in that body?”

“I don’t wanna live as paper forever!” She shouted, suddenly furious. “I don’t bleed, or bend, or break. I’m not meant to change. Look at Quattro, 5 years and he’s still a kid. What does that mean for me, long-term I mean? Will I just never age, am I gonna end up outliving everyone I know?”

She sniffed and wiped her nose, trying to avoid showing any emotion in front of Dipper. “Life isn’t meant to live inside paper. I’ve tried it. I just wanna be like everyone else.”

There was a deep silence in the room. Dipper didn’t want to bring up anything regarding her personal issues, and Andromeda wasn’t about to divulge any more about that either. He tried to think of something less inflammatory to talk about.

“Can I ask you something? Why ‘Andromeda’?”

She shrugged. “I dunno, I’ve heard you use it as a nickname for Pacifica a few times. Seemed like a decent enough name.”

“But do you know why I call her that, what the name means?”

“I, um, I’m sure it’s something meaningful? You two both love that sappy romance stuff.”

“Hmm, so it’s mainly just the personality you inherited from Paz, not the memories.”

“I mean, kinda. Sometimes I think I’m remembering something from her point of view, but it’s never clear. Just another part of what makes living my life so hard. Like the dumb powers. It’s not great to walk into a room and have two dozen conflicting emotions bombarding you all the time.”

“Yeah, but the controlling plants stuff is kinda neat, you gotta admit.”

“I’d rather just be normal. Sometimes it’d be nice to just act like I don’t have to worry, you know. Buying dresses, going on normal dates. Dumb teen stuff.”

“That sounds like something Paz said once. Hey, about dates, that reminds me. Since you have parts of her personality, do you feel anything towards… me… like… in that way.”

As it dawned on Andromeda what he was talking about, her expression became disgusted. “Ew no Dip! What are you talking about, that’s gross! I have way too much Mabel to ever think about…
that, with you! Eugh, that image is never gonna get out of my head.”

“Ok, ok, sorry I brought it up!” He held up his arms in apology and was blushing bright red now. “I won’t touch that subject again with a 10ft pole.”

“Good. Can we just drop everything now, I’d rather just not talk while we wait for Mabel.”

Dipper stroked his goatee. “Wait, ok, one last question. How do you ‘relate’ to Pacifica, as a person? I mean, I know how you feel about Mabel, but Paz is kind of your creator too.”

Andromeda had to stop to think. “Well, she is complicit in creating me, just like Mabel, so that’s a negative. But I guess she’s alright. I don’t have the same urge to take over her body as with Mabel, it’s more like an, um, ‘annoyance’ that she helped make me. It’s odd though, despite having her personality, she seems... different now.”

“Well yeah, that’s what a month away from her parents will do. She’s finally had a chance to be herself.”

“But the hair, the new clothes! It’s such a departure! I know it doesn’t seem like much, but as someone with an imprint of her personality from a few months ago it’s like she’s a different person.”

“I know exactly what you mean. Paz has changed. When I look at you, it’s like seeing her how she once was, you’ve got some of that old spite she used to harbour. But she’ll never be like you again. I know that now, she’s stronger than that. I suppose you wouldn’t really understand that, changing, since you’re kinda stuck the way you are.”

“Change...” She looked off into the distance, as if contemplating the meaning of the word. Then she chuckled. “I never did like change much, did I.”

Dipper good naturedly laughed too. “Ha, that sounds more like Mabel now. This is all so messed up, right?”

“Totally.”

Dipper was glad to finally have some kind of mutual understanding with Andromeda, but before he could continue their conversation, a beeping came from his hoodie. He fished out a small glass screen with a holographic display flashing on the surface.

“What’s that doohickey thingy Dipper?”

“It’s a remote diagnostic tracker for Mabel’s rockets. Oh no, we may have a slight problem.”

Mabel was giddy with excitement. The initial jolt of exhilaration after the take-off hadn’t diminished yet, and the wind whipping past her hair made it feel like the world’s best rollercoaster. Several times she’d zoomed straight down at the ground, only to correct her flight at the last second and head back up, just to get that free fall effect. Soaring high above the pine trees and the town, every second up here in the sky was indescribably amazing.

She mused that it was different from her usual parkour or using her grappling hook. With those there was always a consideration for where to move next, how to avoid obstacles, find the best routes, her mind constantly whirring. But up here, against the orange-tinged sky there was nothing, just pure freedom.
She’d circled the town a few times now, increasing the accuracy of the scanner’s measurements. The views were another added bonus of being so high up. The forests that she’d spent her youth exploring on Mystery Hunts blanketed much of the terrain below, but the town itself stood out in its clearing. To the north were the majestic floating cliffs that encircled the valley. She even made out the strange hump to the south, that she knew from Dipper was actually an alien crash site.

While up there she couldn’t see the Mystery Shack, nestled as it was in the trees, but the Northwest mansion was plainly visible on its high hill. She wondered if Pacifica was in there right now, investigating McGucket. The idea of having the Ursus stone back was always at the back of her mind too. Despite avowing never to use it there was a certain ‘pull’ it had over her that was irresistible.

Now she was looking across to Lake Gravity Falls again, the shimmering water reflecting the sunset light. Feeling daring, she’d actually flown through one of the waterfalls, getting a bracing hit of cold water that made her extra alert. She swept over the treeline again, having already pinpointed the radiation source. She just wanted to enjoy her flight for a bit longer before reconvening with Dipper and Andromeda.

A loud popping noise, almost like a gunshot rang out from behind her. At first she thought something was attacking, trying to shoot at her. She looked back to see if she was being followed but was greeted by a cloud of smoke. Choking on the fumes, her panic grew when she saw that one of her leg units was belching out the black smoke. “Goddamn it Dipper!”

She was still staying upright in the air, so tried to angle herself downwards to find a landing spot. Sticking her arms slightly upwards caused her body to tilt in the opposite direction, a control scheme that had been tricky to manage at first. With her gangly arms it had taken a lot of focus to keep them coordinated. Shooting downwards, she prayed that she’d reach the ground before the smoking ankle gave out, it would be nearly impossible to stay balanced with the rocket jets only coming from one side.

Unfortunately, Mabel didn’t get to test flying with only one leg, as at that moment the booster on her other leg cut out with no fanfare. The previously smoking unit had also finally run out of steam and ceased to work.

“Ah fudgemuffin.” Suddenly no longer being propelled through the air, Mabel felt the pull of gravity and hurtled down towards the treeline. She clicked her ankles together, trying to cause a spark and reignite the jets.

That wasn’t working, so she desperately turned to plan B. Ripping the metal off her left wrist, she tossed away the now useless booster. As the ground rapidly approached, she stuck out her arm below herself, hoping that she’d actually succeed before colliding with the solid earth.

Her face was whipped by passing tree branches, and a particularly nasty hit caused her to draw blood from her cheek. The branches didn’t slow her fall one bit though, she was till hurtling down.

Then she felt a mighty tug, and pain spread all through her arm. She closed her eyes, clenching through the pain, until she felt herself come to a stop, hanging in the air. Arm outstretched above her, she saw where the cable from her grappling hook had mercifully impacted into the side of one of the pine trees. It was a good thing she’d decided to slip the gauntlet on this morning, always helped to be prepared.

“Phew, that was too close,” she sighed. “Next time I fly, I’m taking an airplane. And a parachute.”

Mabel lowered herself slowly through the canopy, extending the line to abseil down. Her feet
touched the soft ground, and she was grateful once again for the tool she’d picked up on her first day of that fateful summer in Gravity Falls 5 years ago. Her arm was aching all over though, it would need some kind of salve after that landing and the cut on her face would need seeing to as well.

At least the scan had worked, she had a precise location for the radiation source. Now she just had to get back to a road and find Dipper. She’s seen Lake Gravity Falls as she was flying, if she could get to the shore it would be a simple route home. Brushing pine needles off her tank top, she headed off back in the direction she thought she’d been flying from.

She hadn’t made much headway, when a sound from behind caught her attention. It was more than just the simple snap of a twig or rustle of bushes. Something big was moving through the forest. And from the increasing volume, it was moving towards her.

Dropping down into a crouch, she switched off the scanner and tried to remove her chest harness as quietly as possible. She made her way behind a tree, but as she peeked round the side, she saw that it was too late.

Lumbering through the woods was a large monster she recognised instantly, even without her glasses. At the end of a long dark cyan neck was a head like a dragon’s, with an elongated snout and strange fish-like protuberances. The body was round and fat, and it dragged itself across the land on four flippers.

She knew that it wasn’t a ‘real’ lake monster - the shine on its skin looked wrong and knowing that McGucket was involved just confirmed things. Though it was smaller than the original, it was still unmistakably the same kind of creation she’d faced years before. Mabel stood up, knowing that she couldn’t hide, and prepared to face the Gobblewonker robot.

Left alone in McGucket’s lab, Pacifica started taking stock of the scattered notes and equipment. She couldn’t figure out what any of the tech laid out actually did (and wasn’t even sure if half of the stuff was even meant to do anything or was just discarded scrap from other projects). The notes were indecipherable to her, none of it was written in terms she understood. ‘Carry three yee-hahs for every six jamborees’ went a typical note, or ‘use the rock-column-majigger to refocus the saturated no-good particles’. These were probably only readable to McGucket himself, though if anyone could understand it, Mabel probably had the most similar frame of mind.

She started doubting herself. Maybe he was still just a harmless old kook working on some robot, and she was projecting Andromeda’s negative ideas onto him. It wasn’t like she had a great track record in that area. At least the clone seemed to be making an effort to change herself, that was something she found admirable after all the upheaval in her own life she’d gone through recently.

Idly, she strolled around the room, her eyes glancing here and there for some obvious ‘smoking gun’. She remembered the covered board that Tate McGucket had been so concerned with keeping concealed and gripped the corner of the curtain. Hesitating, she considered just turning around and leaving, going off and spending the rest of the evening with Mabel and Mason and not giving a care in the world to all of this radiation nonsense. One last peek under here, then she’d leave, that was a promise.

With a single tug, she pulled back the curtain and gasped at what she saw. In that moment, she knew that she wouldn’t be leaving anytime soon. Sketched on a tall set of blueprints was a complex schematic of a triangular device. The same kind of portal design as in Stanford’s basement, or the one Merak had built in the desert. After all he’d gone through, could McGucket really be planning to build a new portal? Was this the cause of the radiation, had he already
succeeded in breaching through reality?

There were a lot of questions brewing in her head. She guessed this was how Mason must feel at the start of a Mystery Hunt, gathering evidence and clues for an unclear goal. She had to get more information while she was here, this single blueprint wasn’t enough. They had to know exactly what McGucket thought he was doing if they had any hope of stopping him. The radiation, the missing creatures, they must all be caused by his actions.

She felt the Ursus stone in her pocket, determined to deliver it to Mabel as soon as possible. Andromeda’s fanciful tale of abducted woodland creatures suddenly felt a lot more concrete, and if Mabel could find where the missing inhabitants were, then it was vital she got the stone.

McGucket must have been hiding the portal somewhere else, possibly beneath the manor. Luckily, Pacifica had lived her for 13 years, and knew most of the building’s secrets. There were numerous secret passages and safe rooms scattered around behind the skirting boards and gothic wood panelling. She jotted down a quick note in her journal about the portal board, then headed off to where she thought someone would most likely choose to hide anything this big.

At first as she made her way through the darkened halls of the manor, it was with trepidation, since she was worried that at any moment she could walk into one of the McGuckets or their frightening looking guard. But as she progressed that feeling melted away, replaced with a breezy confidence.

Another feeling accompanied that confidence: A tingle running down her spine at the excitement of the adventure she was on. More and more recently she’d begun to feel this buzz at the twins’ Mystery Hunts, the thrills she experienced were like nothing she knew. At times she felt like she could do anything, and was excited to share this new feeling with Mason. It was nice to know something of how he felt, so often she found understanding his obsessions difficult.

Turning a corner in the long winding hallway, she came upon an alcove furnished with a white carpet and matching décor. It was like looking at a monochrome photograph in room form. This was one of her parents’ many sitting parlours, their favourite in fact. It was their pristine place of perfection, a sanctuary against the grubbiness of the town outside. She even had a distant memory of her grandfather, Auldman, sitting in the same room, adopting an air of superiority to the mere idea of being ‘unclean’.

5 years ago Pacifica had cared about that same ideal, and it had nearly cost her and Mason their lives. It seemed silly to care so much about a useless carpet when so much was at stake. She casually rubbed her boot on the patterned floor, slightly messing up the stitching work. A minor gesture, maybe, but one that made her feel quietly assured of herself.

Tracing her and Mason’s tussle on the night of the Northwest annual party, her eyes drifted to the left, where a torn painting still hung across the wall. The figure in the painting was a skeleton dressed in a long red cloak. It made an apt symbol for the nature of what lay on the other side, that hollow spectre covered in fabulous finery.

She stepped through the torn section, and without a flashlight it was hard to see what was so important that it needed to be kept hidden. But she already knew. Stacked up in rows were countless paintings, each one made by one of her ancestors, making a record of some nefarious act they’d once committed long ago. These paintings had opened her eyes to lot of difficult things. Things she hadn’t wanted to consider about herself back then.

Holding a hand out beside herself to track the curve of the paintings, she made her way into the gloom. If McGucket wanted something hidden in this house, then here seemed as appropriate a place as any. She reached the back wall sooner than expected and ran her hands along the wooden
planks that surrounded the hidden chamber.

Confirming her suspicion, a small section on one of the planks clicked in satisfyingly. An aperture opened up in the wall as the planks slid upwards. Regretting bringing nothing but her journal, she stepped into the pitch black corridor beyond. She’d have to navigate by feeling the walls alone.

These stone-lined tunnels linked up to her parents’ bunker beneath the manor, which if you wanted to keep something as hidden as possible was the place to go. It seemed almost ridiculous that her family would care so much about keeping themselves and their money safe that they’d got out of their way to construct this paranoid web of passageways. Spending money just to protect money.

Although she couldn’t see without a flashlight, she’d traced the path to the bunker a few times before. At the end of the summer of 2012, between the Northwest party and Weirdmageddon, and emboldened by Mason’s support in defying her parents, she’d explored every inch of the manor looking for anymore secrets her parents might have stashed away. She hadn’t turned up much, but the mild danger of going behind her parents’ back gave her a drive to simply explore for its own sake.

At last she reached the solid metal door of the bunker. It was sealed up and pressurised, as the bunker had its own circulating supply of air. She spun a heavy wheel on the door, which turned slowly. Thankfully the bunker wasn’t locked from inside, else she’d have been forced to abandon the mission. The wheel clunked, signifying that the door could now be easily pulled open.

She rested a hand on the door, but before she could pull it open, something silver floated into her view and she felt a tug on the back of her neck. Hovering straight out in front of her was her Pine Tree pendant. Normally, when in close contact with the supernatural, it was just supposed to lightly spin around. Now it was almost dragging her forwards, the chain on her neck pulling hard against her skin.

This was it, the jackpot. Whatever was behind that door must be the source of the radiation afflicting the town. Her plan was sneak in there, take note of anything important, then head off to collect the twins. Together they could stop this madness.

She heaved the door towards her and stepped over the lip into the room beyond. Finding a light switch on the wall just inside, she turned it on and adjusted to the return to full brightness. As she got used to the light levels, her eyes widened even further at what she saw.

The room beyond didn’t contain a portal through space or some other machine of McGucket’s devising. Instead she was greeted by a narrow row of cages stacked on either side, like a dog pound. She peered into the first cage on her right, then recoiled from a familiar grinning face staring back. She could never forget those bright yellow eyes and the crazed smile it bore. It was the Were-Coyote, the same one that had nearly killed Mason during Spring Break. It butted its head against the bars of the cage but couldn’t break free.

She hurriedly rushed to the next cage. This one held a large furry creature with floppy ears, like a gorilla, but with curved tusks, and mushrooms growing on the shoulders. The cage after that held a starved unicorn. The one after that, a pair of dejected looking gnomes. On and on, every single cage held a different supernatural beast.

This wasn’t the source of the radiation. Far from it, this was the aftermath. Every one of these creatures must have been ‘infected’ with the same strange energy. As she passed down the hallway of cells, the clamour of moans and wails coming from behind the bars became overwhelming. The trapped creatures were calling out, desperate to be freed or cured. Those that could actually speak cried out for “help!”, over and over again.
It was all too much to take in. As their calls grew louder, Pacifica covered her ears with her hands, trying to drown out the cries of hundreds of terrified beings. Her necklace spun around and round, its enchantments working overtime to try and alert her to the teeming masses.

She slowed her breathing, trying to act rationally. She had to think what the twins would do in a situation like this. What Mason would do. She knew exactly what he’d do. She opened her journal to the latest page and began to write.

Hurtling through the forests of Gravity Falls, Mabel was trying to put her parkour moves into practices in a very different environment to usual. Her training course was in a construction yard, with lots of simple and obvious geometric routes to follow. Here in the woods there was no set path, no clear ways to run and jump. Without her glasses too, it was hard to make out any defined shapes on the forest floor, what looked like a straight stretch of ground might be concealing a dozen roots to trip her up.

Night had fallen since her crash by the lake, making it extra-hard to navigate. It didn’t help that she still had two weighty metal gauntlets strapped to her shins, both of which were now completely useless. Instead of helping her fly onwards, they were just dragging her down. And moving quickly is highly important when you’re being chased by a giant robot in the shape of a lake monster.

The new Gobblewonker had selected her as a target and was now hell bent on eliminating her. Lost in the woods, Mabel had no clue in which direction to run, so was just randomly darting to and fro. This mad dash couldn’t last forever though, and eventually Mabel tripped on a root. Prone on the ground, the robot rose high above her.

Reaching into her pocket, she lofted Dipper’s sonic grenade up above herself, hoping that it would be enough to stop her attacker. She pressed down on the activation button and slammed her hands over her ears. Instead of a piercing howl of sound, all that the sphere let out was a lame high pitched whine, like a balloon sadly deflating.

“Oh thanks Dipper, is everything you gave me today totally busted??!” She covered her face, fearing the worst as the Gobblewonker’s jaws descended towards her. Seconds passed, and she tentatively lifted her arms out of her face, wondering why she hadn’t already felt the grip of the robot’s blade like teeth.

In front of her, its head was spinning around wildly, and sparks flew out from the rivets on the body. The head reared up one last time, before all its motion abruptly ceased. The head then flopped down onto the forest floor. Mabel looked closely, seeing that the Gobblewonker’s eyes were now blank. The robot had been turned off.

She looked up, seeing someone standing atop the robot’s back. Without her glasses, she couldn’t really make out any of the figure’s details, besides what looked like a white lab coat. “Hello? Thanks for saving me. Who are you, I can’t see.”

“Is that… Mabel? OMG, I can’t believe it!” Mabel knew that voice. She might not be able to make out her face, but she could recognise the voice of one of her closest friends anywhere.

“C-Candy?! It’s Mabel, yeah, I’m-“

“There you are! Oh, thank goodness you’re alright!” Dipper had stumbled into the clearing from behind, his scanner goggles covering his eyes. “You would not believe how many squirrels show up with the same energy traces as humans! Made finding you a nightmare. Wait, why am I seeing two traces?”
He removed the goggles, blinking a few times to get used to the ambient light levels. The black haired Asian girl staring down at them was someone he hadn’t expected to find out here. “Is that… Candy?! Oh wow, it is, it’s been ages!”

Candy stepped down off the defeated robot. At first, neither girl knew what to say. Mabel eeped out a small, “Hi,” and gave a little wave. Candy blushed and waved back.

Dipper was rather taken aback when Mabel then pulled Candy into a full blown kiss on the mouth. He’d forgotten quite how ‘open’ Mabel could be with her closest friends. He was just glad Mabel had never tried that with Pacifica, she’d probably have received punch in the face for her trouble. Their smacking of lips was rather forward, so he just blushed and tried to look away.

“Ahem, ladies, can we, maybe, save the romance for after?” The girls split apart, both of them grinning wildly.

“I can’t believe it Candy; we haven’t seen each other in so long! Last summer feels like ages ago! I’ve got so much to tell you, me and Dipper going on so many adventures, nearly ending the world, Pacifica- oh, Paz, I hope she’d doing ok. I can’t wait to tell you everything!”

“I am excited too! Your hair is purple now! Though, I am worried as well. What are you doing here?”

Dipper spoke up. “Candy, have you noticed any unusual radiation, missing creatures? Know anything like what I’m talking about?”

“I know everything! It’s all to do with McGucket, he-“

“I knew it!” Dipper punched the air. “I knew he’d reverted, ha, it’s so obvious! We have to put a stop to his plans, if he opens another portal-“

“Woah woah, slow down Dipper! McGucket’s not making a portal!”

Dipper was dumfounded. “He’s not? Then what is he doing? With the big killer robot, I would’ve assumed he was going on a warpath!”

Candy patted the head of the Gobblewonker. “Ol’ Gobby’s just the recon drone. Easy enough to shut down, since I did build this model myself.”

Mabel shook her head a few times. “Woah woah, slow down sis, how do you know what’s going on with McGucket?”

Candy shrugged. “I was kinda his research assistant. Beep boop, I’m a scientist now! He knows soooooo much about robotics and programming, it was a great opportunity. I helped him on some projects, he mentored me, it was good. Then about 3 months ago, we started detecting strange readings. Energy leakage of some kind. I wanted to explore the phenomenon, but McGucket was hesitant. It was like he was hiding something.”

Dipper stroked his chin. “So he’s not causing the radiation? Damn, but I’m certain he’s the only one besides Ford who could engineer something like this. We need to know more, what’s he been up to lately?”

“That is why I left him - I didn’t like the way things were headed. He hired a man, a bounty hunter. He has been kidnapping creatures, anything in town that’s suffering from the radiation! Dozens and dozens of beings! He used the Gobblewonker to track them, then sent out the hunter like a mad dog! Then he started going on missions out of state, to bring back the creatures who’d run away!
It’s sick. He has them chained up in the manor basement, experimenting on them like lab rats.”

Mabel drew in a sharp breath. “Oh man, and we sent Paz in there! Guess we don’t have to use the Ursus stone to find the missing creatures at least. Ooh, that reminds me Dipper, the scanner, here.” She passed over the device, which now had a set of coordinates locked in that would take them to the source of the radiation. “And by the way, the rockets, your sonic whatsis? Next time make sure you double check before sending me out into the field with dodgy equipment.”

“I will do Mabel, you can count on it. Still, your flight was useful demonstration, I got some great diagnostics…” Mabel’s steely glare cut him off. “Well, nevermind all that. Candy, it’s great having you on our side. We’ll do whatever it takes to stop McGucket and fix things here. Come on, let’s go to the source.”

“Wait, I have one question for you two. How did you find out about what was happening here? The radiation hasn’t spread beyond the town borders yet.”

Mabel smiled knowingly. “That’s easy, it was all thanks to Andromeda… wait Dipper, where is she? Don’t tell me you left her all alone!”

“Relax Mabel, I left her with Soos. I’m sure he can handle it. Well, I mean… Hmm.” Mabel glared at him again. “Ok, maybe you have a point. We just have to find the source then get back in case she tries anything, easy peasy. Here.”

Dipper handed Mabel’s glasses back to her. “I so need to get contacts.”

“Yeah right, like you could handle putting them in every day. You’re fussy enough as it is with just your glasses. No time to waste guys, let’s head to these coordinates. The faster we deal with the radiation, the faster we can find out what Paz has discovered.”

Deep below McGucket manor, Pacifica was making a survey of all the denizens of Gravity Falls. In the filthy conditions down here, it was hard for her to stomach staying. Being so tightly trapped together meant that the room was incredibly hot and stuffy as well. She had to persevere and carry on. The sheer breadth of creatures was astounding and had this been any other situation she’d likely be boggling at how incredible this was.

But in this dark prison, the only emotion she felt was revulsion, towards McGucket, and towards this place. She pithily observed that it was rather appropriate that the Northwest manor’s final legacy would be one of such dispassionate terror.

Some of the creatures were ones she recognised. A few were common in Gravity Falls, like the gnomes and a couple of captured Manotaurs. Others she’d encountered directly, the Were-Coyote for instance, or a tiny cage holding a Lilliputtian.

The rest were all new to her. One cage held a pair of large living rock creatures with glowing gemstone cores, a parent and child. Another held what looked to her like a crested dinosaur, which occasionally burped up small jets of fire. She passed on further, past a cage that held a group of half a dozen squirming squids, each one had only a single eye. A few of these had matched descriptions of things Mason had told her about in the past.

One of the cages initially appeared empty, but as she stared hard, she could make out a region of the air that refracted the light differently. The odd shimmering shape was larger than a bear. She noted it down in her journal like all the rest, cataloguing every single ‘person’ or animal McGucket had abducted. As soon as her list was complete, she’d get out of here as fast as she could and
beeline for the Mystery Shack.

She’d tried to ask some of the creatures directly about what was going on, those who were able to talk and weren’t too worn down from the imprisonment. A few gnomes recounted their kidnapping, snagged two weeks ago in a net trap. Another gnome just uselessly repeated the word ‘Shmebulock’ whenever she asked a question. The thin-framed unicorn, named Radianamajestica, weakly told her that blood samples had been taken from every prisoner by McGucket, then the huntsman had dragged them down here. Most hadn’t been fed for days after arriving here.

A multi-headed bear, who she’d first met during Weirdmageddon, asked if she was here to save them. She’d weakly nodded, but realistically she didn’t know how she could ever accomplish something like that.

How could McGucket be so heartless, imprisoning all these paranormal entities here like some cruel zookeeper? Most likely he was experimenting on them, trying to learn about the radiation he was probably generating elsewhere. It didn’t matter - this needed to end. The torment of these innocent creatures wasn’t something she couldn’t tolerate, maybe once when she’d been younger and more insular, but not anymore.

She completed her list of the trapped creatures, coming to a stop at the end of the hall of cages. There was another door out of the bunker here, she made sure that the hinged latch was unfastened in case she had to make a run for it.

She pulled out her phone and snapped a photo of her journal, a single page covered in names and descriptions of everything she’d seen. She sent it to Mason, hoping that once she was above ground she’d have enough signal for the intel to get through to him. She slammed her journal shut and began making her way out of this dungeon beneath her old home, walking back along the aisle the way she’d come.

As if on cue, the ranks of captured creatures convulsed in pain, their bodies wracked by an invisible force. Andromeda had described something like this, a spike in the radiation that caused an intense stabbing pain throughout her body. It was clear that almost all of the creatures down here were suffering from the same affliction. She could understand why many of them had tried to flee the town to get away from this.

A handful of the creatures, such as the rock monsters or the coyote seemed un-affected by the pain however. Pacifica thought that was odd, why would McGucket capture a bunch of specimens who weren’t under the radiation’s influence? Maybe as control samples, to have healthy examples to compare with?

It didn’t matter, she had to get out of here before someone came to investigate the cacophony of screams coming from the ranks of suffering beasts. Unfortunately, at that moment the far door creaked open. Across the narrow strip dividing the two walls of cages stood the tall muscular bodyguard, Morbid.

He looked down at her smugly. “Knew you’d find your way here girl. I recognised your journal, you a friend of those Pines twins eh?” Pacifica said nothing and backed towards the far door out of here. “It’s no good trying to run.” Morbid pulled off a heavy rifle from his back and cocked it menacingly. “You’ve seen my handiwork, I can’t let you just walk away.”

“Why are you doing this, it’s inhuman!”

Morbid chuckled. “Well, these aren’t exactly humans are they.” She jumped as he punched out a fist, rattling one of the cages. “Heh heh, I can’t believe I’m getting paid to do this. I hope that once
the boss is done, I can have the satisfaction of finishing off each and every one of these vile things.”

A fire rose in Pacifica’s chest, she wasn’t even sure from where. “We’ll stop you! Me and the twins! You can’t get away with this, or the portal!”

“Oh, I’d love to see you try.” He fired off a shot at the ceiling. Pacifica realised that whoever this guy was, he was blatantly mad. Reasoning with him wasn’t gonna cut it. “Go on girl, run! Let’s make this into some sport!”

She didn’t need to be told twice and sprinted through the rear door away from the cages. The sound of the huntsman’s mocking laughter followed her through the network of dark tunnels as she ran for her life.

Dipper received Pacifica’s text with the list of captured creatures en route to the radiation source, which only confirmed Candy’s story about McGucket. Mabel had removed the useless dead weights that were the rocket boosters on her legs, giving them to Candy to look over, and was now toying around with the sonic grenade, tossing it back and forth in her hands.

The three of them followed the anomalous energy scanner out of the woods and back onto the main road. Dipper hadn’t expected to find any radiation emitting from the town, he’d thought that if the portal in the Shack wasn’t the source then surely some mystic rift out in the woods somewhere would be the more likely candidate. Instead they found themselves making their way down the main street of the town.

At least the light from the streetlamps showed them the way forwards. Since night had now fallen traversing the woods would have been a risky venture, especially with how clumsy Mabel could be. They briefly passed by the Northwest residence, but neither twin wanted to linger long, and they already knew that Pacifica had escaped.

The scanner made a beeping noise, confirming their destination, as they stood right outside the column lined front of the Gravity Falls Museum of History. Dipper tucked away the scanner, since it couldn’t track the source any more precisely. “I guess it makes sense, if McGucket is involved.”

Candy was confused. “What do you mean Dipper? Why would he care about an old museum?”

“It’s not what’s in the museum, it’s what’s beneath it.”

“You don’t think… Dipper?” Mabel was still on the fence about outright condemning McGucket without more evidence. “You don’t think he’s started up the Society again?”

“Let’s find out. He’s so gonna pay if he has. Come on Candy, we’ll show you where McGucket hid the real mysteries of Gravity Falls. Let’s just say there are things he didn’t tell you. Things he didn’t even tell himself at first.”

Mabel’s one-of-a-kind infiltration skills got them through the door of the museum handily. Dipper led the girls through the empty museum, following the trail of the pneumatic tubes lining every corridor. While Dipper remembered which way to go, Mabel told Candy all about the Society of the Blind Eye, their crusade to scrub clean the memories of any ‘weirdness’ from the inhabitants of the town, and the terrible side effects that had caused. McGucket’s role in founding the society surprised Candy, but she was oddly mute on the topic of the memory gun itself, not reacting much to the concept.

Dipper entered the anteroom filled with an assortment of various eyes, which was just as creepy as
he remembered it being. He traced the eyelines and placed a hand on the ancient carving of the Blind Eye, which served as a ‘door handle’.

Candy gasped in shock as the fireplace behind them slid away, revealing a narrow passage. Mabel was blasé to it though, these days it took more than a simple secret passage to get her excited. They descended along a stone staircase lined with extinguished torch sconces. It appeared as if nobody had used this chamber in quite a while.

Brushing aside the crimson curtain at the base of the stairs, that assumption was quickly discarded. A soft orange glow dimly illuminated the chamber beyond, revealing that the grand circular hall of the Blind Eye had been converted to a new purpose. The old wooden chest for holding the memory gun was still present off to the side, but gone was the chair for strapping down victims of the society’s cruel methods. The centre of the room now held a massive triangular column of dull grey stone, reaching from the ceiling above and resting just above a pool of clear water. Heavy chains linked the stone to the surrounding walls.

Both twins exclaimed as one. “The Obelisk!”

Candy studied the tall pillar of mundane looking rock. “You two have seen this thing before?”

“Yeah, we found the Obelisk back in California.” Dipper ran a hand over the stone, finding that it felt just the same as the unexciting material that made up the Obelisk below the Hartnell mine. “Or rather, an Obelisk. Guess there’s more than one. McGucket must have set this up! He must be using it to amplify the radiation, to make it even more dangerous!”

Mabel looked around the room, trying in vain to find more clues. She ended up over by the pneumatic tube that originally ferried the memory canisters to the distant Hall of the Forgotten. “But why Dip? And how, how would he even know about the Obelisk?”

“I can answer that.” The three of them spun around at the sound of this new voice from the stairs. Stepping out into the orange light was the one man Dipper had dreaded finally confronting, McGucket himself. Mabel just studied him, as if she could pierce through to the truth of his motivations. “You shouldn’t have come here. Now I’m going to have to fix my mistakes.”

After Pacifica made it out of the labyrinth of tunnels her ancestors had constructed, she found herself just outside the grounds and fled the manor as fast as she could. It was the middle of the night now, so she hoped that the darkness would give her some cover from the madman pursuing her.

Her plan was to lose him in the woods, then make her way straight back to the Mystery Shack. She was once again grateful for Mabel’s makeover, her boots made traversing the twisting undergrowth a thousand times easier than if she’d been running in heels.

She ducked down behind a fallen log, lying still. The flicker of a torch beam shone through the trees, panning left and right. She held her body as flat to the ground as she could. The light swept over the log and passed on. A few seconds later, she was back in pure darkness again.

She sighed in relief and made to stand up. That was when the side of log beside her exploded into a mass of splinters. “Nice try kid, but you’ll have to do better than that!” She threw herself back down immediately and started running in a hunched position. “Run! Run little girl! I’ll still catch you!”

Morbid chuckled and tossed a flaming orb at her. It blasted out beside her, sending smaller bursts
of flame all around to light up the forest. Pacifica realised that she should have stayed on the road away from the manor, it would have been a more direct route. She’d chosen the woods for more cover, but if this lunatic was determined on burning it to the ground she’d have gained little advantage.

Another burst of gunfire erupted on the trees just above her head. “Come out girl!” If she didn’t lose him fast she was going to take a bullet in the back. Adrenaline pushed her forwards, but it was different from the usual buzz of excitement she got when facing a supernatural beast. This man was driven by a single goal, to kill her, and there was nothing she could do to stop him. She had no backup, no equipment.

All she had was her journal, useless for information on fighting gun-wielding maniacs, and her pendant, which could hardly stop a bullet. A burning pain from her pocket suddenly stopped her frantic escape. She reached in and pulled out the Ursus stone, but immediately had to drop it, as it burned her skin. She let go before it left a mark but could still feel the immense trace of heat on her palm.

Cautiously, she grabbed the band of the necklace and held up the stone to her face. It was glowing with a bright purple flame, and she could feel the warmth scorching out from it. She was pretty sure that even when Mabel had used it it’d never got that hot. Her Pine Tree necklace was now spinning like crazy again.

“You can’t hide from me!” She no longer felt as worried about Morbid finding her, something else, something much worse was nearby. Carefully avoiding burning herself, she made sure her grip on the stone was tight, then continued running in the opposite direction of the huntsman’s calls.

She tumbled at an unexpected slope and rolled down small verge. She stumbled quickly back onto her feet but found herself looking face to face with… herself. At first she thought she was looking at a mirror, but as she focused her eyes through the darkness, she realised just what she was seeing. “Andromeda? What are you doing out here? Nevermind, we have to go, quickly!”

She started shoving Andromeda, trying to get her to move, but the other girl stood her ground. “We’re not going anywhere.” Striding confidently, she walked out into an open clearing, arms spread wide. “Oh Mr hunter dude! Over he-ere!” Her sing-song voice was like a horrible imitation of Mabel’s.

In a harsh whisper, Pacifica tried to make her stop. “What are you doing! You’re gonna get us both killed!”

“Nah sis, if anyone’s dying tonight, it won’t be me.” Having appeared to get Morbid’s attention, Andromeda faced down at Pacifica. “At last, I will be strong. I won’t have to cower in that Shack, or fear retribution. Poor dumb Soos couldn’t keep me in check, so now I can finally take what’s mine!”

Andromeda grasped at the Ursus stone, ripping it out of Pacifica’s grip. Pacifica expected it to burn the other girl’s hand, but she just held it calmly, gazing in awe at the glowing purple. A realisation suddenly clicked for Pacifica, and she tried to grasp the stone back. “No!”

Andromeda nimbly stepped back, despite her heeled boots. She let the fatigue from Pacifica’s chase give herself the upper hand and pushed the shorter-haired version of herself down onto the ground. “Stay down if you know what’s good for you!”

Helpless to do anything, Pacifica gaped as Andromeda put the stone around her neck. A wicked grin of delight spread across the clone’s face. Her attention turned away from her elation as they
both heard the click of a rifle at the other end of the clearing. “Nowhere to run now girl. Surrender, and I’ll bring you back to the manor unharmed. Resist…” He aimed the gun straight at Andromeda’s head, seemingly unaware that it wasn’t the same girl he’d been chasing.

“Oh, you funny little man. I remember you Morbid. What you did to the Rosettas. My kind don’t take nicely to that sort of treatment.”

“Your kind?” His aim wavered for the first time. “I’m warning you, last chance or I will shoot your pretty little head right off!”

“Try it then, go on!” Morbid was dumbfounded, which made Andromeda giggle in mockery. Pacifica thought it sounded terrifying but Morbid still didn’t comprehend what was going on.

He screamed down at the clone, who was seemingly embracing death. “Alright then! You asked for it!” He pointed the gun right between her eyes, but Andromeda didn’t waver. She was actually smirking at him. Pacifica watched, waiting for the horrible moment when she’d hear that loud bang and Andromeda would be no more.

But nothing happened. Morbid started sweating, concentration growing on his brow. Andromeda laughed again as the huntsman grunted at his gun. “I- I can’t! What- what are you doing to me!?”

“Why, that’s simple, you dunderheaded hunk of meat. I’m inside your head, tee hee!” Morbid’s eyes widened, but he still couldn’t fire. His finger simply wouldn’t budge, as if a force was holding him back. “Let me spell it all out for you and ‘princess’ back here.” Morbid finally noticed Pacifica lying in the dirt. “I’m not telepathic, I’m not reading your ‘thoughts’. But your emotions, oh! So rich from you, all that anger and insecurity, manifesting in this ridiculous bull-headed ideal to rid the world of anything ‘un-pure’. Tastes delightful, honestly.”

Pacifica couldn’t believe what she was hearing from the clone, who’d seemed so repentant before. Mason had been right all along - she had been lying. That realisation stung her more than she’d expected it to.

“I can sense that too Pazzy-waz.” There was that sickly imitation of Mabel’s cutesier talking style, that was like nails on a chalkboard. “I can feel the betrayal, your disappointment. Don’t be sad, this is a momentous day for all my weird brothers and sisters! Sorry you can’t join in the fun.”

“You lied to us Andromeda. We can still work together to fix you, maybe I can still-“

“It’s too late for that! Far, far too late. This is the reason I didn’t just come back home to Piedmont, showing up at the circus gained me a little extra sympathy from you idealistic idiots! I knew I could get you to come around, to pity me, see me as a victim.”

Andromeda raised an arm high above herself, then clamped her fist. “But who’s in charge now?” From the edge of the clearing came a deep sonorous howl. Pacifica felt the noise shudder in her bones, it was like nothing she’d ever heard before, like a deep rattle resonating and clashing with itself.

A large creature with shimmering purple skin came hurtling into the clearing. It had a rounded head and legs that ended in spikes like shards of bone. The skin warped and flowed, revealing the blobby innards floating about. It passed beside the still immobile Morbid and stood next to Andromeda. She bent over Pacifica, who was too scared to try and run from the clearing.

“This is my Kochab. It’s very loyal, I do have the strongest mental fortitude on this planet after all. It was lost and directionless before I found it, without the Ursus it was an empty shell. Now it
serves a higher purpose again.”

“You’re freaks, all of you! Twisted mind shit, that hideous abomination of an animal! Release me!” Morbid strained against his invisible bonds once more, trying to resist as hard as he could.

“Oh, you.” Andromeda looked thoughtful for a moment, then snapped her fingers. “I know! You’ll be the first of my new followers. Go, collect the others. We have to build ourselves up, become strong before anyone can prevent our ascension.”

With great resistance, Morbid started walking away. Pacifica stared at his face, which was twisted into an expression of exertion. He was still struggling against it desperately, but walked out of the clearing nonetheless.

“Ha, like a puppet on a string! That reminds me of a time - you weren’t there Pacifica - Dipper got turned into a human sock puppet. Kinda like what I’m going to do to Mabel. Poor dear Mabel.”

“Why are you doing all this Andromeda?! Ok, the Mabel stuff, I get that, you want her brain. I obviously don’t agree with it, but I understand it. But all this?” She gestured at Morbid and the Kochab. “What’s it all for?!”

Andromeda pulled her to her feet roughly by the arm. “The only thing this is for, is justice. With the stone, I can use my powers to bring justice for all my wronged kin, the marginalised creatures that live in this town, forced to hide away from society. I’m one of them now, so with them as my soldiers I can wage war on all who’ll oppose us. It’s only a matter of time anyway, once I absorb enough energy, then the real fun starts.”

“You’re insane!”

“And whose fault was that?”

Pacifica couldn’t find any words to respond. This messed up girl planning such monstrous deeds was partly her own creation. “Now, what to do with you? I don’t wanna kill you - even after all you’ve done to me, I can’t just strike you down in cold blood. No, I have a much worse fate in mind for you. Dipper might say you’ve ‘changed’, that you’re a ‘new person’ - but I still know the perfect place to trap you. Let’s go have a family reunion.”

To be continued…
In the central hall of the Blind Eye, Dipper and Mabel were bathed in the cool orange light generated by the Obelisk. Candy was prepared for the worst, as staring them down was Old Man McGucket, examining them with an aggressive look.

“Woah, cool arm Fiddleford!” Mabel’s standard enthusiasm cut through the tension, even with such a high stakes situation.

McGucket’s stern look didn’t change though, even as he looked down at the arm. “Yeah, it was built by my ex-research assistant.” He made sure to stress the ‘ex’ part, which made Candy frown.

“I had to leave! You were doing wrong!” Her fists started clenching. “I saw what you did to those poor creatures! That huntsman is sinister!”

“You don’t understand Candy, the fate of all their lives depends on this! I couldn’t just let them roam free!”

“Why not, they are innocent! Now they suffer in your basement, forced into tiny cages! You don’t have the right to hide so much away, the prison, this rock thing,” she gestured at the Obelisk. “We will stop you!”

“Bold words girl. I’d like to see you try.” He raised his mechanical arm, and a blue circle of light started glowing in his palm, charging up to release a shot.

“Woah woah woah! Everybody calm down!” Dipper placed himself between the two former partners, hoping to defuse the tense stand-off. “Candy, I know he’s keeping things from us, but fighting isn’t going to get us any closer to saving those creatures.” He turned to McGucket. “You’d better explain things fast old man. Otherwise I’ll let both Candy and my sister loose on you. Be warned, Mabel can probably beat you up so hard you’ll wish you could erase the memory.”

Mabel shoved her brother aside. “I’m not gonna fight him Dip! We can do this like mature responsible adults.” Everyone in the room was silent. “Ok, maybe that’s going a little too far for me, but you know what I mean. This doesn’t have to get ugly. Fiddleford, why don’t you start by telling us what you’re using the Obelisk here for?”

“Isn’t it obvious!” Dipper incredulously stated before McGucket could reply. “He’s using it to amplify the radiation, he wants it to spread!”

“I’m not amplifying anything boy!” McGucket irritatedly replied. “You Pines twins are mighty meddlesome folks, you know. Always sticking your noses where they don’t rightly belong. Sometimes you should look afore you leap. This here tri-fold mineral manipulator-majig is a lodestone. It’s a magnet for the rift pollution, drawing it all to this one point. How else was I s’posed to keep all the radiation in one place?”

“Wait, you wanted to stop the spread?! Now I’m seriously confused, you’re the one plotting secret plans out of sight and kidnapping creatures for sport!”

“Sport!?”
“And what about this?” Dipper strode over the memory gun chest. “I should have known you’d be tempted to rebuild it, you’ve probably been taking care of anyone who tried to interfere in your plans.” He opened the chest and reached inside. “Well it stops now, I’m gonna deal with this… wait… there’s nothing here!” He ran his hand over the chest, but only found the empty frame and cushion, with no device present. “Wait, you aren’t using the memory gun? I don’t understand.”

“Now listen here you young whippersnapper!” McGucket angrily poked Dipper’s hoodie with his brass arm. “You think I’m just a crazy old nutjob what ate garbage and married a racoon? You still think I’m the same madman you first met? The dangerous lunatic who wants to take revenge on the world? You don’t know anything!”

“Then tell us, please,” Mabel implored, honestly wanting to hear his side of the story. Candy nodded, agreeing with Mabel’s sentiment.

McGucket sighed. “I just wanted to make things right, to correct the damage I caused. I thought I’d done that 5 years ago, but we can’t escape our pasts. Back in February I started detecting abnormal portal activity.” Mabel and Dipper exchanged a quick glance at the mention of the date.

“It was a massive flare up of interdimensional fluctuations, travelling along a network of breaches in reality. The flare didn’t last long, there was a lot of build-up, but it all fizzled away after a few days. That was mighty strange, but I didn’t dwell on it. Least until we started recording cases of folks getting struck down with strange illnesses.”

The twins knew that by ‘folks’ he was talking about the magical beings that resided within the town’s weirdness field, drawn to it subconsciously. The terrible toll of the radiation must be currently acting as a counterweight. The vast array of organisms that usually felt attracted to staying the town were forced to contend with the negative consequences of the radiation field.

“So, you started ‘collecting’ the affected creatures?” Dipper asked.

“Yes, at first it was simply for studying. I had to know what was causing the disease. I discovered that it was the same kind of energy that I’d detected back in February, which is also the same kind that was generated every time me and Stanford operated our portal. I’m responsible for this, so I took it upon myself to try and save as many creatures as I could. I captured them, yes, but not to experiment on them. To keep them safe from further radiation exposure, and to have a large sample so I could work on a cure. Unfortunately, my research didn’t turn up much - I’m an engineer, not a biologist. So, I built this Obelisk instead, to halt the spread. It was all I could do while I worked on a way to remove the radiation entirely.”

McGucket felt a hand on his arm, and saw it was Mabel’s. “It’s not your fault Fiddleford. You’re not the one who started up all this rift junk. That was me and Dip… kinda… made another portal,” she guiltily said.

“Huh? The what now?”

“I’d love to tell you everything, but for now you just need to know that me and Dip… kinda… made another portal,” she guiltily said.

“You what?!” McGucket looked on the edge of mania at the very idea of somebody replicating his work.

“It was for a good cause,” she said with a grimace.

“After everything you kids went through, what me and Stanford went through, why in the
hootenanny heck would you-"

“It was the only way McGucket.” Dipper cut him off, not wanting to get bogged down in explaining all that happened back in February with the Ursus event. “Simple story is, we had to build a portal to draw in something that came through from another dimension. We didn’t have another choice. But trust us, it’s destroyed now. I made sure there were no lasting after-effects, I really did. We checked out each and every major rift point.”

McGucket stroked his white beard with his non-robot arm. “Hmm, a massive cosmic event on that scale, funnelled through the same portal network… the harmonic resonance would mean that the it’d be compressed into a more diffuse nature… Gravity Falls would be a nexus for the release matrix…”

“Ah, of course!” Candy nodded her head. “The energy could have built up like a blocked pipe, then all come flooding out at the weakest point!”

Mabel waved a hand between the two excited scientists. “Uh, guys, what are you saying? It’s all just sciencey mumbo jumbo to me.”

Candy looked at her old friend, trying to simplify things for the twin’s sake. “When you activated your second portal, it essentially re-opened the old wounds from the first portal here in your Shack. The tears in reality started leaking out the dimensional energy you trapped inside yours, polluting the town as the radiation we’ve been detecting.”

Dipper slapped his forehead. “Oh man, Paz was right. We always have to clean up our messes. Why can things never have a clean break? I’d better check on Pacifica actually, it’s been a while since she messaged. Wanna make sure she got out of the manor alright.” Dipper pulled out his phone and rang Pacifica.

McGucket nodded to himself. “The manor? So that’s why Miss Pacifica was paying us an impromptu visitin’. Shoulda known she had her own angle, you two’ve been rubbing off on her. Maybe we can catch her on our way home, the only reason I was out here was to check on the Obelisk. This old Blind Eye hall is certainly a useful place to have legal ownership of. Lotsa nice handy chambers for big side projects.”

“Let’s be off then! Man, I’m so glad you weren’t evil!” Mabel cheerily said. Dipper was still trying his phone, so absent-mindedly trailed out behind his sister.

“Wait,” Candy interrupted. “You’re still not off the hook McGucket! What about that hunter!? You still hired him, he’s a brute!”

“I told ya Chiu, it’s for the best! Those creatures would be dying out there in the wild, it’s the only way to keep them safe!”

“Did you even tell him why you’re making him catch all those creatures? Because I’m pretty sure he’s of the opinion that you’re going to let him deal with them as soon as you have no use for them. A man with a goofy name like ‘Morbid’ seems the type for that.”

“Wait, am I hearing this right?” Dipper spluttered. “You hired Morbid the Huntsman!?”

“Why? Is he bad or summint?” McGucket obliviously said.

“Oh, he’s the worst!” Mabel exclaimed.

“Dangit! That’s what I get for hiring an amateur! Knew I shoulda actually got someone decent at
their job! Darn corner cutters.”

“No no, he’s not bad! He’s just bad. Well, what he does is bad, but he doesn’t do it badly.”

“Eh?”

“What Mabel is trying to say,” Dipper said while focusing on his phone, “is that Morbid the Huntsman is a despicable anti-‘freak’ butcher, who delights in killing or torturing anything vaguely outside the norm. Him being in a place like the Falls is probably his dream come true! Some of the creatures he brought in for you that Pacifica chronicled aren’t even native to here, like the Were-Coyote or the Rosettas. Did you just send him to pick up every single report of a creature on the western seaboard? He’s a menace to everyone who deals with him.”

“Told you so McGucket.” Candy triumphantly crossed her arms.

McGucket waved an arm. “Yeah well, it’s not like I’ll need him much longer, hopefully I can refocus all efforts onto the radiation itself now I know it’s conclusively the cause. There has to be some way to cleanse the whole region of the pollution.”

“Let’s not dilly dally then guys! Mabel’ll lead the way! Candy, I can’t wait to show you the Hyper-Coyote, it’s so rad. Plus Paz, you gotta catch up with her-“

“Mabel, can you quiet down a bit.” Dipper shushed her as the call finally connected. “Ah, Pacifica, finally, me’n Mabel are heading back, we’ll-“

“Hi there Dipper, how’s things with you? Cause I’m doing fabulously with this new necklace of mine.”

Dipper nearly dropped the phone in shock and his face paled. “A-Andromeda?” He swallowed. “If you’ve done anything to Paz, I’ll-“

“Hush now, I’m talking. Pacifica’s mine, so is our old pal Morbid. Soon, so will every little captive in McGucket’s manor. Then I’m gonna use this portal ‘problem’ to make myself unstoppable. Ta ta bro.” The phone clicked as the call went dead.

“Guys, we’ve got a new problem. A big one.”

Giving a rundown of who Andromeda was once again was getting on Dipper’s nerves, but he had to fill in Candy and McGucket on where things stood. It’s was especially annoying since neither of them knew anything about the copier and had only a basic knowledge of the electron carpet. Getting them up to speed on the Ursus stone was also something of a trial, since its history went back a lot further than just what Andromeda was concerned with.

Mabel took most of the job of explaining the stone’s origin, since Dipper was getting pretty stressed. The fragile trust he’d started to build with the paper clone had been shattered, and now Pacifica’s life was in danger. Furthermore, Morbid was now a wildcard, wandering around doing who knew what. Andromeda’s end goal still seemed unclear, she had the Ursus stone, but her plans seemed to go beyond simply taking over Mabel’s body this time.

While trying to explain about the Ursus stone for the hundredth time, McGucket finally grasped something. “That’s it! I’ve got me one a them head thoughts! Empaths have control over emotional fields, they can read and manipulate those same fields. That’s what gives yer clone those powers, right. So, it stands to reason that with a boost, such as that funky future-majigigger, she could gain
control over the radiation fields saturating the town!"

“Could that really work? She wants to absorb the energy before she tries to hop into my head?”

Mabel was recalling the time just before the Alignment, when thanks to the amplification of the Obelisk she’d had immense telekinesis powers. If Andromeda gained a similar level of power, one she could use constantly, there’d be nothing on Earth that could stand in her way.

“It’s a plausible hypothesis,” Candy said. “If she can draw enough of that dimensional energy into herself, using the stone as a medium to filter out the harmful effects, then she could potentially harness it offensively. Or it might just burn up her brain.”

“She’s made of paper, I think that’ll keep her stable.” Dipper was only half interested in the discussion, still thinking about Pacifica. “I have a plan. McGucket, can you shut off this Obelisk?”

The old man slowly nodded. “Yes, I can neutralise the grounding couples, that’ll defocus the centralising magna pull. But why, Dipper?”

“Because as of right now, this place is Andromeda’s number one target. All of the radiation is pooling here, just like it did at the Mojave Obelisk. If we remove it from the equation, she’ll be forced to go to the original radiation source. Am I right in thinking that the Shack basement is the location with the most holes in reality?”

Both McGucket and Candy nodded. Mabel understood too. “Right Dip, it has my Unicorn shielding, that’ll make it harder for her to get in if we’re trying to defend it. Ok, so Fids and Candy are gonna do that, what about us two?”

“Andromeda will be biding her time, gaining forces and power. That gives us a little time to prepare. I want you to run by the manor, let Tate McGucket know what’s going on, see if he has any weapons or equipment we can use. If you get there before Andromeda, round up any of the magical people who wanna help. Then head back to the Shack, let Soos and Melody know we’re expecting a fight. Get it set up in defence mode, barricades, covering fire opportunities, anything that can keep it a safe place. Hopefully by morning we’ll have a solid cordon around the basement.”

“And you?”

“I’m gonna save Pacifica.” Mabel nodded, knowing full well that anything she might say to try and dissuade him would fall on deaf ears. “We’ve all got our missions now. I mean, what could possibly go wrong?”

“Oh no Dipper, no! Never say that, you’ll jinx us! What next, you’ll say, ‘at least it isn’t raining’?! She rolled her eyes at him, then made to head off to the manor when McGucket called after her.

“Hold a mo Mabel, I wanna have a look see at that rocket armour that got busted. It might be a good idea to give ourselves every advantage.”

Dipper headed off through the curtain, poking his head out to say goodbye. “Candy, thanks for all you’re doing to help. I hope you and McGucket can… well, sort things out.” Candy nodded, grateful for his sympathy. “Bye guys, I’m gonna go get Paz. No way am I gonna let that creep of a clone take her from us. First I’m gonna swing by the Shack. If I’m going to have to face Andromeda with the stone, then I’m going to need some backup.”
their way across town. Both had blonde hair, each cut differently. The one with longer hair stretching below her waist was dragging the other girl, whose hair didn’t pass her shoulders.

The two of them stopped outside the austere Northwest house on the edge of town. “Here we are Ciffy, time to stop running away from your fears. Face ‘em like a true adventurer.” Andromeda held onto Pacifica’s shoulders and pushed her through the outer gate and along the lawn to the front door.

“Please, don’t do this.” Pacifica tried to move left or right, or even to stop entirely, but her body wouldn’t obey her commands. The only thing she was allowed to do by Andromeda’s powers was walk forwards.

“What are you worried about, they’re your parents after all. You only rejected everything they ever instilled in you, abandoned them for a month, and ran out on them today - I’m sure they won’t take their anger out on you… much.” Andromeda laughed haughtily. “I’m not a total monster, here, keep your journal and Dipper’s dumb magic pendant. Your folks will probably wanna confiscate those to keep you in line.”

They reached the door, and Pacifica felt her arm start to rise. In a cruel gesture, Andromeda was going to make her knock on the door herself. “Stop it, I’m begging you, I’ll do anything you want but go in there.”

“Nah, this is therapeutic for you. Remember the night before I was born, you had to get over your fear of sketching faces by just doing it. Same here, just go in there and see what happens. I’m sure Preston and Priscilla won’t be too harsh, they are your parents after all.”

Pacifica’s face scrunched up, but she resisted crying. “You weren’t there. In the hospital.”

“Hospital?”

“In Spring break. That’s why I left them. Mason was hurt because of me, and my parents showed up to take me home. But I said no. I shouted, I demanded they listened to me. And for one of the first times in my life, they did. One month they said, one month to see how harsh the world really is. Coming back to them was the ultimate defeat, not because I failed. No, it was because they assumed I’d fail from the very start and did nothing to change themselves to face the fact I might not wanna be like them. So if you send me through that door now, after I explicitly betrayed them… that’s my life over.”

Andromeda hesitated. Deep down in her jumbled mind, she had conflicting thoughts about Pacifica. While her resentment for Mabel ran deep due their overriding personalities being so similar, she had much less malice towards Pacifica.

Eventually though, Pacifica felt her arm moving closer to the door again. “Five minutes before I was born, Mabel was thinking about the past. Obsessing would be a more apt description. She wanted to look inside and find herself. Instead, you helped her find that Oracle and then me. The frame of mind Mabel was in was copied and baked into my very being. I’m stuck with a mind that’s not sure whether it’s coming or going, whether I know who I am or if I’m just a blend of two other people. So I don’t care that your past was rough, or that you’re gonna miss what you had. It’s time for the future to have its way with you. My future’s just getting started.”

Andromeda headed back up the path and turned away. “You bitch,” Pacifica choked out. Andromeda just waved without turning. Pacifica’s hand knocked on the door three times, that same old compulsion her parents had taught her, to always do it three times to be polite. To her surprise though the door was unlocked and swung inwards.
It wasn’t like her parents to leave themselves unprotected. They must have left it like that, for her. The strange obligation from the Ursus stone prevented her from leaving willingly yet, she’d have to face them first before it would let her.

The house was unlit, and there was no-one in the entry hall. She checked over the sitting room and kitchen, but her parents weren’t there. She called out tentatively. “Mom? Dad?” There was a noise from upstairs, the floorboards creaking. She knew which room they were in now, of course they’d be waiting there.

Like a trained animal, she headed upstairs. The one light in the house that was on shone out around the edges of her bedroom door. She rested her head on the door and whispered quietly to herself before daring to enter. “I love you Mason, Mabel too. I will not be the old me.” She rubbed a finger on her old lucky hair tie bookmark attached to her journal. “One step at a time.”

Inside her bright room she saw her mother sitting on her bed. Her father was perched on her desk chair, fingers steepled and brow set. They were expecting excuses or forgiveness. This was to be a ‘serious’ discussion in which she would likely end up confined to the house, later to be sent off to some far off boarding school for troublesome kids.

Pacifica decided that she was done playing by their rules. She wasn’t gonna raise her voice or cry or sink to their level. She was gonna be the one to set the tone of this encounter. “Hey guys, how’s it hangin’?” She couldn’t help but grin at their already outraged faces. “If you’re wondering where I’ve been, I was out cataloguing rare fauna in my journal.” She opened it to the page that she’d written the list of caged creatures on, then tossed it loosely onto the bed. “Have a read, if you do you might find out about the things I actually care about.”

Her father spluttered out a response. “I will not tolerate this flippancy-“

“Is this gonna take long? I have more important things to do than rehashing the same arguments we had last time. Cleary you haven’t matured enough since then to make any difference in what we talk about.”

“You’re still wearing it; I knew we shouldn’t have trusted you.” Priscilla was looking at her neck. Pacifica glanced down at her pendant, then her eyes flicked back up to face her mother.

“Yeah, it was a birthday present from my boyfriend. Oh, I’m sorry, does that offend your delicate sensibilities?” She was enjoying how insulted they were getting over her dripping sarcasm. “Anyway, I’m going to go home now, this place doesn’t feel welcoming anymore.” She made for the door, but her father quickly shut it before she could leave.

“Pacifica Elise Northwest! You will know your place!” He tightly gripped her arm, in the same way he’d done back in the hospital. This time, Pacifica was prepared. In a move that slightly surprised even herself, she twisted her father’s arm back, then flipped him over onto his back. Mabel had given her a short training session in martial arts a few weeks ago, and with all her recent adventuring experience the grab had triggered an automatic reflex. This was a move inherited from Stan, called the ‘grabby tourist body-slam’.

“No, know your place, Dad! I’m sick and tired of being ‘lesser’ than you. Christ, real families don’t make their kids obey the command of a bell for starters! Who’s in control now, huh?” It felt cathartic for a moment, but she shook her head, then gave her father the space to stand up. “It doesn’t even feel satisfying. I don’t wanna flip the script and rule over you. The one thing I always wanted was two people who actually cared about me.”

“We do care darling.” Her mother put her hand on her shoulder and Pacifica let it rest as she heard
what she had to say. “We want to make sure you’re not throwing your life on a pair of hooligans, who can’t provide a fraction of what we can. They’ve already led you to ruin, making you talk back to the ones who raised you, giving you mad ideas of running off into the blue and getting lost in the wilderness. Come back to us Pacífica, we can be whole again, and you can live a life of comfort.”

Pacifica shrugged the hand off her shoulder. “Are you basically bribing me?! I don’t want money, all that ever did for you two was turn into a bunch of stuck-up jerks who treat their daughter like property. And here I thought the twins’ bickering would give me a migraine, I think listening to you two’s excuses is gonna give me a brain tumour.”

“But why Pacífica, what do you even see in them! The girl, Maple, she’s clearly mentally stunted or something, she acts like a child half the time and has absolutely no sense of presentation or class.”

Her father got up off the floor, rubbing his wrist. “And the boy, the one you so blindly follow. He’s fanatically obsessed with chasing fairy stories; he’s spread that same obsession to you. Now you’ll want to waste away your life on a fantasy, ignoring what’s really important in life over some juvenile infatuation. I will not have my daughter discard our family name over such a poor choice.”

Pacifica gritted her teeth. “Ugh, don’t you know anything! I don’t care if they’re poor or don’t act like stuffy Victorian dukes or whatever. They actually care about what I want, and I care about them. Mabel’s weird and acts like nobody else, and that makes her special. She’ll make sure you’re alright even if you treat her like dirt, she wants to make everyone as happy as she always feels. And Mason, he’s so insightful sometimes, he’s a genius in the right field. He likes how good I am at solving puzzles or how confident I am, and he has the warmest little laugh when he’s really happy that find so adorable. But you don’t care about any of those things.”

She stopped herself and sighed. “No, you know what? I don’t have to justify any of this to you.” Grabbing the journal off the bed, she turned her back on both of her parents. “If you wanna know the real me, you’ll let me leave right now. Do that, prove to me you give a damn, then maybe next time we can have a proper discussion.”

She stormed out of the bedroom and down back to the main hall. Not looking back, she could already hear her parents scrabbling out after her down the stairs. “Stop!” She simply increased her speed, heading straight for the front door. “You take one step outside of this house, and we’ll make your life hell. Their lives too.” Pacífica’s heart stopped in her chest.

Her mother, in a more commanding voice than she’d ever heard before, spoke up. “We still have power and influence. Legally, you are still our daughter. You may have turned 18, but without a job or education, we can make things very difficult for you. Do you think the government will care about your ‘feelings’?”

“We can make it so we have full control, over everything. And if the Pines twins interfere… well, their father works in computing I believe.” A chill ran down her spine. They’d not been sitting idly by for the last month after all. Had their entire goal been merely to find all about the Pines family, to gather intelligence on how to bring them down? “We know they cannot support another person living with them, it’s just not financially viable, especially if the primary breadwinner were to receive an unfortunate early retirement.”

Threats against herself, Pacífica was used to, and could handle well enough. After pleading, her parents’ next recourse was normally to use the idea of directly punishing her to make her stay in line. By now, after so many years of the same routine it felt practically blasé to have them try to bully her. But to have them go after the Pines, who’d done nothing but open their door to her in her
time of need, it made her feel sick. She couldn’t bear the idea of ruin being brought down on them simply because of her own actions.

“So if I don’t do what you say, you’ll make them suffer?”

Preston carried on. “We can have them investigated. Of course, they may not find anything out of line, but if someone in government were to find out about all of the twins’ ‘excursions’… well, I think all parties would find that information very… troublesome.”

“All the lies and risks they take behind their backs; any sane parent would want their children to be protected. It could result in a lot of messy consequences for the family.”

The idea of blowing the twin’s Mystery Hunting cover made her feel almost as bad as them losing money. All because of her. Because she was being ‘uppity’ and wouldn’t follow her betters. Her mother and father had finally found themselves a leverage to use against her. They would use the very same desires that drew her away from them in the first place to police her actions now. She’d lose them no matter what option she chose.

She turned around slowly to face the two people who’d done the most to make her life miserable. With head lowered, she let out a single tear. “You’re monsters,” she whispered under her breath.

“Oh Pacifica, you’ll thank us in the end. You’ll see. We’re doing this for the greater good.”

“Greater good my ass!” A voice called from the front of the house. Pacifica’s head rose and her heart leapt in her chest. That voice was probably the one she most wanted to hear right now. “You two Northwests really are dicks, you know that right?”

“Mason!” She twirled round, seeing him standing silhouetted against the night in the open doorway. She looked back at her parents, who both still had assertive stern expressions. “I… they… I don’t want to hurt you or Mabel, or your parents! I’m the one who should take the punishment for my actions.”

“What actions Paz, wanting to live like a normal person? You shouldn’t be made to feel guilty for that.” He took her hand, and the couple stood side-by-side, a confident presence against the Northwests. He conspiratorially leaned over and whispered in her ear. “Paz, things are gonna get worse before they get better. But trust me, I know what I’m doing. You have a keen eye, don’t forget to use it.”

She regarded him quizzically, but he turned to face her parents. “I didn’t get a chance to say this last time you showed up, but there’s a difference between giving someone ‘everything’ and letting them do ‘anything’. You buttered Paz up with money and luxury for so long, but it never made her feel like less of a slave.”

The two Northwests regarded him with disdain. “We can destroy your life boy, I’m sure your own parents would love to know where you are right now.”

Mason just shrugged. “Like that matters more than keeping Pacifica away from you.”

“Do you have dreams of college Mr Pines? A bright future where you steal our daughter away? That can never happen while you defy us,” Priscilla said, becoming noticeably more desperate.

“Oh, Mr and Mrs Moneybags getting so worried over one dumb teen. How insecure do you have to be to see your daughter being really happy for the first time in her life and then decide to attack anyone she really cares about?”
Preston started shouting in his face. “We’ll do it! We will!! You leave with her and that’ll be the end of your happy little monster seeking hobby. Your sister wants to get into art school, well we’ll block her applications. You father wants a promotion, he’ll be fired instead. Your uncles can be investigated for crimes against the government, that decrepit Shack closed down! Only devastation awaits those who defy the Northwests!”

“Wow, I’m so devastated to hear that.” Preston lashed a fist out in a wide arc, aiming for Mason’s face. He just caught the fist causally and held it out, surprising Pacifica with a newfound strength. “I may have weak noodle arms Mr Northwest, but at least I can consider myself more of a real man than you.”

Pacifica linked her arm around his. “Come on Mason, let’s leave these two losers behind. I’ve had enough of trying to reason with brick walls.” The couple turned on their heels.

The whole room shook, and Mason and Pacifica had to cover their ears as a booming voice rang out. “No, this isn’t the way I wanted things to go!” The door, which was still swinging open loosely, blasted off its hinges, forcing Mason to jump back. Striding into the house was Andromeda, whose blind rage looked like it was enough to outclass the entire Northwest family’s collected aggression.

Pacifica tried to drag Mason back inside. “Get away! She has mind control stuff!”

“Don’t worry Paz, I’m not afraid of her.” He stood between her and the doorway.

From the back of the hallway, neither Northwest was saying anything, stunned into silence by the appearance of a second Pacifica. She clenched her fists and focused on Mason. “YOU! GET OUT NOW! You’re messing everything up!”

“No, no-one’s controlling Pacifica after tonight! Not you, not her parents, not even me! If she wants to leave, she’ll leave!”

“I’ve had it with your ‘holier-than-thou’ spiel Dipper! You can’t help interfering where you don’t belong! Well that’s gonna stop right now!” As she said the last word, she shot out a hand. Her fist morphed and elongated as it travelled through the air. The clone lost her fingers, they all blended together into a single long blade of paper skin.

Before anyone could react, she charged at Mason, plunging the arm dagger right into his chest. Pacifica gasped and all Mason could do was weakly grunt. Blood poured out of his chest, staining his shirt and hoodie.

Andromeda retracted the blade, shifting her hand back to normal and regarding her brother with only a mild curiosity. “NO!” Pacifica screamed as Mason fell backwards, a primal noise of pure anguish. She rushed over to his side, but it was too late. His eyes stared up the ceiling, lifeless.

“Human beings, so fragile really.” Pacifica ignored the clone, crying tears of agony as Mason laid dead on the floor of the hall. “Oh well, guess I was wrong after all. You really have changed. A more secure prison would do better to keep you out of the way.”

Andromeda put both arms out in a T-shape, palms open wide, then smashed them together in front of herself. The floor around Pacifica shuddered and the walls splintered. Not caring about any of that, she let herself be surrounded by a perfect sphere made of the hallway of her old home.

Andromeda flicked her wrist, sending the clumsily made orb flying out of the open door, carrying Pacifica and the body of Mason with it. She gave one last look at the two people who, in the very
The light of day revealed a forest blanketed by ceaseless rain. At this time of year Oregon was usually sunny and warm, but on the rare occasions when it rained, it poured. Now the root-covered paths through the forest had turned into a thick sloshing mud.

The grey sky above was bright, but down in the forest it was still as dimly lit as ever. The cool air had a different vibe to the usual atmosphere of Gravity Falls, more pregnant with anticipation, tingling as if in wait for what was about to come.

For the first time in her short life - counting only the two months since she’d been created - Andromeda was able to step outside while it was raining. While normally a single drop would cause an intense pain and begin breaking down the bonds of her paper body, now the rain was harmlessly cascading away from her. The Ursus stone granted her this ability, to move the water with her mind so that she remained permanently dry. The only thing she had to worry about now were puddles of still water.

That, and Mabel Pines. Andromeda could already sense her approaching, the emotions coming from her were strong and determined. Mabel was going to find her and face her down, even though she knew the risks. Andromeda had already dealt with Dipper, whose intelligence made him the greatest threat to her plans, and Pacifica’s orb had been sent off to float aimlessly around the woods. Now only Mabel was left to deal with.

She found a dry log to sit on and wait. Her fur boots were coated in mud, and she reflected how it must be Pacifica’s influence that made her care about that. Her mind was still a mess of thoughts from both girls. Was her desire for power some latent desire of Pacifica’s, a chance to right the wrongs of her childhood? Or was it Mabel’s fear of the future making her choose a decisive course to set things right?

At least her powers would soon see an end to that dilemma. While she couldn’t yet display the same raw fury that Mabel had demonstrated during the Alignment, her powers were more far-reaching. Already she could feel the union of her mind with numerous others across the valley.

At last Mabel came around the trees and stood her ground opposite. Andromeda regarded her coolly. “It’s not like you walk blindly into danger, my dear precious Mabel.” Mabel didn’t reply initially and there was odd sensation she could detect. Not the expected fear at this encounter, instead more a pensive worry.

Andromeda turned her eye to Mabel’s appearance. She was wearing an oddly bulky sweater; it was Pacifica’s favourite, the yellow llama wool one. She’d applied heavy black lipstick and eyeshadow beneath her glasses for some reason but made no other effort to appear ‘goth’. Her hair was tucked into the sweater, and she had the turtleneck up tight over her chin.

“Hi there Andry.” Mabel’s bubbly voice at least sounded much the same as usual, though tinged with a layer of trepidation. “See you’ve been stealing things. Stan really is a bad influence, Pacifica’s right.” She pointed at the purple stone hanging around her neck.

“What can I say. Finders keepers. I’m doing much more with this than you could ever imagine. Mm, it feels good to sense you, there’s a familiarity to your mental patterns. I can tell how you’re feeling, anticipation for what’s coming next, tension regarding how I might act, anxiety over the fate of Pacifica. It’s all so much clearer now.”
“You started out with vague feelings, then defined emotions. Next you’ll be up to reading thoughts just like… like, uh, I did. Probably an example of the ambient energy enhancing your synaptic connections, so they can more easily translate the external stimuli coming from the collective consciousnesses surrounding you.”

“Huh, what?” That seemed oddly smart for something Mabel would say.

“Oh, uh, something Dipper told me. He’s pretty clever, remember. And he’s gonna help me stop you.”

Andromeda smirked at this naïve confidence. “Oh, I don’t think so.” Mabel instinctively took a step back, knowing something was wrong. “Your friend and your brother won’t be doing anything more to meddle in my plans. Pacifica’s stuck in a nice little orb with the tattered remains of her lost future. And your brother…”

“He’ll fight you, every step of the way through your nasty little plan.”

“YOUR BROTHER IS DEAD!” Andromeda rose off the log and stretched out her hand. Mabel couldn’t react before thick roots from beneath the mud wrapped around her arms. Like great muddy tentacles they constricted around Mabel, ensnaring her fully in Andromeda’s trap.

Andromeda knew that a reaction to her words was coming, and bizarrely managed to pre-empt it with her powers. She sensed the realisation of her words’ meaning moments before seeing Mabel’s mouth open in shock. “Yes Mabel, I killed him. Stabbed through the heart. I don’t regret it, not one bit.”

This was a lie, as both components that made up her mind were clearly filled with an overwhelming love for Dipper. But she squashed those thoughts, they were leftovers from before she’d been made, clinging on like parasites in her brain. Her new thoughts were more important, her plan would override everything else.

“I don’t believe you!” Mabel was straining against her restraints, but it was no use. “Why would you hurt him, you’re supposed to be like me!” A few tears rolled onto her cheeks. “I thought you could change… so did he.”

Andromeda’s eyes narrowed. “I have changed. I’m not like you anymore, I’m more powerful, and I know who I am now. I’ve found my new purpose. As soon as Morbid returns with my brothers and sisters, we’re all gonna have a grand old time.”

“What are you waiting for then? You’ve got me, you’ve won. Get it over with.”

Andromeda blinked a few times. “Get what over with?”

“Any last words?”

Mabel nodded, then closed her eyes in readiness. “Look before you leap.”
As she felt herself zoom towards Mabel, the last image she saw were her black lips turning ever-so slightly upwards into a smile.

Hours had passed, but Pacifica still felt like her soul had been torn out and shredded. In the tight darkness of her wooden orb prison she hadn’t stopped crying since Mason had been stabbed. It had all happened so fast back at the house. All her preparation and skills, all those ways she’d been getting better at Mystery Hunting in the last month, it had all been for nothing when it really mattered.

Mason, the first person who’d ever stood up for her, defended her, and shown her what true friendship and love were, was dead. She’d never had to deal with this kind of loss before in her life. Her grandparents had died when she was very young, and they weren’t the types to bond with her much anyway. Once when she’d been 7, a beloved pet peacock of hers had died. That had been a tragedy for a few hours. Her parents had simply bought her a new bird the next day.

Those were both nothing compared to how she was feeling now. Her heart felt like it was straining against her chest, beating erratically due to the stress it was going through. Her eyes were beginning to sting from the raw emotion flooding out. She could barely form a coherent thought, with the image of Mason toppling over bleeding still seared into her vision.

One stray thought did occur to her through the haze though. How in the world could she ever explain to Mabel what had happened? Thinking of breaking the news to her and seeing how she took the loss of her twin was almost as bad as the feeling of sheer emptiness she felt herself.

A wild impulse suddenly overtook her reasoning. Maybe Mason was merely unconscious, shock from the stabbing maybe rather than blood loss. Like when he’d been knocked out by the Were-Coyote, maybe she could still save him. She lightly brushed his hair out of his face, trying to peer down at it through the blackness. The orb she was in let no light penetrate, so she had to operate on touch alone.

She touched his cheek, feeling no warmth coming from him. He was practically frigid at this point. His skin also felt coarse, like it had been dry for too long. There was no movement beneath the skin, none of the slight tremors a person made all the time without consciously realising. She placed her hand above his mouth, hoping to feel some tiny hint of breath coming in or out. Nothing.

A small mewing whine came from her throat. She wasn’t nearly ready to let him go, not now, maybe not ever. Without him, she was nothing, a pawn of people who wanted to use her. She’d never see his dorky grin, hear him tell her about some mystical artefact, nor feel his tender warmth in a hug or kiss.

Her fingers brushed his forehead, feeling the spots of his birthmark. It made her think of the first time he’d shown it to her, how he’d overreacted over somehow offending her with it. He’d acted so silly, a rare look behind his normally composed façade. Only later did she come to truly cherish his birthmark, and how he considered her ‘worthy’ enough to see it. He’d even got over his habit of covering it up with a hat thanks to her.

A new stream of tears came even stronger. After all they’d been through as a couple, death was one adventure she’d never be ready to face. She closed her eyes and gave into the wave of loss. One tear rolled down off her chin and splashed onto Mason’s birthmark.

The silence of the orb was broken by a tiny noise, like the sizzle of a hotdog on a barbecue grill. Pacifica eyes shot open as she became immediately alert. In the dark her hearing had fewer distractions, so she traced the source of the sound. It quickly faded away, but not before she
realised it was coming from below herself. From Mason.

She wiped her face clear of tears, barely able to hold out the smallest hope that this sound indicated something. She fumbled her hand over his face again, looking for anything that might have caused the small change in her silent prison. Nothing by the mouth or the eyes. Her hand moved up to the birthmark… but didn’t find anything there.

She rubbed her hand back and forth over his forehead, feeling nothing but a smooth surface. It was as if the birthmark had been simply removed, magicked away like it was never there. This wasn’t right. Suddenly everything felt suspect. She turned her attention to one part of the body she hadn’t dared to examine. She dipped a very hesitant finger in the now dry blood which caked Mason’s chest. She pulled the finger up to her nose and sniffed.

It wasn’t blood. There was no tang like iron, and she knew that if felt wrong to the touch as well. She had to be sure. Gulping before daring to do it, she stuck her tongue out and licked a small sample of the fluid. It was a taste she knew. Simple tomato ketchup.

Her eyes widened with the realisation that this had all been faked. Mason’s stabbing hadn’t caused blood to gush out, it was a just a dummy condiment to make him appear to have been killed. She reached under his hoodie and found a small plastic bag that had been pierced by Andromeda’s blade hand. There was still a small pool of ketchup that hadn’t flowed out collected in the bottom.

Her hand moved over the chest, finding the incision that the blade had made in Mason’s chest. She was confused, it went right in there, a clean, almost medically precise, wound. Why would he need fake blood for a real stabbing?

She remembered the birthmark and licked another one of her fingers. Taking a guess, she stroked it down Mason’s cheek. The sound of sizzling returned, and she could feel the skin bubbling as she moved over it. The roughness of his skin, the way his birthmark had vanished, the lack of blood, now it all added up.

This wasn’t Mason at all. It was a paper clone.

She gasped, overcome with a mad elation. All the feelings of loss and fear were wiped away like the fake birthmark, replaced with a new determination. If Mason had faked his death, he’d done it for a reason.

It seemed that this clone was still ‘dead’, Andromeda’s magic stab must have done something to end his life, though Pacifica could scarcely understand the mechanics of how a living paper being could even feel pain. She should have noticed all of this sooner. Though she’d held his hand back at the house and felt the paper skin, she’d been too caught up in the heightened emotions to notice. Arguing with her parents and then Mason’s sudden return had been enough to make her not pay attention.

She remembered what he’d told her, about having a keen eye. He’d trusted her to identify that he wasn’t the real Mason. For whatever reason, her pendant hadn’t made any movement in his presence. She supposed it hadn’t done anything around Quattro or Andromeda either, these paper clones must not register strongly enough on whatever ‘weirdness metric’ Mason had enchanted it to detect.

If Mason had planned this clone’s death, then it was possible he knew she’d end up trapped like this. She patted down his body, finding a small lump in his hoodie pocket. She reached inside, and instead of finding his journal or camera, there was only a small silver ball with a speaker. She pressed the button on the side of the small device, then hastily dropped it when it started blaring.
out a piercing screech.

The orb she was in vibrated like crazy, the structure falling apart. After a few seconds of the deafening attack, the orb completely broke and she fell a small way into some mud. The screeching metal ball was ineffectual now its noise was dispersed outside.

Pacifica looked around, seeing the drizzle of rain through the trees. She was glad that her hair had been cut recently, before when it soaked up the rain it would annoyingly weigh her down. It was so refreshing to be out in the cool air after the uncomfortably tight heat of her prison, and she gratefully let the raindrops fall on her face. Any tears she had left were soon forgotten under the relief of the water from above.

Beside her, the clone of Mason had fallen into the mud, and was swiftly melting away under the rain. She didn’t know whether she should mourn the fallen clone, surely he was just as alive as Quattro or Andromeda. But there wasn’t time to dawdle. She gathered up her journal, which thankfully hadn’t fallen in too much mud, then started trying to get her bearings. It was then that she noticed the bushes and grass around her begin to twitch.

Andromeda raced through the surface layers of Mabel’s consciousness, passing through random discarded memories of little things, like random smells from years ago, or that one catchy tv show jingle she could never quite get out of her head. She was more interested in the deeper core memories, once inside she could supplant them, transferring her own consciousness over Mabel’s. Her old paper body would be left an empty shell, and she’d finally be flesh and blood.

The memories around began to become more structured; she saw brief flashes of the past like the day Mabel won Waddles, or seeing herself floating in front of the portal, or finding Journal 3 in the woods, or kissing Pacifica for the first time in the club-

Andromeda knew something was wrong. These memories didn’t match either Mabel’s, Pacifica’s, or her own limited experiences. In fact, there was a strong resemblance to someone else’s memories. Her body manifested as an avatar as herself to ease navigation, and she tried to breach to the mind core.

All around, a simple world began to form, the mental mindscape of who she was inhabiting. At first it was a void, but it wasn’t pitch black like the realm of the Ursus. It was a rough light brown texture, almost like sepia. She touched a hand out at the surroundings, and felt a land of parchment, similar in fact to the way her own skin felt, but much older and rougher.

She looked down, seeing that she was standing on a black platform. There were other black shapes appearing against the brown background, as if they were being sketched from the air. Which, she supposed when she realised what they were, was accurate. She peered over the edge of her platform, seeing a long black stand sticking out beneath. She was standing on a giant letter T, floating in a world of words.

“You like it? Makes sense to order my brain the way I order my thoughts down on paper.
Welcome to Journal world.” The voice came from the air, but across the page another avatar appeared. This one was dressed in a flannel hoodie.

It had been surprisingly easy to fool the paper clone. Despite literally having all of Mabel’s memories, she’d completely missed all the signs that seemed obvious from Dipper’s point of view. The slightly different facial structure. The fact that he was considerably taller. She hadn’t even noticed the lack of purple in his hair. Or for that matter, the obvious birthmark beneath it on his forehead.
But a heavy layer of makeup, Mabel’s glasses, Paz’s bulky sweater to hide his gender, and a whole lot of luck had done the trick. A little bit of McGucket’s refined voice changing serum had completed the deception. For all the superiority Andromeda had felt before about tricking him by pretending to be Pacifica, she’d never even suspected he’d pull the same twist on her.

Andromeda gritted her teeth and spat out her words. “Dipper. Fancy seeing you here. You’re looking well for a corpse.”

“If you’re looking to take over a mind today, then I’m sorry. I have a lot more mental resilience than Mabel. Ford has taught me a lot about guarding my mind over the years. Build up proxy mind states to shield the long-term memory, focus on a well-known environment for maximum fortitude. Worked pretty well to regulate my emotions so you didn’t even suspect a thing out there in the real world too. You fell for the classic Cipher-Trap.”

Andromeda lunged forwards and jumped onto the next letter on their line. “Aghh! What does it take to kill you? I’m starting to see why Gideon and Bill Cipher hated you so much.”

“Careful ‘Andry’, comparing yourself to those guys isn’t a good look for you. Whatever happened to ‘I just wanna be like everyone else’?”

“I’m not like anyone else! Not with this!” She clasped a hand around the fiery purple stone hanging around her neck. “I’m becoming a god thanks to this!”

Dipper dismissed her with a wave. “Oh, that. That’s nothing. That hunk of rock’s just a mundane bit of future tech. It’s the weilder who makes it special. You might be able to ‘sense’ all those feelings, but you can’t understand a single one. Why Andromeda, why bother with all this acting tough and hurting people? That’s not gonna make you happy.”

Dipper’s few tears before being mentally attacked had actually been genuine (partly, in addition to a lot of furious blinking). He really had hoped for the best after talking with Andromeda, that she could see the error of her ways and try to repent.

A few of the giant ink letters floated up past Dipper and Andromeda’s line of text. “Looks like things here are starting to slip away. Guess it was only a matter of time. Last chance before we separate then. Either surrender now, hand over the stone, and I’ll consider trying to help you find a way to fix your brain. Or-“

“Never! I’m gonna absorb every last ounce of excess energy in the dumb hick town, then I’m gonna take back my body from Mabel, and with all the built-up power I’ll get whatever I want out of life! And next time I’ll make sure you’re really dead!”

“Or, as I was going to say, I’ll have to deal with you. The hard way. I already did that with my new copy, so you know I’m not playing around, clone.” He used the same scornful tone that she always used when referring to normal humans. If she was gonna casually dismiss his entire way of life, he might as well play by the same rules.

More of the inky blackness started turning into clouds and floating away, and the parchment surrounding them began to tear slowly. “Bye bye Andromeda. I hope you see the light before the end.”

“Why don’t you go fu-!”

Dipper woke up with a start, lying in the dirt. He got to his feet and shrugged off the heavy yellow
sweater. Beneath, he was just wearing his normal clothes. He carefully removed Mabel’s glasses, not wanting to risk damaging them (he feared Mabel’s wrath if that ever came to pass), then wiped as much of the black lipstick as he could off onto the back of his hand. It was good to not have to play the part of his sister anymore.

He saw Andromeda lying on the ground, still asleep. There was a perfect dry patch surrounding her body where the stone had moved the rain away. Her mind was likely taking some time to return from his journal-scape.

She was completely at his mercy right now, though it was only a matter of time. He couldn’t remove the Ursus stone, even standing over her he could feel the searing heat emanating from it. But he could just end her here and now. The stone might be forcing the small raindrops away, but there were plenty of puddles around to try dunking her in. Or he could just use violence, tear off some of her paper limbs or maybe he could… he could...

Try as he might, he just couldn’t muster up the will to hurt this girl. He knew that were their positions reversed she’d have no hesitation in mercilessly ending his life. He wasn’t that kind of person though. It was especially hard to consider such an act when Andromeda looked so much like someone he loved so deeply.

Sighing, he turned and left the sleeping clone behind, heading back to the Shack to await the results of Phase 2 of the plan.

The mud was starting to come up to Pacifica’s neck as she was dragged down by the tangled roots and leaves. Andromeda was nowhere to be seen, but her influence must be extending throughout the woods of Gravity Falls. She wondered if the townsfolk, ignorant of this new threat, were also being victimised by their garden shrubs.

She knew she didn’t have long left, once her head was under the mud she’d be swiftly out of breath. She tried to once again break free, ending up just exerting a bunch of energy and slipping slightly further down in the sloppy morass. She felt gross all over her body, encrusted mud covering all over her clothes and exposed arms.

She perked up, hearing a noise, like a plane’s engine, getting closer and closer. She braced herself for whatever was coming her way. Her whole body was suddenly jerked out of the mud pool as she felt a pair of hands lift her off from under her shoulders.

Now she was hurtling through the woods at intense speed. She looked up at her rescuer and couldn’t have been happier to see a hooded, goggles-wearing Mabel grinning down at her. “Mabel! You’re flying!” She craned her neck back, glimpsing the fiery exhaust coming from her ankles. “Mason finished them! This is awesome!”

“Nice to see you too! Hold on, this is gonna get a little bumpy.” Mabel released one arm, forcing her friend to clutch onto the remaining one with all her force. She strained to focus on the scanner goggles, which showed a simple outline the trees, acting as a basic HUD for this low-altitude flight. McGucket’s repairs to the leg jets were decent, though they would intermittently cut out. Without the arm jets, she was relying on her grappling hook to orient herself through the trees. Her mental state felt more like her usual parkouring style, lots of quick reactions and fast manoeuvring.

She fired out a line to their left, then pulled hard, orienting the two girls away from an incoming tree. “So, saved ya again Pacifica, you’re really slacking in that department!”

“Seriously Mabel? I’ll trash talk you when we aren’t fleeing for our lives from an insane melded
"Copy of ourselves!" She had to shout somewhat over the noise of the wind and the rockets. "Besides, I was about to get myself out of that situation!"

"Oh, sure sure," Mabel sarcastically replied.

"How’d you even find me?"

"We tracked Andromeda. Dipper used his, say it with me now:"

"Anomalous energy scanner"

"-scanner, right. Man, that dumb thing’s always getting us in trouble. With all the energy Andromeda’s soaking up, she shows up like a walking Obelisk on all the readouts."

"How is your brother? He tell you all about the plan to kill his clone and make Andromeda think he was dead?"

"Yuh-huh, he’s gonna prank her so good. Uh oh, speaking of Andromeda." Mabel bent her legs forwards, slowing their flight, then moved to a stationary standing position. Andromeda was standing in front of them, glaring and sticking her arm out. Splinters of bark from the nearest trees began shooting out like tiny wooden bullets.

Mabel’s head craned upwards and the rockets followed suit, giving them the height to avoid Andromeda’s attacks. Unfortunately, Andromeda lifted her body telekinetically, forming a weird sphere of dry air amongst all the falling water. Mabel angled herself forwards again, while Pacifica clung to her and grimaced. "This would definitely be ‘seatbelts on’ time if I was a plane!"

Something hit one of her boosters, and the pair started falling towards the earth. Mabel flared her wrist out behind them. Luckily the hook hit a tree, but their momentum caused the girls to spin around it as the rope wrapped itself around the trunk.

"Woah woah woah!" They both screamed, before colliding face first with each other and landing in the undergrowth in a mass of limbs.

Mabel pulled herself up out of the bushes and pulled in her line. Rather than finding Pacifica grumbling about the rough landing, she was instead laughing hysterically. "When can we- ha, when can we go on that ride again?" She got to her feet shakily but was still grinning.

"How about right now!" Mabel pointed back the way they’d come. Andromeda wasn’t there, but instead something was running madly towards them. Pacifica saw that it was some sort of giant lizard, with a large crest on its back. Incredibly, Mabel recognised the creature. It was a Pyrosaur, creatures that travelled between dimensions by combusting their bodies under the influence of the moon.

The two girls broke into a run across the uneven ground. The Pyrosaur wasn’t normally a chasing predator, they preferred to lie in wait for prey and ambush. But a new command was overriding the creature’s natural instincts, and it had decently speedy gait.

Afraid of being cooked to a crisp, Mabel turned, knowing they couldn’t outrun the beast. "Mabel, what are you doing, we’ve gotta keep moving!"

"Gimme a sec Paz." Mabel held out her left arm and closed one eye. Meticulously, she lined up her hand with the crest on the approaching creature. "Hope the mechanism doesn’t stick." Mabel stuck out her tongue, then a second later, Pacifica heard a massive bang as a shot fired out from her wrist gauntlet. Their pursuer collapsed and snorted out one last little candle-sized flame. "Yes!
“Bullseye!”

“You didn’t kill it, did you?”

Mabel reset her gauntlet to the grapple setting. “Don’t worry, it’s just a tranq dart, the bang was from the propulsion system. Oh no.” Ahead of them, swarming through the trees were multiple creatures, all as possessed as the first Pyrosaur. There was one of the Rosettas, a burly Manotaur, and even the emaciated unicorn Radianamajestica. Mabel grabbed Pacifica’s wrist and the two of them broke back into a run. “I can’t shoot all of them! We’ve gotta get back to the Shack!” As they ran, more creatures came upon them. Above, an eye-bat swooped down, and Pacifica waved it off. Jumping after them from branch to branch through the trees were a pack of Cycloptopuses.

Without any warning, all the creatures following them halted in their tracks. Pacifica looked back, confused. “Why are they stopping?” Mabel pulled her away before she could find out the answer, and the two girls made their way back to safety without encountering any further resistance.

The army had finally arrived around Andromeda. Their gathered ranks came from the basement of McGucket’s manor, liberated by Morbid the Huntsman at long last. He’d of course been horrified by his own actions, unable to resist the action of freeing the creatures he’d spent so long tracking and catching.

Now he found himself helping the domineering girl to her feet. “You just let those girls go? Why? They’re your enemies, you should have dealt with them while you had the chance!”

“I need more time! My powers aren’t refined enough yet. I’ve already failed to take over one mind, I can’t go in unprepared again. The army will secure our success.” She looked around with pride at the motley crew of various species she’d assembled. Their bodies were still suffering from the radiation, but with every passing second her own form was taking more and more of it in. When she reached her apotheosis, everything else in the Falls would be cured as a side effect. Her purple tinged Kochab lined up at the front of the horde, it was her most powerful and loyal monster.

Morbid found himself still able to roll his eyes despite the rest of his body being immobile. “Ugh, you want to use these ‘things’ to help you? At least some of them will end up as cannon fodder. I shoulda increased protection on McGucket’s manor, the man’s too soft.”

Andromeda sidled over and took his cheeks in her hand. It was a move that showed just how much power she had over this pitiful man. “I know what you’re thinking, you dolt. But McGucket was never gonna let you kill them. He was trying to cure these beings, not slaughter them. You were just the idiot muscle to bring them in. Now you’re my idiot muscle. Look on the bright side though, I hate the Pines twins just as much as you. Our next stop will be the densest point of the energy leakage. Which just so happens to be their home in that Shack that’s falling apart.”

Morbid thought about this for a moment, then found that his neck muscles also still worked of his own accord and nodded. “When do we start?”

By the time the girls had trudged back to the shack, the intensity of rain had increased. It was still relatively bright outside, but darker clouds were moving in from the south. Both of them felt miserable, soaked to the skin and exhausted. Neither had slept since arriving in Gravity Falls, and when they finally reached the Shack’s clearing they both gave a sigh of relief.

Dipper came out onto the porch to greet them. He and Pacifica embraced without a word; though
she was drenched and muddy he savoured the moment. “Pacifica, I’m so glad you’re alright. You’re not hurt at all, are you?”

“I’m fine Mace. Come here.” She kissed him deeply, as if it were the last chance she ever had. “That’s for being thankful that you’re not dead.” Dipper smiled back, but his look was replaced with utter shock as he felt Pacifica’s palm slap him across the face. “And that’s for making me think you were dead in the first place! What were you thinking, dummy!? Never do that to me again.” She hugged him tightly as he rubbed his deservedly sore cheek.

“Oh, I know, it was a bit of a dick-move using the clone like that.” Pacifica glared up at him. “But, in my defence, I had to convince Andromeda I was dead, or we couldn’t have distracted her for Phase 2 of the rescue. She’d have sussed me out and Mabel wouldn’t have found you.”

She nuzzled her face into his chest. “Fine, just don’t go making any more paper yous, ok. We all know how easily it can backfire.”

“I promise.” He lifted his head and looked over at Mabel, who was sitting on the sofa and rinsing out her socks. “You doing alright sis?”

“I’m ok, glad to be back home. Though these rockets will need fixing again, they got hit by a magic flying splinter.”

“I’m sure McGucket and Candy will be able to help. They’re inside, with the others. We’d better get in there and clean you two up, we have a lot to discuss and prepare. Andromeda will be coming here soon, the radiation source is in the basement.”

The girls both looked happy to be warm and dry, so eagerly headed inside. Dipper took one last look out at the torrent of rain. From the other side of the valley came a deep rumble of thunder. “Storm’s coming alright.”

“By the way Dip, you’re looking fabulous!” Mabel had stuck her head around the door. “What next, are you gonna get a tattoo?! Zing!” Her laughter faded as she ran up the stairs. Dipper put a hand to his face, realising that he still had the eyeshadow and most of the lipstick on. Grunting, he headed inside to wash himself clean.

As Pacifica exited the shower, the sound of water hitting the roof of the Shack made it seem as if she hadn’t left. She sat on Mason’s bed, waiting for her hair to dry. The triangular shaped window was blurred by the rain washing across it. Though the weather outside was getting worse and worse, the group had a window of peace right now. After the chaos of last night, a quiet moment to rest was all anyone wanted. The trio needed to recover from their tussles with Andromeda and everyone needed time to digest the new information they’d discovered.

While impatiently waiting for her hair to dry (and thankful once again for it being shorter), she found her journal. Writing about what had happened at her house, with Mason’s clone, would be helpful. Though she’d recovered well in the moment after finding out the truth, now she had time to think she was troubled by what she’d seen. She hadn’t taken the loss well, breaking down and practically giving up all hope. Now she had Mason back, she never wanted to let him go.

That made her think. Was that how he’d been seeing her lately? With the immediacy of her departure weighing him down, he’d become more protective over her. Somehow he’d managed to get over it after her birthday. Maybe she could find a way to do the same about this?
She worried most about Andromeda, about what she’d do now, having been tricked so blatantly. Would she try to finish the job with Mason? She wasn’t sure. The clone’s mental state was uncertain to anyone, probably even to herself.

Mabel had found the discarded ‘basketball puppy’ sweater Andromeda had abandoned when she’d slipped past Soos. It had given her an odd melancholy sensation; it felt like Andromeda had come so close to joining them, only to cruelly reject their offered hand. The sweater was just the biggest symbol of that.

Soos of course had apologised profusely to Pacifica for letting Andromeda escape, but she brushed his apology off. He wasn’t responsible for that, they all knew Andromeda was crafty, even ignoring her manipulation powers.

Now the others were gathered in the Shack living room, coming up with solutions to the imminent threat. Pacifica would join them shortly, as soon as the journal entry was done. Another nagging thought was the fate of her parents. Andromeda seemed uninterested in the town itself, there had been no reports of attacks from any of the townsfolk. But that’s not why Pacifica was thinking about her parents. Their threats still stood; even if they survived the coming crisis it would still loom over the trio.

She’d just have to hope their reach wasn’t as wide as they’d claimed.

“Alright, I call to session the first meeting of the gathered ‘Anti Andromeda Assessment And Attack Association’. That’s Mabel’s title by the way.” Dipper addressed the small group they’d brought together in the living room to deal with their impending doom. Tate McGucket had brought over as much research from the manor as he could, and his father and Candy had been sat at the table poring over their options. Soos and Melody had closed the tourist attraction side of the Shack, making sure there weren’t any bystanders caught in the fray. The Mystery Trio had joined them after cleaning up and were now smooshed together on the old armchair.

“Yeah, go AAAAAA! Mabel wooped.

“Um, thanks. Anyway, we all know why we’re here. We have the skills and knowledge to defend this location and figure out some way to stop Andromeda. Anyone wanna start?”

There was an apprehensive silence hanging over the air. The distant low rumble of the storm was the only sound in the room. Nobody really had a clear plan for defending themselves. Soos had used some old crates to barricade the doors, but beyond that their supplies were limited. The twins had left almost all of their Mystery Hunting equipment back in Piedmont, having not comprehended the true scope of the endeavour.

Mabel fired off a shot from her gauntlet and wheeled back a can of Pitt Cola from across the room. She slurped it noisily, glancing around at everyone’s uneasy faces. “Awkward.”

“Doods, I think our number one priority should be keeping the Shack protected.” Soos had half a mind on keeping his home and place of work as safe from harm as possible, regardless of the portal or rifts. Melody was also in no condition to fight, being near the end of her term, so would need to be kept safe too.

While the response from the scientist table was to keep focusing on their research, Tate McGucket grunted. “And how’re we s’posed to do that? We ain’t got hardly anything to fight with.” The two men glared at each other, an enmity starting to brew due to the heightened tension.
“We have my axe and crossbow, that’s something.” Pacifica had retrieved her ‘adventure pack’ from the Hyper-Coyote, glad to have a space to keep her journal after lugging it around under her arm all day.

“My gauntlet’s not gonna be much use though,” Mabel said. “Tranq darts aren’t gonna cut it for most of the creatures, their skins are too thick, and getting clear shots’ll be tough in the chaos of battle. Though, I’m not sure I wanna use real bullets or anything, it may be self-defence, but aren’t we trying to save these guys?”

“In all serious Mabel, we might have to do whatever it takes to keep this place safe. And that includes… killing,” Pacifica said solemnly.

“Woah, hold on, battle? Let’s not get carried away guys, our aim with this planning meeting is to try and avoid any kind of confrontation.” Dipper also knew that he’d be worse than useless in any combat situations, having neither any weapons training nor physical strength. “The Shack’s shielding won’t keep us totally safe; we already know Andromeda can pass through it trivially. We should try and use our time now to shore up defences and look into ways of neutralising the threat.”

Candy looked up from the notes. “But with what you’ve reported, it seems the clone’s powers are reaching their fruition. She will soon have the powers of a god.”

Pacifica shrugged. “So what, the twins here have beaten a bunch of gods before, ain’t no biggie.” She paused after saying that sentence to reflect on how utterly bizarre it actually was, and how casually she’d said it. “The point is, she’s not unbeatable. She must have some kind of weakness, a flaw in her system.”

Mabel piped up. “Ooh, like that time I had that groty wart right between my thigh and my-“

“Ah chchch!” Dipper silenced her. “Mabel, nobody wants to hear about that. It was unpleasant enough having to deal with you at the time. Andromeda’s weakness is more likely to be something mental, regarding her powers or her weird personality condition.”

“Couldn’t we just talk to her, try and come to an arrangement?” Melody said. “I mean, if she’s half of each of you girls, surely she won’t wanna fight either.”

“I’m sorry Mrs Ramirez, but Mason and I already tried that. She’s not gonna be swayed by us any time soon. More likely she wants us all dead.” Pacifica left that sour note hanging for a moment.

Melody sighed and took Soos’ hand. “Alright then, you kids always seem to know best. I just hope this all works out.”

“We’ll do our best Mel, you can count on it.” Mabel sympathetically smiled. “So, weaknesses. Our clone friend is undoubtedly screwed in the head and coming to knock down our door. Like Dipper said, maybe we can use her empath powers against her, could we overwhelm her with emotion, or find some way to fix her brain so she no longer wants to fight?”

“I may have something for that.” McGucket spoke for the first time. “I’ve been thinking on it, and it’s the only practical solution I can see. A last resort.” From within the folds of his bushy beard came a small stubby gun. The handle was silver, and the barrel was a simple glass tube. Candy regarded the device with a solemn look, and Dipper looked at it curiously.

“What is it then? Some kind of energy weapon? Concentrated Di-Hydrogen Monoxide projector? A dimension cannon?!” He was getting rather too eager at contemplating all the many possibilities that this device could be.
McGucket, with no hint of levity or jokiness simply stared down at the gun. “It’s called the Memory Re-alignment Emitter. MRE.” He read out the initials of the acronym slowly in a way that chilled Dipper to his core. MRE… memory…

“Mr E? What, is that like ‘mystery’? Weird name.” Mabel cocked her head to one side goofily, and Dipper could only roll his eyes

“No Mabel, I know exactly what this thing is. It’s a memory gun.” Mabel’s excitement for this new toy disappeared rapidly.

“Oh no no no! You didn’t Fiddleford! Tell me you didn’t rebuild it!” McGucket said nothing, remaining focused on the gun. “Ohmigosh, I have to- it can’t be-“ Rambling and beginning to hyperventilate, Mabel jumped off the armchair and started backing away in fear of the device. “Keep that thing away from me!”

Pacifica got up and tried to calm her down, grabbing her arms. “It’s ok Mabel, it’s ok! He’s not gonna use it on you, you’re safe, we’re all safe.”

“I know what that thing did! What it did to my Grunkle! What it did to him!” She pointed accusingly at McGucket, who forlornly tucked the gun back into his beard.

“I never said I wouldn’t rebuild it… I’m sorry.”

“I helped him work on it, it wasn’t meant for a bad purpose,” Candy defended. “It was a precautionary measure, first in case of ‘you-know-who’ potentially returning, but also for other applications. A selective memory eraser could, in time, be an asset to several psychological fields.”

“It’s too dangerous.” Dipper was staring into the space the shining new device had been a few seconds before. Internally he was conflicted. Half of him wanted to just go out there and blast Andromeda clean of everything, that would be the easiest thing to do. The other half knew that erasing her would in some ways be tantamount to killing her, memory being the most important component of a person’s personality - and that Mabel would never go along with it in a million years.

“Yeah man, like, you turned totally coocoo after using that mind gun.” Soos seemed to be in ‘Camp Mabel’ when it came to using the gun.

McGucket gave a small nod but didn’t waver. “I understand where you’re comin’ from, I do. I know the risks more than anyone. 35 years ago me’n Stanford built this portal, now look where it’s led us. Still cleaning up the same mess. Ironically Andromeda’s indirectly solving my biggest problem. If only she weren’t turning the excess radiation energy into fuel to power her maniacal vendetta against you folks.”

Mabel removed her glasses and rubbed at her eyes. “But we can’t just wipe her like an old videotape! We have to be better than that.” She suddenly strode over to McGucket and thrust out her hand. “Give it to me.”

“Beggin’ yer pardon missy?”

“Give me the memory gun!”

McGucket fished it back out, then Mabel roughly grabbed it off him. “Mabel!” Dipper indignantly exclaimed. She ignored his shock and examined the new device. It was a lot more compact than the original. She couldn’t find any way of selecting which memories in particular could be deleted. It must be an ‘all-or-nothing’ version.
“I’m keeping this from now on. If anyone’s going to have to make a decision about Andromeda, it’s going to be me. I’m the one with the most experience dealing with… this kind of thing.” She turned over her wrist and clipped the gun to her forearm gauntlet. It sat next to the grapple launcher and projectile tube, the gun’s handle sticking out to the side slightly inelegantly. “In the meantime, we need to come up with another plan.”

Mabel sat back down on the armchair, clearly the discussion around using the MRE was over as far as she was concerned. Dipper decided to focus on their secondary problem, rather than upset the hornet’s nest. “McGucket, uh, you said earlier that Andromeda was like a vacuum, absorbing the radiation.”

“Well yeah, ever since she got that time stone doohickey, she’s been sucking up the radiation like a sponge in a moonshine still! I’ve been detecting a noticeable drop in the ambient levels over the past few hours, but there’s a massive singular spike wherever the girl goes. If she loses focus over that stone there’s two ways things could go. One, the collected energy gets polarised and shunts itself back through the rifts, solving the problem lickety split!”

“And the other?”

“The radiation spills out all at once like a dam bursting, killing everything in its path,” Candy said with an air of melodrama. “Sorry, not very cheery.”

Dipper rested his head on a hand. “Great, that’s really great. Might as well try and wait for her to absorb as much as possible, either way we should try and make it as ‘clean’ as possible. Though that will make her tougher.”

“You guys think about,” Mabel said, heading out of the room. “I’m gonna go… get some air.”

Dipper and Pacifica made a stocktake of the Ford’s old basement supplies. Most of the weapons he’d stashed were either too old and falling apart, or were too large scale for this kind of threat. A fat lot of good a Quantum Destabiliser would do against an army of flesh and blood creatures. Using the copier to make a bunch of clones was out of the question. Not even mentioning the ethical ramifications, they just wouldn’t last a minute out there due to the rainstorm. And the electron carpet would just make things more complicated than ever.

Upstairs, Candy and McGucket were squirreling away, trying to build whatever they could before the army arrived. Soos and Tate had got into a small fight over how to properly build barricades inside the Shack, but Melody had calmed them down.

Tired and stressed, the couple sat at the kitchen table and munched on snacks while they waited. Dipper perused Journal 4, taking note of as many weaknesses as he could that would be useful for the coming battle.

Pacifica had tried the same with her own journal, but comparatively fewer of the creatures she’d chronicled would be involved anyway. “So,” she said over a mouthful. “Is this it? Just you, me, Mabel, and the others against the ‘forces of darkness’ or whatever?”

“Looks like it Paz. We don’t have time to get anyone else. Most of the townsfolk won’t want any part of this, they went through enough 5 years ago. The magical denizens are all either part of Andromeda’s army or in hiding. Nowhere in the woods, hell, nowhere in the whole valley is safe for them.”
“We must have some other backup, surely?” She yelled across the Shack, “Candy, what’s Grenda up to? We could do with her brute strength, girl’s a machine when it comes to weightlifting.”

“Grenda is in Austria right now, visiting Marius,” came Candy’s shouted reply.

“Oh… ok, that’s useless. Come on, there must be somebody we can call?” Pacifica’s voice rose, “Your Great Uncles, they’d be great…” then fell again. “But they’re hundreds of miles away on that boat. Dammit, I keep thinking cause you and Mabel are here that it’s summer.”

“Hey, we could always call your parents, we could do with some extra cannon fodder to go on the front lines.”

“Not funny Mace.” Her lip started to quiver. “Ok, a little funny, but still. Any other bright ideas? Cause I’m all out of them. We don’t have time to turn the Shack into a mecha or summon help from a spirit realm. It’s up to us.”

Dipper stared out the window and the drops sliding down the glass. “I wish Wendy was here,” he said absent-mindedly. “Uh, I mean for defence purposes, she’s good in a fight.”

“Hey, I’ve seen the way Quattro is, you don’t have to hide it from me. I know what it’s like to look at someone and never believe you can have a chance to be together. I thought for years that my parents would stop us ever becoming something more.”

They linked hands under the table. “Thanks for understanding Paz.”

“Yeah, I’m awesome and forgiving like that. Just don’t ever make googoo eyes at her while I’m around, or I’ll be fully justified in killing you.” She winked at him.

“For sure. If we make it out of today alive, that is.”

Sat on the roof, Mabel was sitting in the rain. She liked the smells that came up after a good rainstorm, that odd smell of dust being blown up in the air, the way it made the pine scent ever more noticeable. Her hair was getting frizzy from all the water though.

She’d found her streamlined turquoise sweater, better to keep herself warm in the rain. She’d also donned a bright pair of yellow welly boots, but her rocket greaves were sat nearby just in case she needed to jump quickly into action. The others down below were trying their best to prepare for the worst, or to find some last desperate hope that could save them.

Mabel wasn’t feeling that positive. She’d kept catching herself glancing at the new attachment poking out from beneath her arm, the glass tube that threatened her so much. She was starting to realise that there might not be an easy fix to this that didn’t involve ‘killing’ Andromeda. It made her stomach turn to even consider inflicting what was her worst fear onto someone with basically the same underlying mind. Andromeda was likely just as scared of that happening, only she didn’t expect it any time soon with the stone in her possession. She might be made of paper, but the gun would erase her like chalk off a board.

This wasn’t going to have a simple fix like with the Ursus. Someone would have to a pay a price.

She looked out at the drenching rain, now punctuated occasionally with flashes of lightning and the delayed ominous sounds of thunder. Mabel normally liked weather like this, it made her feel warm and snug when she was wrapped up inside, and could be a fun opportunity for splashing around in puddles and getting all messy. She imagined that Pacifica, queen of clean, would probably hate it herself. Andromeda must be having a weird time right now processing that split, not to mention her
She was idly loading an explosive firecracker pellet into her gauntlet, when she heard another rumble of thunder. At the end of the thunder, as it was fading away, there was a second, much louder bang. For a moment, she’d thought she’d set off one of her new pellets, which were designed mainly to make a big distraction with their noise. But she counted, and all of them were still intact.

She got to her feet quickly and peered out across the shelf. She scanned the treeline for anything, and her eye caught one of the tallest pine trees. It was starting to fall over, as if uprooted from beneath. She braced herself, then heard another massive crash as it hit the ground. That had made the same sound as the ‘second thunderclap’. Something big was moving through the woods.

“Guys! Everybody!” She called down the ladder hatch leading to the gift shop. “They’re here! Action stations!” She hoped they’d heard the message, and swiftly pulled off the wellies and began clipping on her flame-coloured rockets.

Her attention was drawn back to the trees as whatever had been knocking them over finally stepped into the clearing. Mabel’s eyes widened at the sight of the creature. On two bulky legs, a Tyrannosaurus Rex stepped out of the woods, roaring with all its might. It towered above the Shack, practically at her eye level. Andromeda must have fully excavated it from the mines of amber beneath the town.

Without any hesitation, the dinosaur began running towards the shack. Despite its spindly arms, the legs were powerful, and it wasted no time crossing the clearing. Mabel frantically tried to finish snapping the last metal cylinder onto her leg before it attacked.

The T-Rex abruptly stopped its ferocious charge, and a wall of purple energy came into view in front of Mabel. Indecipherable alien runes floated over the surface of the massive glowing dome that encompassed the Shack. Her old unicorn-magic powered shield was still working perfectly after all these years.

“Ha, take that! When it comes to being a threat, you’re extinct!” She had to reconsider her words, as other creatures began emerging into the clearing. The T-Rex retreated, awaiting the rest of Andromeda’s troops.

Though she was still tensing herself up for the coming battle, she couldn’t help but be awed by the multitude of creatures laid out before her. Even after all those months searching for the supernatural back in Piedmont, she still got a giddy thrill seeing the wonders of Gravity Falls. Those same ‘wonders’ which were now appearing from all directions, encircling the Shack.

A pack of three unicorns, each one a different shimmering colour led the forces from the right side, which included the Rosetta parent and child, half a dozen Manotaurs, and the same Pyrosaur she’d knocked out with her dart earlier. From the left came a small unit of gnomes, the Were-Coyote, and the poor old Multi-Bear. More and more creatures came, encompassing some Mabel had never even seen before, like a serpent with six-heads, a creature like a giant millipede rolling in a curled up ball-form, or a tall dark creature with skinny limbs and bright yellow saucers for eyes.

Even some of the more strange and reclusive oddities of the town had turned out. A swarm of Soothsquitos flew up and around the Shack’s roof, giving minor aerial support. The Cycloptopus family Dipper had seen back in California were climbing down the trunks of the nearest trees on their suckers. Mabel even saw a baffling collection of logs, united into 4 legs by a glowing fire with eyes, which seemed to be struggling somewhat in the downpour.
All in total, there must have been over a hundred creatures surrounding them, leaving no chance of escape. Their enemies had come. The war was about to begin.

At the front of the column, some of the creatures began charging towards the shack. Once again, the shield appeared, and the attackers uselessly pounded against it. Mabel didn’t know how much damage it could take. It had stood up to the full might of Bill Cipher in his prime, but that had been only a few days after the magic had been applied, and it was specifically designed for him. There was every possibility that their protection could collapse, or that some creatures could slip through.

So she had to fight to protect her home. She took a deep breath, readying her body and mind. Rockets securely fastened to her shins, she stepped off the roof and blasted upwards. Her first move was to fire a line at the Mystery Shack sign. Her arc through the air was in a circle around the clearing.

The Soothsquitos hovering above scattered as she flew straight through their formation. Once they were dealt with, she broke the connection to the Shack and landed on the ground out the front of the gift shop. “Who wants some!”

Most of the creatures were still standing someway back from the Shack, so she fired out a warning shot from her gauntlet. The firecrackers made a good display, exploding and causing several approachers to scatter. A unicorn rushed her from the side and she rolled to avoid being skewered on the horn. She fired another shot directly into the unicorn’s face, and the sparks from the blast blinded it.

Momentum carried it forwards though, and it knocked into Mabel. She fell into the wet dirt and grass, which was getting quickly churned up due to all the activity. She pushed herself up and stared forwards, straight into the dazzlingly yellow eyes of the Were-Coyote. Still sat on the ground, she shuffled back. The coyote knew she couldn’t outrun him, so slowly crept forwards, tongue wagging.

She heard a cry from above and the sound of shattering glass. She quickly angled her head up, as did the coyote. From the triangular attic window, Pacifica had jumped right through the glass. She did a forward flip through the air (a move Mabel had taught her during their parkour lessons), then landed right between Mabel and the beast, axe already in hand.

“You wanna mess with her, you go through me! Yahh!” Pacifica charged forwards with the axe, feeling much more prepared than the last time she’d fought the coyote. With one clean swing she knocked it off its feet, sending it sprawling away. “And good riddance! Mabel, on your left!”

Mabel ducked to avoid the swing of a Manotaur’s Warhammer, then kicked upwards into his gut. She touched backs with Pacifica, and the girls span around so that Pacifica deflect another hammer swing. A quick move of her own axe upwards unbalanced the Manotaur, and he was disarmed.

From inside the shack, more battle cries began calling out. Candy stormed out, wearing a pair of metal gauntlets. They were converted from old load lifters and had a large flat rectangle on the ends of each of her fists. She aimed at the baying crowds of attackers, then used the powered metal fists to deal out massive punches. Soos, power drill in hand, with toolbelt strapped on like a bandolier ran out into the fray. Tate McGucket followed him out, bearing a fishing rod high above his head.

Dipper came out last, standing on the porch and paling at the sight of the ranks of creatures bearing down on them. “Oh man, this would be so cool if it wasn’t so terrifying!”

Mabel manhandled him back through the door. “Stay inside Dipper! We’ll handle this! Ready
guys? Mystery trio, scientists, Soos! Let’s show Andromeda what we’re made of!”

Everyone cried out and ran at the army. At first, their mere presence was enough to cause some of the creatures to turn and run, particularly the physically weaker lifeforms like the gnomes. Others quickly fled after the group started their retaliation, unwilling to stand up to the oncoming blows. Pacifica had a very satisfying time punting Cycloptopuses with her boots, sending them flying off out of the clearing.

But this brief flare-up of success was only temporary, and the stronger creatures quickly took the place of those that had run. Everyone had to dart out of the way to avoid a rush from the Rosettas, who weren’t going to be stopped by anything in their path. Separated, they had to fight multiple fires at once, trying to keep the perimeter of the Shack secure. They did have one advantage. While the army attacking them was being controlled by a single flawed mind, each of the defenders could work creatively as a team.

Mabel’s rockets gave her the height advantage, so she swooped over the battlefield, getting a tactical overview and spotting breakaways getting through their defences and taking them down with precision shots from her gauntlet, now loaded up with new armour piercing tipped tranquiliser darts Candy had made for her.

While Candy dealt with the tougher beasts - her gauntlets giving her ten times the normal punching strength - Tate and Soos worked together against the remaining forces. Pacifica worked as a sniper, eliminating the distant foes with her crossbow, and dealing with anything that came near with a swift slice from the axe.

It wasn’t a pretty fight, none of them relished hurting the controlled creatures. But they did what they had to, otherwise they’d have suffered worse. Already they were beginning to tire and take hits.

Mabel’s unassailable position was suddenly under threat when a bulky form flew towards her. She tried to dodge the claws reaching for her but didn’t act quick enough. She was pulled down to the ground by the Gremloblin. All the rain had made it a sight to behold, his water-fuelled mutation in full effect.

Pacifica had seen the crash and fired a bolt into the creature’s shoulder. It stuck in, but the Gremloblin didn’t seem to even notice. She broke into a run, then slid the last distance on the wet ground, swinging her axe at his leg and bringing him down into a kneel.

Mabel saw the chance to get close and did a double back-flip to cover the ground. On the way down from the second flip she planted her feet into a kick on the Gremloblin’s chest. The heavy-set beast just laughed the impact off and was barely hurt at all. He let out a chuckle but was blindsided when Mabel shot off backwards with her rocket boots. He fell back, bashing his fragile head and falling into a deep sleep.

Mabel landed next to Pacifica and helped her back up out of the mud. “Nice work sis, that’s another one down!”

Pacifica looked at the surrounding woods, which continued to spew forth relentless numbers of enemies. “One’s not going to matter much soon. We can’t keep this up!”

“We have to Paz! For the sake of all the things attacking us! If we don’t fight, they’ll be slaves forever! There’s no choice there.” She reloaded her gauntlet, preparing for another wave. This time, there was something different. The new beings emerging from the trees hung back, wary to enter the clearing. “They’re waiting for something.”
The ground shook, and some of the trees on one side of the clearing began to fall. Mabel thought it was going to be another dinosaur, and she wasn’t sure how they were going to deal with it. The slender reptile-like neck stuck out of the trees and Pacifica raised her crossbow.

Mabel quickly tried to push her arm, so the shot went wide of the mark. “Wait, don’t shoot it!” Despite being aimed wrongly, the fired arrow still hit the body of the newly arrived creature. It made a plinking noise and bounced harmlessly off the metal body. “It’s on our side.”

“Gobby!” Candy was beside them, cheering on the new arrival. The Gobblewonker robot gave a loud roar, then started fighting with the nearby creatures.

“What is that thing, Mabel?!” Pacifica gasped.

“It’s an old friend,” she said with a wink. “Come on Paz, we’re going for a ride!” She shot up her grappling hook and pulled Pacifica and herself onto the Gobblewonker’s back. “Yee-hah! Ride ‘em cowboy!”

Pacifica got into the spirit of things. “Yeah, out of the way! The Pacifi-saurus Rex is coming through!” Charging onwards, they knocked the Rosetta pair over. The frightened rock creatures curled up into their ball forms and were rolled harmlessly out of range before their defensive dust clouds could kick in.

Their joyride halted and the girls bodies shuddered as the Gobblewonker suddenly stopped all movement. “Uh, what’s going on? It can’t be rusting in the rain, surely? It’s an aquatic robot!”

The machine they were sat on was suddenly blasted across the clearing. It came to lay on its side, and the two girls fell roughly off. Mabel peered round the side of the downed robot to see what had knocked them over.

A massive hole had been ripped out of the side of the Gobblewonker. She covered her nose to block an intense stench of rotting coming from within. The creature that had made the hole climbed out and stood up. Mabel gasped at the sight of the translucent purple beast.

Standing opposite them was Andromeda’s purple Kochab, the strongest being in her entire arsenal. The vibrations of its signature roar radiated out into the clearing, striking a deep fear into the Shack’s defenders. It looked directly at Mabel and Pacifica, then started pawing towards them. “Uh, Paz, I think we might be in trouble.”

In all the heat of the battle, nobody took any time to watch their flank. The group felt secure with the glowing shield covering the Shack. So there was no-one to notice when Andromeda and Morbid walked casually into the Shack’s sitting room. The shield barely touched Andromeda, though she was a paper construct, that wasn’t weird enough for the shield to parse out and prevent from entering. It was no worse than stepping through a waterfall.

Inside the wooden structure the sounds of conflict were muted. They passed through the Shack, unopposed by anyone. Melody was up in the attic, the least likely place to be attacked, which left the rest of the place empty of any people. Except for the gift shop, that was.

Standing in front of the vending machine and its hidden door to the basement, McGucket squared his shoulders and examined the paper girl for the first time, along with his ex-employee.

Morbid and Andromeda made an odd pairing. The petite, elegant rich girl juxtaposed with the muscled, warn-down mercenary. Sophistication and savagery, side by side. Despite the many weapons he carried and the murderous look of intent in Morbid’s eyes, it was Andromeda who
scared him more. There was a quiet dispassion to everything she was doing here, like it was beneath her.

To illustrate that point, she didn’t even look up at him, she studied her nails instead. “Thought they’d put someone in the way. McGucket, it would be you. I wonder, 35 years ago did you help Grunkle Ford build the carpet or copier? Are you another culprit in my conception?” She looked up from her perfectly manicured fingers. “Doesn’t matter now, you’re irrelevant.”

“I saw you once before girl, in the woods. I offered you help.”

“Ah right, a cure for that damn radiation poisoning. Yeah, that’s not a problem anymore, practically got all of that stuff running through my paper veins now. And, well, I don’t take too kindly to guys who back up their words with a mercenary holding a big gun.”

McGucket glanced pointedly at Morbid. “You’re one to talk missy.”

“Touché. What can I say, I’m a hypocrite.” She snapped her fingers and Morbid menacingly approached. “Deal with him.”

A wide grin broke out on the huntsman’s face. “You’re gonna regret hiring me old man. I should have just killed those monsters you made me catch the moment I brought them in, now look at me! Fighting beside them like some tree-hugging sissy. At least breaking every bone in your body can make up for that.” He cracked his knuckles, preparing to finally feel some satisfaction for the first time since he’d been possessed.

McGucket calmly lifted his mechanical arm. There was a low hum emanating from the palm, and a bright blue beam of light shot out. Morbid was blasted across the room, hitting the counter and rolling over behind the till.

Andromeda rolled her eyes and exasperatedly shouted. “Why must I always do everything myself! Get out of my way old man!” With surprising strength, she lifted McGucket off the ground with one hand, clutching his brown overalls. McGucket squirmed but couldn’t loosen the iron grip she had. “I’m the only one I can rely on in life! Me! I don’t need anyone else! Not you, not Morbid, not the twins, not even my army, nobody! I will soon be… all I need.”

She tossed him aside like he was nothing. Kneeling over him, she grabbed a hold of his brass arm. “And just to make sure you won’t be any more trouble.” She yanked the arm clean off and threw it down with enough force to break the wooden floorboards.

“And for you!” A flick of her outstretched arm brought Morbid flying towards her telekinetically. His neck flew straight into her hand, and she pressed down with her fingers. “You’re nothing, a sicko, a blunt instrument.” She tightened the grip and he felt her well-kept nails stab him, drawing blood. “Don’t fail me again. Or maybe I’ll take your other eye. You’re only alive while I have a use for you. Now beg.”

She released him and he fell to the floor gasping for air. Andromeda lowered her arm, having barely seemed to expend any effort to hold him up. “Thank you, oh great one. Keeping me alive is a mercy I do not deserve!”

“That’s good. Now come on, heel. We’re ending this.” She turned, and rather than inputting the code to unlock it, she merely ripped the vending machine off its hinges.

Morbid got up, rubbing his neck and staring at his master with a glare like fire she didn’t care to notice. Grunting with disdain, he got to his feet and followed after her, hardly able to do anything
As they were about to descend into the earth, McGucket called out one last time. “Wait, please! That power wasn’t meant for any ordinary person to possess!”

“Well, good thing I’m the furthest thing from ordinary in this Shack then,” she said with an evil smirk. She ignored the Blind Eye symbol warning people away from using the elevator. In a few short moments, her eyes would be wide open.

The silver doors of the elevator slid open onto the underground control room. For Andromeda it was like wading through a warm treacle. There were a lot of very strong emotions tied to this place. Her new powers actually gave her the ability to see them, and ghostly traces from the past danced in the spaces they’d once played out in. A hunched over Stan working tirelessly at the controls. Dipper and Ford playing DD&D on the floor. Ford containing the rift that had resulted from his return.

That was what she wanted more of. Not only was this place the nexus for some of the strongest emotions she’d ever sensed, it was also the weakest point in space and time on the entire Earth. And was, most importantly, her birthplace.

The flowing emotions and abundant radiation she could feel in the control room suddenly weren’t enough. She wanted it all. She switched on the lights, seeing the illuminated stacked up crates in the portal room beyond. But there was also a person standing in there. Sighing deeply, she resigned herself to dealing with this one last hurdle and headed into the next room with Morbid trailing behind.

Standing by the old safety button than controlled the portal aperture with his back to them was Dipper. After his disguise the last time they’d met, he was now dressed in his usual hoodie and jeans, his attire as unchanged from the norm as her own purple jacket and dress.

He addressed them without turning as they approached. “This button doesn’t do anything anymore. The portal’s been inactive for years. But it’s a nice gesture, isn’t it? The handy little button to press that could fix everything. Close the portal, seal the dimensions, cleanse the town of radiation.” He turned and stared at Andromeda. “That’s your cue Andromeda. I know you can do it, you’ve pretty much finished absorbing the energy. Send it back where it came from. Save the town.”

She gave a curt laugh. “Really? That’s your big plan to stop me? Asking nicely and hoping? I expected more, Dip.”

He shrugged. “I’m only down here cause I’m no good in a fight. I can’t stop you getting the radiation straight from the source. So I’ll use my words instead. Although, I’m not holding out much hope after your reaction last time we met.”

“Scared I’m gonna stab you again? You were too much of a coward to face me openly in person.”

“You’re right. It was a cowardly move. I made that clone, a living thinking being, and maybe that was a mistake. He didn’t live a very long life before you killed him. I thought you’d have more sympathy for him, after all you’ve been through.”

“Enough moralising!” Andromeda impatiently signalled to Morbid to approach Dipper. “It tastes so good down here brother. In a few minutes, I’ll be full of the juicy energy, all ready to take my body back from Mabel. Then I can unleash my full power and rule over all the humans! They’ll see
what it’s like to live in a cage, to scrounge for scraps on the street, or live every moment in fear!”

Morbid grabbed Dipper’s arms, then pulled him into a bear hug. He knew that struggling against the hunter’s strength would be pointless. “You know, I was sympathetic before. You wanted to steal Mabel’s body, but I could understand why you were doing it. This insane quest for tenuous power is crossing way over the line though. I offered you a peaceful resolution, try and remember that in the end.”

She ignored him and breathed deeply. The aroma of the energy, straight from the portal, felt so good to her. 35 years hadn’t dulled the sensations, which were so much purer than the ambient radiation she’d been feeding on up until now. Like a crystal clear glass of water after drinking nothing but dirty sewage. The radiation flowed in from all around, drawn back to its point of origin via the Ursus stone.

“Hey, Andry! Over here!” Her reverie was interrupted by the arrival of two more spectators to her victory. Mabel and Pacifica each aimed their respective weapons at Andromeda, Mabel her gauntlet and Pacifica her crossbow. “Let Dipper go and hand over the stone sis, we don’t wanna hurt you.”

Both girls writhed in pain as a force from beyond their control restrained them. Andromeda’s arm was extended out at them. She clenched her hand into a fist, causing Pacifica to drop the crossbow. With a flick, she lifted them both into the air. The pain began to subside, but they felt unable to move, hovering in the air as Mabel had done 5 years ago in this very room.

Andromeda slowly clapped. “Pacifica, so nice of you to come and watch my grand achievement. Thoughtful of you too, Mabel, to bring me your body on a platter - It’ll sure be nice to slip into something more comfortable once I’m done.”

Pacifica looked over at the similarly trapped Dipper. “Hey Mason. Sorry, we kinda let Andromeda slip by.”

“Not like I did much better at stopping her. Fine mess we’re all in now.”

Mabel gave a harsh laugh. “Ha, we’ve gotten out of worse scrapes bro-bro.”

Pacifica nodded. “Trust us Mason, we’re not totally lost. Mabel, call in our old friend.”

Mabel, freeing one arm from Andromeda’s spell, stuck two fingers in her mouth. At first, there was just the sound of awkward blowing, since Mabel had never been very good at whistling. Eventually she got it right and let out an almighty whistle.

The glass partition to the control room burst outwards, and the girls covered their faces from the shards of broken glass flying out. The Kochab, whose skin was now a soft golden tint, had leapt through into the portal room. Andromeda’s concentration was distracted, and the girls dropped and moved out of the way of the approaching creature, mindful of its unusual non-matter properties. Dipper and Morbid just watched from a distance, still both captives in their own ways.

“My Kocab! You can’t be using my Kochab!” Andromeda indignantly shouted.

“Her name is Kochy, and she can do what she wants!” Mabel pouted. “Didn’t take too much to convince her to go along with what I wanted; she recognised my thought patterns from before. You should know I spent months training my mind with the necklace.”

“Grr, I’ll show you true power!” Andromeda’s face curled up into an expression of pure rage. The girls stood back as the Kochab started turning purple again. Mabel focused all her concentration on
Kochy. Pacifica watched the skin shimmer back and forth between gold and purple as the two of them battled for domination over who would get to influence the creature. Both Mabel and Andromeda looked exhausted, beginning to sweat and suffer over the effort.

All of a sudden, Dipper felt Morbid’s grip loosen. He was dropped like a dead weight, then Morbid lunged furiously at Andromeda’s neck. He grasped around and clutched the Ursus stone. It burnt his hand, but he suffered through the searing pain.

“What are you fucking doing?!” Andromeda screamed.

“What does it look like, I’m taking that damn stone! I quit!” As he pulled, the cloth band of the necklace snapped. Andromeda and Morbid each grabbed half of the necklace, pulling against each other with the stone suspended between them.

The stone started to shine brighter than the sun, purple and orange lights dancing and flickering around the basement. An indistinct glowing sphere of energy surrounded the two of them, preventing any of the trio from getting close enough to break the stalemate. Frozen to the spot, Andromeda and Morbid felt overcome by the stone’s energy. Neither wanted to give up the stone though, even as their bodies felt the overwhelming energies held within fluxing out through themselves.

Since everyone’s attention was diverted, Kochy reverted to her basic instruction, the one instilled by Mabel back at the circus to stay out of the way of any living creatures. Glowing golden forevermore, she charged out of the Shack the way she’d came, leaving the trio alone with the two enemies fighting over the stone.

“Give it over girl! With this I can finally rid the world of degenerate scum like you!”

“Never, it’s my birth-right! My triumph! I’ve not come so close to lose now!”

A reverberating hum came from the stone as it started to shake, and with all the energy coursing within it looked like it was going to explode. Dipper backed up to the old portal frame, trying to get as much distance as he could from the maelstrom.

Lit by the wavy glow, Pacifica found the crossbow and fired off a shot. It bounced back, repelled by the sphere of energy. “Mabel what do we do!”

Mabel was already staring straight at the Ursus stone, considering her options. Her hook or tranquilisers wouldn’t break through the barrier. If she did nothing the whole Shack might be destroyed if the stone couldn’t handle the two contradictory masters, and the bottled up radiation would burst back out into the world. Or one of them might just end up claiming the stone, which could be even worse.

Making a snap decision, she raised her left arm and pointed her gauntlet right at the stone. “I’m sorry Andromeda. So sorry.” She pulled the trigger of the memory gun.

A concentrated blue-white beam of light shot out from her wrist, blasting through the energy wall and hitting the stone square on. Time slowed to a crawl. Both Andromeda and Morbid stared down at the stone, eyes wide open in shock as Mabel pumped more and more of the beam into it. A sphere of the blueish light began forming around the stone, before collapsing back in.

In the last moment, Andromeda saw a vision of seven eyes staring back at her. That would be the last thing she ever saw before the end.
For an instant, nothing happened. Then time sped up for a fraction as a second as the stone blew apart into dozens of tiny black splinters of rock. In slow-motion again, the fragments drifted across the room while Andromeda was thrown backwards. She was already unconscious before she hit the floor.

On the other side of the room, Morbid’s fate was much worse. He wasn’t so much blasted through the regular space of the shack, instead his body seemed to be moving through the walls of reality, which were paper-thin enough as it was down here. It looked as if hundreds of tiny tears had opened up all over his body. He let out a blood-curdling scream as his body broke apart and was dragged through the rips in reality. Even though the trio’s perception had slowed, he was gone in a heartbeat. All that was left was his eyepatch, fluttering down.

Time resumed its normal course and the blackened shards of the Ursus stone clattered across the room. Closest to the blast, Dipper was hit by some of the fragments, but they had lost any of the fantastic energy they’d once contained and hurt no worse that tiny pebbles. “That was insane! We’re all still good, Mabel, Paz?” He looked over, relieved to see they were fine.

“I’m not ok.” Dipper’s smile slowly faded as another voice came from behind one of the stacks of boxes. Andromeda sat upright and he tensed for another fight. She just looked around, confused. “I… where am I… who are you?”

Mabel, who’d felt like she’d had her arm lifted up for an eternity, lowered her gauntlet and breathed out. “Figured this might happen.” She untangled the MRE from her wrist. The barrel was still steaming slightly. She turned it over and a small microchip popped out of the butt of the gun. This was a replacement for the spools of electrical tape in the prototype that held the encoded memories. Everything that made Andromeda who she was, compressed into a few inches across.

Mabel threw the gun away into the corner like it was a piece of nasty garbage, discarded along with all the other forbidden objects down in the basement, then handed the chip to Pacifica. “We have to choose now Paz. She’s our responsibility to deal with.”

“Choose, choose what?”

“What we tell her. With Stan we used reminders to bring back his lost memories. Little things he recognised that led to him remembering more. Or I bet McGucket could probably download her memories out of that chip. But I don’t think we should do that.”

Pacifica slowly nodded. “If she remembers everything, her old personality might return. She’d have the same problem of having two minds smushed together again.”

“Here’s what I wanna try.” Mabel looked over at the bemused paper clone sitting on the floor. Her head was cocked to the side, clearly lost about what was going on. “We can give her a fresh start, she’s a blank page now. We don’t have to bring back all the junk she went through, she can be happy. But the old Andry would basically be gone.”

“Old Andromeda, new Andromeda, I don’t think it matters. What’s important is her, that girl down there who’s probably a bit scared and alone right now. If we can give her a good life, then that’s a good enough end for me.”

Dipper came over and put a hand on each of their shoulders. “I’ll support whatever you two decide. I didn’t make Andromeda, you did. I won’t butt in and give my opinion if you don’t want it. You decide.”

Mabel nodded. “I’m with you Paz. First, what should we do with the chip?”
Pacifica clenched her fist around the fragile piece of circuitry. There was a small crunch, then she dropped the broken remains onto the floor. “I think that settles it.”

The trio gathered around the sitting girl, the same way the twins had done so with Stan 5 years ago. This time they weren’t here to jog her memories, the exact opposite in fact.

Andromeda looked at the nervous faces of the people staring down at her. “Hey, do I know you guys? You seem familiar.” The trio’s eyes all glanced away for a moment. “Could you help me out, I… I can’t seem to remember… well, anything!”

Mabel was the first to speak. “Hi there. We’re the Pines. We’re sort of your family, kinda. I’m Mabel, this is Pacifica and Dipper. You’re our cousin, Andromeda.”

“That’s a pretty name.” Like a child, she innocently smiled. Mabel took her hand and pulled her onto her feet. “Wow, your skin is so smooth!”

“How are you feeling Andromeda?” Pacifica asked. “You’ve… had a bit of an accident, but you’re safe now.”

Andromeda puffed out her cheeks, an inherited habit from Mabel that hadn’t been erased by the MRE’s beam. “I feel like I’ve just run a marathon.”

Dipper leaned over. “Probably her body’s natural reaction to the loss of all the radiation energy.” The girls nodded, but Andromeda didn’t seem to take any of it in. “You’ll be fine Ann, just stay away from water and you’ll be golden.”

Andromeda looked down at herself. Pacifica was glad she didn’t have a mirror; their identical appearance might have raised some awkward questions they hadn’t formulated answers to yet. “Are these really my clothes?”

“What’s wrong with them? They always looked fine on me- I mean you,” Pacifica stammered. “I don’t know, doesn’t feel right.”

“Ooh, I know what’ll you need! BRB!” Mabel ran out of the basement towards the lift.

Dipper whispered to Pacifica. “So what now? We can’t fill her in on everything, it might re-awaken the old mental connections.”

“We can give her bits and pieces though. She should learn about us at least. Here.” She pulled her journal out of her backpack and turned it to the first few pages. “This is a brief history of my friendship with these guys. Have a read, I guess it’ll tell you who we are.”

Andromeda ran a hand over the golden llama on the cover, admiring the quality of Mabel’s craftsmanship, then focused on the text. Pacifica and Dipper left her to quietly read, making sure she didn’t go beyond a certain point in the book. They noticed her stroking the paper, comparing it subtly to her own skin texture.

Mabel returned to the portal room, carrying a purple sweater. “Andromeda, I have something. This is yours.” She passed it over as Andromeda’s eyes went wide.

“For me? That’s so kind, thank you! No-one’s ever given me… well, anything before!”

“We’re here for you Andry, we’ll help you figure out who you are.”
The trio found themselves pulled into a group hug by the clone. “Thank you guys so much! I might not remember you, but you guys sure seem care about me, that’s all that counts.” As the hug loosened, the trio smiled at one another. The process of teaching Andromeda everything she needed to know would be slow, but together they could try and give her a second chance at life, one without pain or heartache or fear.

Pacifica led her towards the elevator, but Dipper pulled Mabel over to one side. “Hey, what about the Ursus stone? I don’t know, do you want a moment, or…?”

Mabel picked up a small fragment of the rock, then flicked it away. “Nah, I’m fine bro. It can stay down here with all the other regrets.”

As they emerged back up to the surface, they saw the bright evening sunlight shining over the clearing. At the same moment the Ursus stone had exploded, a switch had turned in the attacking creatures’ minds. They were all free once again. Most didn’t stick around, either eager to find their way home or not wanting to tussle with the other gathered creatures or humans.

While Soos and Tate started work on the cleanup, Candy was checking over the battlefield to help any beings wounded in the fighting. McGucket had pulled himself onto the porch sofa, and as the trio approached from inside the Shack he showed them a handheld scanner. “Look at this. Registering zero traces of radiation.” He slapped his leg. “Yee-ha! You youngin’s did it!”

His expression turned to confusion as they led Andromeda outside. “She needs guidance, Andromeda’s lost everything.” Dipper explained. “You know more than anyone what it’s like to have to start a life from scratch. Can you guide her, make sure she does alright?”

McGucket nodded. “I promise Dipper. Me’n Candy’ll keep her safe, from rain or shine, mind or matter. We’re not much for parents, but we can make sure her mind stays clean as a whistle! Hi there Andromeda! I’m Fiddleford!”

Andromeda chuckled. “Your voice is funny!” She shook his hand. “Nice to meet you Fiddleford. I have a good feeling about you.” The old man smiled, happy to be able to repair his mistakes.

Mabel went over to Candy to share the good news and assist in clearing away the debris from the fight, while Pacifica and Dipper made a thorough scan of the region for any lingering radiation traces. Luckily it seemed that Andromeda had already absorbed practically all of it before the explosion, and that it had been entirely sent back through the rifts. A level of ambient radiation would eventually return and settle over the town, but now the worst of the after-effects of the Alignment was dealt with for good.

Once all that was done, the two of them sat down in the sitting room armchair. Linking hands, they sat together to rest after the strenuous toll the last two days had put on them. “What do we do about your parents then?”

Normally Pacifica would have chastised his lack of subtlety, but right now she had to admit it was pretty relevant to talk about. “Honestly? No clue. I have no idea how they’ll react after what happened last night. We can worry about that in the morning.” She nuzzled his chest, holding close to his body.

“And what about you, how are you reacting after all of that? Seeing me… dead… must have been hard to take.”

“I’m alright. At first it was hard to bear what had happened… what I thought had happened to you.
I guess it’s like how you reacted when I got knocked out by the Spline.”
“You have been kinda reckless lately.”

“I know. It’s just, this stuff you do, it’s so exciting. Can you blame a gal for getting so invested?”

“Spose not. Now at least we both know how it feels to lose each other.”

“But hey, you’re safe now. We’re together.” She kissed him. “Plus, now that radiation’s dealt with, we should celebrate. Forget about all that bad stuff and enjoy ourselves. Although, what do you think happened to that Morbid guy, Mason?”

He shrugged. “Guess we’ll never know. Maybe he got pushed out of our dimension along with all the radiation? I doubt he’d endure the trip in any survivable state, but who knows. This is the Mystery Shack after all! What’s wrong with a little mystery?”

The next morning brought a dry day over the valley, with the rain having passed on for good. That was good for Andromeda, who was eager to explore the town that was entirely new to her. The trio took her with them as they headed for the Northwest house. She was delighted at seeing the quaint little town and happily waved at all of the townsfolk they passed. Those same townsfolk had known nothing of the great battle from the previous day, but then again, neither did Andromeda.

They told her to wait outside, trusting that she wouldn’t wander off, then headed into the house. Pacifica stepped into the entry way through the broken door, then hesitated before calling out.

From her side, Mabel prodded her to go on. “Well Paz, no time like the present. Don’t leave us in suspense, let’s get this over with! I can’t stand the waiting!” For once, Mabel’s impatience seemed to outweigh Pacifica’s own.

Dipper touched her arm. “Whatever happens next, we can help.” He smiled that reassuring smile that always made her heart light aflame.

She hugged them both, then found the strength to overcome her last final stumbling block of anxiety. “Mom? Dad?” There was a moment of silence as her words echoed around the house, and she feared for a moment that her parents had simply abandoned the place.

Then, quietly from the kitchen, a voice spoke. “We tried… So hard, to raise you in the way we thought was right.” Pacifica followed the voice. Her parents were sat at the kitchen table, neither of them staring at anything in particular. Her father spoke again. “Perhaps… perhaps our way was not the best for you.”

This quiet admission was enough to make Pacifica find a stool and join them in sitting. She wanted to pay full attention to whatever her parents said next. The twins lingered by the door, not wanting to intrude on this family matter. Noticing this, Pacifica waved them forwards. They had as much right to be a part of this conversation as anyone. The concept of her ‘family’ was about to become a lot more nebulous, after all.

Preston and Priscilla were both shocked by Dipper’s appearance, likely not expecting to see him walking around perfectly fine after the previous night. Priscilla’s eyes glanced away. “Last night. When that boy… when Mason was hurt…” Pacifica was mildly impressed by the fact she’d remembered his name. She could see the conflict behind her parents’ eyes. They really were making an effort. “Your reaction, the scream, the horror you felt. It was more emotion than you ever showed towards us.”
There was a sad honesty to the words. Even if the Northwests had deluded themselves into thinking they were on the right path, and had been genuinely cruel, Pacifica still felt a pang of sorrow at their sense of loss right now. “And then you went off. We saw you in that awful battle. It was as if you were at home there, fighting in the mud and dirt, doing whatever you could to save your friends. Is there any chance you could feel the same for us again sweetheart?”

Pacifica sighed. “Look, it’s too late for us to ever go back to the way things were. I don’t think I could stomach living here with you again after all that’s happened. I’m not sorry for wanting to leave. For all the worth you showered on me, you two still made me feel worthless. But maybe, if you really try, you can find some way to move on without me?”

Preston rested his forehead in one hand. “But how can we? We wasted our one chance to raise our only daughter properly.”

“Well, you may have missed out on raising me right. But there’s someone else who might just be in need of someone to look after her.”

As if on cue, Andromeda stepped into the room. Perhaps it was a last vestige of her empath powers, letting her sense the mood of the room and that now was the time to show herself. Whatever the case, the Northwests stared at the clone in utter bafflement. “It’s the girl from last night!” Priscilla said, with not small hint of fear. Andromeda studied the two adults to whom she had no affection or revulsion. They were simply strangers.

Calmly, Pacifica explained. “This is Andromeda. At the moment, she’s fresh, open to anything. She’s got friends, but she needs a normal life, somewhere she can just be a kid. Your second chance.” Her parents shared an uneasy glance. “Don’t worry, she’s fine now, no more…” She watched her words, trying to avoid triggering anything of Andromeda’s memories, “Well, she’s not a threat. Her mind is a blank.”

“You’d trust us to look after her, teach her right from wrong? After everything you accused us of doing wrong? I don’t understand.”

A wry smile grew on Pacifica’s face. “It’s all on you now. You can be the parents I always longed for, actually cater to her needs, make her feel loved. Cause if you don’t, she’ll grow up resentful and bitter. It might just reawaken her memories. You both saw what the old Andromeda was like.” Bringing up the image of the paper blade had the desired effect, as her parents nodded seriously.

Her father slowly nodded. “Perhaps it is time to try something new. Our family’s never been big on ‘change’. But we’ve seen the alternative.”

“What do you say, my dear, Andromeda, was it? Would you like to stay with us?” Priscilla posed the question hopefully.

Andromeda looked at the two for a moment, then broke into a massive grin. Before the Northwests could react, they found themselves pulled into a suffocating bear hug. “Thank you, thank you, thank you! I’ve never had a real home before! If you two are anything like Pacifica, who’s been so kind to me, then I’m sure I’ll love living here!”

She broke the hug leaving the ruffled Northwests gasping for air. Andromeda was certainly going to be a handful. From the small smiles on each of their faces though, it seemed that it was a challenge they’d try their very hardest to achieve.

Pacifica smiled too at seeing the paper clone so happy and free of trouble, when her mother raised a pertinent point. “What about you Pacifica?”
It was a good question. With her parents potentially taking on a new role as guardians for Andromeda, they no doubt wondered where Pacifica expected to fit in. She’d already come up with an answer. “Goodbye, Preston and Priscilla. Good luck, and goodbye.” Simple and to the point, formality worthy of the Northwest reputation. Her parents both got the message, and didn’t protest as she got up, turned around, and left them behind.

Once back outside in the sunshine, Dipper took her hands in his, holding them tight. “Are you sure this is what you want Pacifica? If you have any doubts, you can let us know anytime.” She took one last look into the house. Rimmed with sunlight, the house glowed with life. Andromeda was excitedly explaining something to her new parents, who were actually smiling back, seeming keen to understand the girl.

With Andromeda’s appearance resembling her old one so much, it was like looking at a glimpse of a parallel life, one she was never allowed to have. People who listened to her point of view, attentive to her needs. A family where everyone was equal in their bond.

She turned away. Andromeda was starting her new life in there. Her own was out here, waiting to be discovered.

Pacifica shrugged and squeezed Dipper’s hands back. “It’s ok Mace. I made my choice, they’ve made theirs.” She wiped a single stray tear from her eye. She wasn’t even sure where it had come from, in her mind there was no apprehension anymore. She kissed him, savouring her newfound freedom. With a confident grin, she turned away from the building. “Hope your parents don’t mind me staying a little while longer in Piedmont.” She felt Mabel join in the embrace from behind. “Come on guys, let’s go home.”

Without sticking around to be sentimental, Pacifica strode out with them, into a free life.

And that was it. Even though it’s been a few weeks, I still haven’t seen my parents again. I don’t know if they’ll keep their promise to Andromeda and give her a good life, the kind they messed up with me. She’ll have McGucket and Candy to make sure that nothing goes wrong, though my parents know what’ll happen if they push Andromeda the wrong way. They don’t want a repeat of the way they raised me, or what they saw of Andromeda’s rage.

It’s strange, for so long they were the worst thing about my life. With them gone, I almost feel too free! I’m sure I’ll get used to it.

After that we spent another day in Gravity Falls making sure everything was ok. Me and Mabel did some repairs to the Mystery Shack for Mr and Mrs Ramirez, there had been some minor collisions with the outside that needed work. Mason, Candy, and McGucket made sure that the town was fully clean and took a census to check that all the creatures were back acting normal. Well, not normal. But you know what I mean.

We all worked to make sure Andromeda got bedded in smoothly. We showed her around the valley, taught her all about the Mystery Shack’s history, Mabel even knitted her some custom sweaters. She’s taking it all really well, already goofing around with Candy like Mabel always used to. She’s seemingly lost all the influences from my mind, it’s like she’s pure uncut Mabel now, just with a different set of experiences to build off of. It’s super nice seeing her happy after all she went through.

I feel similarly, our lives have both changed for the better. It’s like something Mabel told me. I’m different now, but I’ll carry the reminders with me forever. In my case, it’s my pendant and this journal.
The three of us headed off home the next day. Mabel and Candy promised to keep in touch more after this, least next time something cataclysmic goes on in town we’ll know about it right away. Her and McGucket will keep an eye on Andromeda. It’s hardly the most conventional family, with a crazy old man, a super smart teenager, and two totally unprepared adults but it’s sure as hell nicer than my old one.

The twins agonised over departing, of course, they hated to leave their friends behind, just like at the end of summer. I didn’t mind though, I just wanted things to be back to the usual routine in Piedmont. That still sounds kinda strange, living in Piedmont but it’s basically my home now so I’d better get used to it.

It’s been nice these last few weeks. Without the horrible spectre of my parents it was even more enjoyable than before. I feel like I could I be good forever just being with Mabel and Mason. When I first started writing in this journal I thought that was an impossible dream. Yet here we are, moving forwards together.

Soon there’s the school prom, Mabel’s very excited for her date with ‘Mr Hottie’ Eli and I can’t wait to see Mace try and do a formal dance. After that, it’s only a few days before summer. That’s another reason why I wasn’t too sad to leave town, we’ll be back soon enough.

Summer. It used to mean so much to me. It was the island of freedom I had in-between the endless crushing boredom living alone was. That’s lessened somewhat now, living with the twins means I’m never gonna have a dull moment. They’ll get to see their uncles, of course, they’re coming back for summer too.

But for me, the season’s role will be reduced from now on. Why pine for summer when I have everything I could ever want already? Though the chance for adventure will certainly be higher, you can always count on that in Gravity Falls...

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Chapter End Notes

With the publication of this chapter, this is pretty much the end of The Mystery Teens. I never expected to write 2 chapters, let alone 52! ;)

I've had a great time writing these two seasons, I just love the central characters so much. But I think I've reached the limit if the stories I can tell with this setting.

That's not to say I'm done with writing about Gravity Falls however. I'm currently engaged in a follow-up project, not a 'season 3' per se, it's more distinct than that. Look for the first update on that relatively soon...

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