Conspiratheory

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Summary

Dipper Pines deals with life, homework, friendships and his increasingly complicated feelings regarding the sulking ex-dream demon living in his closet.

As well as the centuries-old mysteries lurking beneath the seemingly tranquil township he calls home, but that's beginning to become par for the course.
Prologue: Demon in the Closet

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Five Years Ago

The first thing he and Mabel did when they got home (after their parents had hugged and kissed them and said “Oh, look at you Dipper, you’ve grown so strong! We should send you back next summer!” and “Mabel, darling, that’s an adorable pig but I’m not sure we have room-”) was clip Bill Cipher onto a coat hanger and hang him up in the spare closet. Bill dangled limply from the attachment, as still as stone. His single eye was closed and he’d apparently decided against sprouting arms and legs, though his ever-present top hat and bow tie still sat stanchly in place.

Dipper and Mabel exchanged uneasy glances. Stanford had assured them it would be fine, that it would actually be safer to separate Bill from Gravity Falls, from the paranormal oddities which seemed to amplify his power. Not that his power was much to speak of, of course – that small upside-down triangular scar inscribed on Dipper’s chest was testament to that. Remembering it brought up the urge to scratch, which Dipper tried to ignore. He had enough nervous tics as it was.

Eventually, he broke the silence. “Man, this just doesn’t feel right. Bill Cipher, all-knowing dream demon. The stuff of nightmares. And we’ve just hung him up in the closet like an old sock.”

Mabel stifled a giggle. “He does look kinda funny.”

“What if Mom and Dad find him? How are we going to explain that?”

His twin sister flipped her hand forward dismissively. “Nahhhh, no one uses this closet. And besides, we can just tell them he’s our arts and crafts project.” She retrieved a page of stickers from her pocket, and slapped a glittery purple panda just to the right of Bill’s bow tie. “There! Now he’s all artsy!”

“Mabel.” Dipper said, semi-reprovingly.

“Dipper.” Mabel replied, waggling her eyebrows.

Dipper sighed and rubbed his face, smiling despite himself. “Sorry, sorry. I’m just a little nervous. I mean, keeping a dream demon in your house? Nothing good’s gonna come from that.” He dropped his hand, staring down at his shoes. “It’s like… I just keep waiting for the other coin to drop. Like maybe we haven’t actually sealed Bill’s power, or that he’ll find a way around it. So that’s why I’d rather not annoy him in the meantime. I mean, we don’t know if he even knows what’s going on around him, but what if something goes wrong? What if he tries to possess me, or manipulate us, or what if he-”

He hadn’t realised he was shaking until Mabel’s arms wrapped around him in a hug. “Dipper,” she said soothingly, “It’s gonna be okay. It’s over, alright? Book’s closed, credits’ve rolled, lights are back on.”

She pulled away, giving him a broad grin. “And in the meantime, we’re gonna make the best of our time!” Mabel scooped up Waddles, who had managed to wander into the room, and was sniffing the furniture curiously. “Just because we aren’t in Gravity Falls doesn’t mean we can’t have fun! You know what? I think I’ll throw a we’re-back-home party! Who’s with me?” She raised Waddles’ trotter.
Shaking his head fondly, Dipper pushed the cupboard door closed, and followed Mabel out the room as she chattered about punch flavours and decorations and the cute boys across the road they should totally invite.

Both of them failed to notice Bill’s eye briefly fluttering open, before it quickly shut again.

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Dipper quietly padded past Mabel’s room, the sound of her quiet snores assuring him that she was asleep. Nimbly dodging some spilled jello (there had been a minor accident during party preparation, which was perhaps fortunate since Mabel had seen it fit to empty the entire contents of a bag of glitter into the jello mix), he stealthily made his way into the spare room. He opened the closet doors, wincing at the squeaking noise it made. He’d need to oil these hinges.

“Hey there.” He murmured, mostly out of habit.

Bill didn’t react when he pulled him off the coat hanger. He didn’t react when Dipper set journal number 2 in front of him. He didn’t react when Dipper flipped to the appropriate page (entitled ‘Energy Transfers’, although in black light it also read ‘THENINECIRCLESTHENINECIRCLESTHENINECIRLES’. Dipper had decided that it was better not to ask), picked him up with both hands, and began reciting the incantation inscribed underneath.

“Vitale Fortuna Domineus.” The scar at his chest began to grow warm.

“Varage Humilie Correstium.” The warmth spread to his arms, to his hands.

“Anima Harame Ludicurus.” A nearly-imperceptible glow as it seeped through his hands, warming whatever it was that Bill was made out of.

It quickly faded, and Dipper exhaled, grabbing the coathanger and re-attaching Bill to it. It was a little odd, seeing him like this. Perhaps it was the side-effects of forcing him out of the mindscape and into the real world, with its strict dimensions and distinct lack of reality-warping, but Bill was thin. Paper-thin, although not nearly as bendable. Grunkle Stan had tried. Whatever material he was made out of (neither smooth nor rough, completely opaque) was far too strong to be affected by normal means. Or abnormal means. Or put it in a sealed chamber and nuke it means.

That didn’t make it any less weird, to be able to turn Bill on his side and examine him. Or play Frisbee with him, as Mabel had been offering. If Bill was conscious, he was being disturbingly apathetic. And it was…

It was a little pitiful.

Dipper frowned, pushing himself up off the ground. Technically, there wasn’t any great need to keep this private. Part of him still rebelled against keeping something like this from Mabel. But every time he performed this ritual (and Stanford had reminded him it had to be done at least once every week), he was reminded of what Bill had been reduced to. A powerless shell of what was once a demon, completely dependent on him to survive.

No wonder why Bill wasn’t talking. If he was in Bill’s position, he probably wouldn’t have wanted to talk either.

Although it would have been easier if Bill talked. Even if it was only to spew the expletive-laden vitriol he’d blasted them with once he’d realised his defeat was imminent. At least Dipper would know he hadn’t just given up.
Feeling hollow inside, he closed the closet doors. He turned to look out the window. It was a warm
night, and a light breeze blew inside, ruffling his hair. Feeling oddly nostalgic, he stared out the
window, breathing in the evening summer air.

He wondered how the Stans were doing. How were they handling the Mystery Shack? Did Stanford
still actively search for the supernatural? Had they tried to fix that letter ‘S’ which always seemed to
get loose and fall off despite their attempts to hammer it back on?

As he had left, Grunkle Stan had shoved a stack of postcards into his bag and suggested, with a
wink, that he find some new victims- whoops, he meant friends- and do a little ‘advertising’. Dipper
snorted to himself, smiling. But the smile soon faded, and he leaned against the window, closing his
eyes.

He missed Gravity Falls.

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Interim

Time passed, and despite its magnitude, Gravity Falls became a lingering afterthought in the back of
their minds, crowded out by the mundane woes and worries of school, of friendships and of
relationships.

The latter mainly applied to Mabel, who spent her days bouncing from one romantic entanglement to
another. Dipper seemed to have less luck largely, it seemed, because of his self-sabotaging nature. A
girl might smile at him, he might smile back, they’d chat and then suddenly his brain was in
overdrive – she had red hair, what if he only liked her as some sort of ‘replacement’ for Wendy, she
was nice but he seriously couldn’t see himself in a long-term relationship with her oh man what if
they couldn’t communicate what if he messed up – and then he’d avoid her every time he saw her
coming.

So he busied himself in schoolwork and assignments, gaining himself quite the reputation as a
teacher’s pet thanks to the regularity with which his hand went up in class. He had friends apart from
Mabel, of course, and he eventually managed to cultivate a little coterie of like-minded souls with
whom he spent much of his time weaving conspiracy theories and discussing unsolved mysteries.
Although he never had the large circles of friends that Mabel did, and eventually resigned himself to
being known as ‘Mabel’s twin brother’. It only stung when he thought about it too hard.

Waddles grew to the point where their parents put their foot down and declared he was now an
outdoor pig. Mabel pulled her sweater past her chin for a week, but cheered up after realising he was
perfectly happy to nose around the garden and uproot their mother’s prized daffodils.

There were some mishaps too, like the time their father discovered Bill during a spring-cleaning
session. Ironically, thinking he was some old arts-and-crafts project of the twins, he promptly tossed
him in the trash. It took some clever scheming on the part of Mabel and some thorough grovelling to
the garbageman on the part of Dipper to get him back. They kept him in Dipper’s closet after that,
despite his protests – he was a teenage boy, and he really needed his privacy, to which Mabel replied
that they weren’t going to take a risk like that again, and also eww, Dipper- and he glared at the
motionless triangle every time he went to retrieve his clothes for the next month.

In hindsight though, he could admit it was actually kind of hilarious.

They did go back to Gravity Falls, during the holidays. However, there was very little out of the
normal (by Gravity Falls standards, at least). They spent their days conning gullible tourists out of
their money, hanging out with Wendy and her friends, helping Soos with whatever odd jobs needed to be performed, and hunting down any creatures it seemed the journal might not list. Dipper was nearly drowned in a creek by a kelpie, Mabel fell in love with a boy who was actually a hallucination caused by some earlier ingested mushrooms. In other words, the usual.

One thing that did change was that Mabel eventually became fast friends with Pacifica, which in retrospect probably wasn’t all that surprising. Although that didn’t stop Dipper from dropping his bowl of cereal on the floor when he walked into the living room and saw them both laughing like hyenas, smeared with peanut butter and jam, apparently in the process of an impromptu food fight. Spotting him, Pacifica sat up straighter and let out a little cough. The effect was ruined when Mabel caught her in an arm lock and began smearing peanut butter into her hair.

Out of necessity, they took Bill with them as well. Both Stans often spent their evenings ‘testing’ the dream demon in their laboratory, much to Dipper’s dismay. They often emerged grim-faced, shaking their heads.

Bill still wouldn’t open his eye.

Dipper dutifully performed the ritual every week. He had a little reminding system set up on his computer just for this purpose, not that he really needed it. When asked by Grunkle Stan why he was going to so much trouble for such an irritating little bastard-he quickly corrected himself- bother, Dipper just shrugged. Said something about not giving an eye for an eye, haha, that was actually a pun. To be honest, he didn’t really know himself.

But sometimes, he would dream. Not like the dreams he’d had before, of a grey world glowing red, of flames, of screams, of a single eye staring down upon them all. Instead, he would occasionally dream of dark, lonely emptiness. A void, tinged only with a quiet sadness.

He tried to ask Stanford about whether this sort of link could let them share dreams, but Stanford immediately fixed him with a piercing glare, demanding to know if he’d had any strange dreams. Dipper had quickly backtracked, laughing nervously.

If Bill had wanted to manipulate Dipper’s dreams, he likely could have done so far more effectively. Something like guilt twinged in Dipper’s chest as he realised that the empty void was likely Bill’s reality now, forced out of the mindscape and stripped of his powers. He’d taken to talking to Bill on occasion, a one-sided monologue about nothing of importance. If Bill was conscious, Dipper was pretty much his only connection to the outside world.

He wondered what it felt like, to have everything at your fingertips only for it to be yanked away like that. He wondered if it would be kinder to give up. To let Bill fade away, or whatever demons did when they died. And then he’d shake himself mentally, because if that was the case, Bill deserved this. Deserved to live through the humiliation of being vulnerable, at the mercy of someone else’s control. And then Dipper would start to feel like a horrible person and the cycle would start all over again.

That being said, life was otherwise normal. Mabel was right. It was all over, the story had ended and the protagonists were off to live their dreary, day-to-day existences. Well, if the alternative was this or apocalypse, Dipper knew which he’d choose.

Well, he was pretty sure he knew which one he’d choose.

Chapter End Notes
So! This is going to be a case fic, meaning that Dipper's going to be running around solving mysteries with Bill, his not-so-trusty sidekick. There are four main story arcs planned so far, as well as one great big overarching plot, and possibly some stuff after that. So buckle up kids, because this is going to be the most exciting thing that's happened since *Project 112*.

And by that I don't mean that reading this is going to be like breathing in tear gas. It's not going to be like that at all.
Now

Their father dusted off his hands, surveying the house as the movers brought in the last of their boxes. Mabel trailed in behind them, her eyes red-rimmed. Dipper glanced at her, concerned.

“You alright?”

“Yeah.” Mabel sniffed, forcing a smile. “Just gonna miss our old house, is all. And all our friends.” She took one end of the coffee table, and gestured for Dipper to take the other. Together, they push-pulled it to the middle of the living room. Dipper glanced around the room. A large glass sliding door stood at one end, through which he could see Waddles happily rolling about the fenced-off area of the backyard which served as his sty. The fact that Waddles was growing too big for their old backyard was practically the only reason Mabel had agreed to the move in the first place, and even so, she’d been moping for the past week.

“Well, think of it as a chance to start fresh.” Dipper said, trying to console her. “This is practically how all your favourite TV shows start, right? The main characters move in to a new town, meet some new people, get popular, and go on fun new exciting adventures. It’s like the beginning of every cliché coming-of-age story.”

Mabel’s lips quirked. “You sure you’re not talking about yourself, Dipper?”

“Huh?”

She looked downcast again. “I mean, I sorta noticed it too. You didn’t have that many friends back home, did you? Kinda felt like it was my fault. Like, maybe I made all the friends and didn’t leave you with any.”

“No way.” Dipper tried to sound nonchalant. “That’s not how making friends works. It’s not some sort of zero-sum game.”

“Zero-sum what?”

“Nevermind.” He turned to survey the small stained-glass window at the opposite end of the room, which appeared to be depicting a series of concentric circles. Not exactly impressive, but at least there weren’t any triangles. “Not your fault I’m not that good at talking to people.”

“Well, this time round I’ll do my best to help you make friends! I can be your teacher in the fine art
of socialisation.” Mabel said, looking cheered. “And maybe I can introduce you to a cute girl! I know I’ll be introducing myself to some cute boys, but I can probably multitask…” She rambled on while Dipper surveyed the room, looking for any hidden compartments or the like. Not that he really expected to find anything, but a guy could hope.

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They hadn’t gotten around to putting food on the shelves, so Dipper grabbed the first edible thing he found in the boxes, which happened to be a bag of cereal, and made his way upstairs to his new room.

“Man, this place is big.” He said, for the benefit of the possibly-conscious demon he’d stowed away in his backpack. “I was hoping I might be able to find some kind of secret passage or something, since this is a pretty old house. Guess it isn’t old enough for that, though.”

He chewed on a mouthful of Cinnamon Toast Crunch. “There’s just something about old houses. I mean, I bet that someone’s died here before. Maybe they died in this room.” Twelve-year-old him might have found that creepy, but seventeen-going-on-eighteen-year-old Dipper had faced off against enough ghosts that he was pretty attenuated to it. “Also, there’s a stained glass window in the living room. Sorta reminds me of the mystery shack. No triangles, though. I guess if you looked really hard, you could say it looks a little like an eye…”

He set the cereal down on his bed as he continued to talk. It had become a habit of his over these past few years, this one-sided dialogue about his everyday life. Who knew, maybe it interested Bill.

He kneeled on the ground, unzipping his backpack. “Welp, I don’t think you need the transfer today, since we already did that yesterday. And we haven’t taken out the coat hangers, so I guess you can go in the sock drawer. We probably won’t have time to take them out tomorrow, either, since school starts tomorrow. Some pretty bad timing there.” He pulled Bill’s small triangular body out of the confines of his bag.

“Hopefully I might actually be able to make more friends this time round. I mean, I love Mabel but it was starting to get annoying how every time I introduced myself to someone they’d go ‘Oh, you’re Mabel’s twin-‘“ He broke off, realising one important thing about the demon he was currently holding in his hands. Bill Cipher’s eye was open.

In his shock, Dipper’s grip slackened. But instead of tumbling to the floor, Bill stayed hovering in midair.

Dipper took a step back, eyes wide. He gulped nervously. It had been five years since he’d been face to face with a clearly-awake Bill Cipher, and it hadn’t been in the best of circumstances. Well, apocalypse would probably count as one of the worst possible circumstances anyway.

And Bill still wasn’t reacting. Dipper steeled himself for a myriad of possibilities. Bill might have been depowered, but who was to say that he couldn’t manage some creative kind of low-effort punishment? Despite his fear, Dipper found he couldn’t look away from his unflinching gaze. Well, at least that was something. Staring death in the eye and all. Which reminded him, he was pretty sure Bill had some kind of laser beam in his eye that could vaporise Dipper in an instant. That sounded relatively painless.

Bill finally moved. He inched backwards slowly, still facing Dipper, their gazes locked. Dipper stayed frozen, watching as Bill moved to hover over his bed, just above where he’d left the bag of
cereal. He watched as Bill slowly, deliberately reached into the bag (when had he sprouted arms, anyway?) and pulled out a single piece of Cinnamon Toast Crunch.

The bag crinkled slightly, the only noise to break the oppressive silence. Dipper tried not to flinch. If anyone could cause him grievous bodily harm with nothing but Cinnamon Toast Crunch, it was probably Bill Cipher.

Bill shifted his stare to the piece of cereal in his hand. Mystified, Dipper watched as Bill gazed at it for a long moment, almost… reverently?

And then he face-planted right into the bag of cereal.

Dipper let out a noise of alarm, but didn’t budge. It wasn’t until a few minutes had passed and Bill still hadn’t moved that he dared make his way forwards.

“Uh… Bill?” No response. Hesitantly, he reached forwards to poke at Bill’s back. Still no response. Cautiously, he flipped Bill to face him.

Bill’s eye was closed, and his arms and legs had once again vanished. “Bill?” he said, somewhat louder. He shook the little triangular figure slightly. Yep, Bill was either asleep or had officially decided it was ignore-Dipper-time.

Annoyed, Dipper shoved him into the sock drawer.

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The next morning was frenetic chaos as their family tried to sort out whatever they needed from the jumble of boxes they still hadn’t unpacked. He had tried to tell Mabel about Bill, but kept getting brushed off (“-not now, Dipper. I can’t find my lucky bangle! I can’t turn up to the first day of school without my lucky bangle!”) or interrupted (“Dipper, do be a dear and take these scraps out to the pig-”). He eventually gave up when, having spent the entire drive to school in a meditative pre-socialisation state (to which end she told him to stay quiet, he could tell her about whatever-it-was later), Mabel immediately flew out of the car before he could get a word in edgeways.

Sighing heavily, he said his goodbyes to their parents and trudged alone past the school gates.

Chapelwick High looked pleasant enough. Plenty of trees on the front lawn, a small rose garden in front of the main building. He passed a number of students excitedly reuniting after their holidays. A few weary-eyed teachers clutching mugs of coffee. He frowned. There should be somewhere they’d be meeting for orientation-

“Hey, faggot!” A loud bang, and Dipper jumped nearly a foot into the air, searching around for the source of the noise. When he found it, his eyes went wide.

Two burly jocks had a smaller, thinner boy wearing square-rim glasses shoved up against the lockers. Dipper made a disbelieving noise because… really? Was this seriously the sort of thing that happened in real life?

“Look, Chad, I don’t want any trouble-” Oh wow, Chad? This was like something straight out of one of those anti-bullying PSAs they insisted on showing in primary school.

The taller, meaner looking jock – presumably Chad – just laughed and cracked his knuckles menacingly. “Look ‘ere, fag. You don’t want any trouble, you fork over your lunch money.”

Dipper tried not to laugh, even as something inside him shrivelled up and died from the sheer cliché
Lunch money? This wasn’t high-school-level bullying. This was like, kindergarten. Weren’t kids their age supposed to be doing drugs or something?

…Wait, why was he just standing there gawking? He really should be stepping in.

But before Dipper could make a move, a very angry-looking middle aged woman marched down the hallway. “Chadwick Phillips, Thorne Lee, just what do you think you’re doing?”

The two jocks jumped back, Chad looking sullen, Thorne looking slightly guilty. The woman stood in front of them, arms crossed. “Well? Do you boys have an explanation for all this?” They shuffled uncomfortably under the weight of her glare.

It was Thorne who finally spoke up. “Sorry, Principal Principelle.” Dipper had to hold back an incredulous scoff because dear god why. “We didn’t mean to hurt him. Honest.”

He quailed under the principal’s glare. “Afternoon detention. Bullying on the first day of school? Frankly, I’m disappointed in you both. Especially you, Thorne.” Dipper watched as the three moved off, Chad shooting the principal a particularly venomous glare.

The smaller boy sighed, stooping down to pick up his books and papers, which must have been knocked out of his arms when the jocks pushed him against the locker. Dipper hurried forward to help.

“Here.” He scooped up some papers which had landed some distance away, handing them to the boy. “Least the principal could have done was make those two help.”

“Nah.” The boy replied distractedly. “Principal Principelle’s nice. She helps out whenever she can, but she can’t be around all the time.” He accepted the papers with a nod of gratitude, quickly filing them back in their proper placed.

Dipper smiled wryly. “Though with a name like that, I guess you could say she was probably destined to be principal.”

“And with a name like mine, I’m probably destined for a lifetime of bullying.” The boy said gloomily, before he stuck his hand out. “Name’s Archie, by the way. Hope that gives you an idea of what I’m going through. It’s just one of the reasons I hate my parents.”

Dipper winced in sympathy, shaking it. “Dipper Pines. And that’s my nickname. Please don’t ask me what my actual name is.”

“You too, huh?” Archie laughed. “Maybe I should get myself a nickname too. I mean, I don’t believe those people who say that your name shapes your life, but still. Archie.” They shared a rueful chuckle, moving on down the hallway.

Eventually, Archie spoke up again. “So, Dipper. You should tell me something interesting about yourself.”

Dipper scratched his head self-consciously. “Oh. Uh, I…” have a demon living in my closet? Once accidentally summoned a bunch of zombies? Punched a giant vampire bat in the face that one time? No, that wouldn’t do. “I’m pretty interested in the paranormal?” He finished lamely.

Archie looked surprised. “Whoa, wouldn’t have taken you for the type.”

He laughed wryly. “Fair enough. In that case, what about you? Anything interesting about you I should know?”
Archie looked pensive, and then resigned. “Well, in the interests of full disclosure, I guess I should tell you that Chad was right about me.”

“Huh?” Dipper squinted at him, confused.

Archie turned to face him, smiling thinly. “I am, in fact, gay.”

The bell rang.

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The sudden influx of students crowding the hallway meant that Dipper had no chance to talk to Archie, as the tide of chattering students made it nearly impossible to find him. Well, at least he wasn’t likely to get lost, given that everyone around him seemed to be going in the same direction. He followed the general flow of movement, eventually arriving at a large auditorium. Principal Principelle stood on a stage at the front, with some students, presumably prefects, sitting behind her. The chairs were uncomfortable-looking cheap plastic, and the walls were bedecked with fabric bearing the school symbol. Almost every other surface – floors, walls, stage - seemed to be made of wood, which was probably some kind of fire hazard. After Gravity Falls, Dipper had become fairly paranoid of things catching fire.

The chairs seemed to be arranged by grade, and as Dipper scoured the area, a movement caught his eye. Mabel was waving wildly, her enthusiastic movements hitting those unfortunate enough to be sitting near her. Dipper smiled fondly, making his way towards her.

“Diiipper!! I was looking everywhere for you! Where were you?” Mabel demanded, almost impatiently.

“Well, maybe if you hadn’t run off the moment we arrived, you might not have had to look for me.” Dipper replied, trying not to sound annoyed. “And as for where I was…”

He filled her in on the recent happenings (minus Archie’s candid disclosure of his sexuality) in hushed tones, as Principal Principelle stood up and began to give the opening address. Mabel’s eyes widened.

“Man, that Chad guy sounds like a jerk.”

“Yeah.” Dipper agreed quietly. He pointed to where Chad was sitting, a few rows in front of them. “That’s him.”

“Hoo boy.” Mabel leaned forwards, scrutinising him with narrow eyes. “He even sits like a jerk.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know, its where you spread your legs right out and then nobody else can fit on the seats next to you. It’s worse when it’s like, a big beefy guy like him. Means he doesn’t care about the people around him. What a jerk.”

Dipper self-consciously crossed his legs.

Meanwhile, on the stage, Principal Principelle was announcing some new changes for the year. “And, of course, Chapelwick High is pleased to introduce a new LGBT Youth Society, founded by our very own Dominique Schell. Dominique, if you would?”

Dominique took the podium to polite applause. “Thank you, Principal. For many years, those of us
who do not fit in the accepted categories of society have struggled to come to terms with who we are. Some of us have spent our lives hiding who we are. Some of us have tried to seek acceptance, and have been rebuffed by our friends, our family. And it shows. LGBT youth are twice as likely as their peers to attempt suicide. It’s a horrifying indication of the struggles we go through in day-to-day life, and I’m trying to fix that.” She was a charismatic speaker, her hands moving animatedly as she continued to address the students. “This is why I have organised the establishment of an LGBT Youth Society, which will act as a support group as well as a source of information about…”

Dipper’s focus was broken by a rude snort somewhere a few rows in front of him. Chad was saying something, in not-particularly-quiet tones. “Who the fuck does Dominic think he’s fooling anyway? Just cause girly-boy’s decided to wear a dress—“


If Dominique heard, she was doing an admirable job of ignoring him. “… and if anyone needs help, or thinks they know someone who needs help, or simply doesn’t quite understand what I’m talking about, feel free to talk to me in private. I’ll be available during lunchtimes in the new LGBT Society room, located in the west wing of the building. Thanks for listening.” She smiled and nodded, stepping down from the podium to more polite applause.

Dipper noticed that even though Chad hadn’t joined in the applause, Thorne had. Hm.

Chapter End Notes

We can't stop here, this is OC country! In my defence, you can't have a proper mystery without introducing some new victims, can you?

This chapter was getting to be too long, so I split it. The remainder will be posted tomorrow.
He and Mabel split up after that. They both had separate classes, with Dipper pursuing more science-based subjects. Meanwhile, Mabel preferred more creative fields such as visual arts and music. To the family’s surprise, she had also enrolled in advanced mathematics and commerce. Although, remembering the similarities she shared with Grunkle Stan, as well as that one time she took charge of the Mystery Shack, Dipper concluded that she’d probably make for a terrifyingly shrewd businesswoman. The only class they both shared was advanced English.

His one outlier was history, and it was there that he again encountered Archie. Archie was initially reserved, clearly nervous about how Dipper might react to his confession, but seemed to relax after Dipper treated him no differently. As the topic at hand was the Bay of Pigs invasion, they spent the rest of history class debating whether the CIA played a part in its failure instead of reading the worksheets handed out to them by the teacher. The argument continued even past the ringing of the bell, as they filed out for lunch.

“Come on. Kennedy actually stood up and took responsibility for the whole mess-up. I mean, it’s not that weird for misinformation to pop up in a bureaucratic setting.” Archie said, slinging his bag across his back.

Dipper rolled his eyes. “Right. And it’s totally not like Kennedy would’ve had a problem with flat-out-insulting his main intelligence agency. You know, the one which he knew had the capacity to plot out assassination attempts? I mean, he knew what they were planning to do to Castro, what was to stop them from turning against him if he decided to blame the CIA for its mistakes?”

Archie huffed out a breath. “Oh my god. Are you actually one of those whack-job Kennedy assassination conspiracy theorists?”

Dipper frowned, crossing his arms. “I’m just saying, there’s usually a lot more to the story than they tell you.” If Gravity Falls had taught him nothing else, he at least had that firmly imprinted in his mind.

“You’re totally a whack-job conspiracy theorist.” Archie grinned.

“Shut up.” Dipper said, shoving him lightly in the shoulder. They entered the cafeteria.

The first thing which struck Dipper was how neatly segregated each group was. The uniformly arrayed cliques of students each sat at their own table, rarely interacting with different groups. Dipper, who had been used to a school environment which was far more open and integrated, felt rather weirded out.

“Well, I guess I should introduce you to the Groups.” Archie said, as they waited in line. He’d somehow enunciated the word ‘Groups’ in a way which left Dipper no doubt as to its capitalisation. “Right, so that table in the middle is where all the popular kids hang out. You know, the jocks and cheerleaders.” Unsurprisingly, Chad and Thorne were sitting at that table, Chad with two giggling cheerleaders at each side. Next to Thorne sat a curvy, freckled girl with auburn hair and glasses. She looked rather out of place.

Archie continued to introduce each of the Groups, Dipper growing more and more bemused as he
went on. There were the nerds (“I tried to join them when I first got here, but I was thoroughly out-nerded.”), the tech geeks (“I’m pretty sure they never look up from their screens. There was that one time the cooker exploded and they just kept tapping away at their phones while it rained pasta.”), the sports enthusiasts, the religious kids (“they pray before eating lunch, it’s a little weird.”), the rebels, the occultists (“I’d advise you against joining them, they’re a pretty depressing bunch.”), the goths (“Yes, I know, I didn’t realise goth was still a thing either, and they have this rivalry with the occultists over who gets to sit in the darkest corner.”) and the art kids—

Dipper could see Mabel sitting with the art kids, enthusiastically chatting to some guy with a ponytail and dark circles under his eyes. She spotted him, waved, and immediately returned to the conversation.

“… the band kids, the fashionistas… and I think that’s it.” Archie retrieved a tray of lunch food, grinning at Dipper’s bewildered expression. “So, what do you think?”

“I think…” Dipper started, still a little shell-shocked. “I think this is like something out of a bad 90s movie. You know, the ones written by old people who have completely forgotten what high school was like? Like that.”

Archie snorted. “You mean your old school wasn’t like this?”

“Definitely not.”

To Dipper’s relief, they trailed out of the cafeteria. He hadn’t been sure which table Archie had been planning to sit at, but it seemed he wasn’t about to delegate himself to one of the cliques. They headed down the hallway, eventually coming to a stop in front of a door. The intricately lettered sign on the outside read ‘LGBT SOCIETY and ‘This is a Safe Space-‘

There were more words, but Dipper wasn’t able to read them as Archie pulled the door open. “Dominique?” he called out.

Dominique, the girl who had given the speech at the assembly, was sitting behind a table, eating lunch while tapping away at her phone. “Oh, there you are.” She said, through a mouthful of bread. “Come on in!”

Dipper hesitantly obeyed, taking in the surroundings. It was a small room, but it appeared they had made the best of the space they had. Posters decorated the walls, and a large rainbow flag took up most of the back wall. There was a small bookshelf, with titles such as ‘Coming to Terms With Your Sexuality’ and ‘Learning to Accept’ lining the shelves. A lolly jar sat at the edge of Dominique’s desk, filled with colourful stickers, badges and some actual lollies. Next to the lolly jar sat another girl, reading a book, her curly hair tied up in a ponytail.

“This is Dipper.” Archie said, gesturing in his general direction. “He’s cool.”

“Uh… hey.” Dipper offered his hand to Dominique, who shook it. Her grip was firm and confident. “Hope you don’t mind me being here.”

“Nah. It’s always nice to have more work slaves- I mean allies.” Dominique grinned broadly, reminding him a little of Grunkle Stan. Dipper immediately felt less out-of-place. “Hey, Angela, meet Dipper!”

“Yeah, I heard you the first time.” Angela looked up, giving him a small smile. “Nice to meet you, Dipper.” Her voice was quiet, and she was obviously more introverted than the talkative, unreserved Dominique.
Who clapped her hands together, looking gleeful. “Oh! Angela, you should do the Thing!” At Angela’s dry stare, she went on. “You know, that Thing. The Thing everyone thinks is really cool!”

“It actually is pretty cool.” Archie added, as an aside.

“Fine.” Angela sighed, closing her book. “I don’t see why you guys keep telling me to do this every time we meet someone new.” Placing it on the table, she drew up both of her sleeves, reached out, and flexed.

Dipper’s jaw dropped.

She was ripped.

Dominique smirked at him, smug as the cat which caught the canary. “Told you so. If you think that’s awesome, you should see her abs. You want to talk to someone about bulking up, ask her.”

Dipper finally found his voice. “Wow.” He said.

Angela shrugged nonchalantly, though she did look rather flattered. “Regular gym workouts, protein shakes. It’s not much.”

“I once tried running with her.” Archie said. “She lapped me. Twice.”

“Wow.” Dipper said again. “I kinda want you to teach me, actually.”

Angela smiled, embarrassed. She rolled her shirt sleeves down, picking up her book again. “Sure. I’ve been looking for a workout buddy.”

“Don’t do it.” Archie said in a mock-whisper. “You’ll die. I’m talking from experience, here.”

***

He spent the rest of lunch chatting to his newfound friends (and it was kind of a heady thought, that he’d actually found friends so quickly), before moving on to class, but not before he grabbed some rainbow stickers and badges out of the lolly jar for Mabel. The rest of the day flew by uneventfully, and Dipper soon found himself clambering into the car while Mabel chattered on about that dreamy aspiring artist she’d been sitting with during lunch.

“He looks so deep and thoughtful.” Mabel cooed. Dipper privately thought he’d looked constipated, but didn’t voice the thought. Instead, he dug the stickers and badges out of his pocket, handing them to Mabel. “Ooh! For me? They’re so pretty! Where’d you get them?”

He told her about the LGBT society, and his newfound friends. He also told her about the fact that Archie was gay, figuring there was no harm since Archie didn’t seem to be keeping the fact under wraps anyway. Mabel listened intently, her expression serious. When he’d finished, she nodded thoughtfully. “They sound like good people.”

“Yeah, they are.”

“And I bet jerks like Chad don’t make life easy for them.”

Dipper glanced at Mabel, but she was busily affixing the badges to her sweater and backpack.

***

Tucking a box of Cinnamon Toast Crunch under his arm, Dipper returned to his room. He could
hear Mabel chattering to someone over Skype. It could have been Candy, or Grenda, or even Pacifica. She’d been fairly thorough about keeping in touch with their old friends from Gravity Falls, which was more than Dipper could say for himself. Closing his door, he plonked his backpack on the floor and turned to his closet. He opened his sock drawer. Bill Cipher was resting on top of a bundle of socks, his eye closed.


Bill’s eye opened instantly.

“Huh.” He hadn’t actually expected that to work.

Arms and legs emerging from his body, Bill floated out of the sock drawer, his eye affixed on the box of cereal. Which was an improvement over having his eye affixed to Dipper, quite frankly. He slowly, slowly reached out (Dipper tried not to make any sudden movements) and his small hand eventually closed around the box. Dipper’s grip loosened, letting Bill hold the box of cereal. As Dipper let go, Bill’s eye flickered, staring curiously at the lettering on the front of the box. Gradually, he turned the box to face himself, and-

Dipper let out a yelp of surprise as Bill Cipher casually upended the entire box of Cinnamon Toast Crunch onto the floor.

The demon’s gaze flickered to him, for the briefest of moments, as if to say ‘Whatcha gonna do about it, kid?’, and he lightly rapped a fist against the bottom of the box, sending the remaining pieces of cereal tumbling to the ground.

Dipper gritted his teeth.

Ignoring him (as was the norm as of late), Bill drifted down to the ground, picking up a piece of cereal, before moving it elsewhere. He picked up another piece, before doing the same. It took a few minutes of watching this (and a few ignored questions) before Dipper realised he was arranging them. It took some more time for him to realise this was actually really boring to watch, Bill probably wasn’t going to answer him anyway, and besides, didn’t he have homework to do?

Sidestepping the arrangement of cereal, Dipper retrieved his backpack and pulled out his homework, sitting at his desk. He kept an eye on Bill as he worked, making sure he wasn’t trying to pull off a cereal summoning circle or anything like that. Although it didn’t look like any summoning circle Dipper had ever seen. Bill was arranging the Cinnamon Toast Crunch in loops and waves which looked like they’d come out of Dipper’s physics textbook.

Was he… calculating something?

A few hours passed, and Dipper finally turned to see every piece of cereal placed neatly in various shapes on the floor. Bill was resting at the side of the room, his eye closed, completely still. He’d obviously finished whatever he’d wanted to do with the cereal.

Dipper debated whether Bill would be offended if he swept up the cereal. Then he realised his parents would definitely be offended to see this mess in the room, whether or not it was arranged in exceedingly intricate patterns. Then he pulled out his phone to snap a picture, just in case. In case what, he wasn’t sure. Maybe he could show it to Stanford the next time he went to Gravity Falls.

Sighing to himself, he went to fetch a dustpan and brush.

***
A few weeks passed by relatively peacefully. Dipper spent much of his time with his new-found friends. He introduced Mabel to the members of the LGBT Society, and she and Dominique hit it off almost immediately. Dipper and Angela would share wry looks upon entering the Society’s room only to find Mabel, Dominique and Archie crowded behind the latest issue of ‘HOT HUNKS’. That being said, Mabel seemed to have made friends with pretty much every group, bouncing from the occultists to the tech geeks to the art kids like a particularly energetic pinball.

He and Angela met up in the mornings to exercise. Despite Archie’s warnings, he found their workout sessions to be surprisingly fulfilling. Sure, they were strenuous, and sure, it was a little emasculating to see the size of the weights Angela was lifting compared to him, but he was content to find himself improving bit by bit.

He still kept Bill in the closet, but decided against pinning him from the coat hanger. Bill’s eyes occasionally opened when he conducted the ritual, but he refused to otherwise react to Dipper’s soliloquies. Dipper guiltily decided against telling Mabel, afraid that it would shatter their fragile truce - or whatever it was. He wasn’t too sure.

The only other thing of note was Chad. The boy had been absolutely insufferable as of late, making derogatory comments every time he passed Archie or Dominique. With slight amusement, Dipper noticed that he failed to do the same around Angela.

Eventually, absolutely sick of his assholishness, Dipper rounded on him, telling him to cut the crap. Chad had sneered, asked if he was Archie’s ‘boyfriend’, and told him that he better back off if he didn’t want the stuffing punched out of him.

Dipper clenched his fists. He could do this. He’d fought off a multi-bear, faced down zombies, and stared the apocalypse straight in the eye. He could take this caricature of a jock-

Huh, when had the ground been that far away from his feet?

Dipper had opened his eyes to find a concerned Archie hovering at his side, and Chad nowhere in sight.

“You shouldn’t have done that.” Archie said, helping him up. “I can handle myself.”

“Right, so I should have stood by and let him insult you.” He stumbled a little, but Archie managed to catch his arm and pull him back upright.

“Well, at least you don’t seem too injured.” Archie peered at his face. “Weird. With the force he hit you, I was expecting a black eye. But there’s no bruises.”

“Guess I’m lucky, huh?” Dipper cracked a grin, and Archie averted his eyes, turning a little pink.

Huh. Dipper thought.

***

One Friday morning, Dipper was awakened by the sound of Mabel hollering at the top of her lungs. He cracked open his eyes to see Mabel yelling incoherently, running in circles around his room. She had a newspaper clutched in one hand.

“DIIIIIIIPPER!!! DIPDOP! Wake UP! Look at this!”

He let out a low groan, and Mabel took it as her cue to leap up onto his bed, brandishing the newspaper. “Dipper, look what I found!” She leaned forwards, her eyes glinting promisingly. “A
real. Actual. MYSTERY!!!” She clapped both hands to her cheeks, bouncing up and down in excitement. The newspaper fluttered down to land squarely on Dipper’s face, who pulled it off and open with a grunt.

In his sleep-fogged haze, he had to squint a few times to make the words out. ‘WEEPING STATUE IN CHAPELWICK CATHEDRAL’ the headline read. Beneath was a picture of the statue in question. It was a statue of a woman, most likely the Virgin Mary. Dark red tear tracks extended from its eyes, curving down its cheeks, turning its otherwise placid expression rather ominous.

“See? The statue’s crying blood! Isn’t that just creepy?” Mabel said excitedly. “Can we go investigate? Can we? Can we?”

“Aren’t most of these weeping statues just fakes anyway?” Dipper sat up, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. “I read about it. Sometimes people just smear blood onto the statues to make it look like they’re crying.”

Mabel puffed her cheeks. “No, Dipper! You didn’t read the article! It actually started crying blood during a church service! They even interviewed a traumatised five-year old! Look!” She pointed at the relevant section of the newspaper. Dipper didn’t bother reading it, just slumping back on top of his pillow.

He made a vague gesture. “Fine, we’ll go have a look at it on the weekend.”

“Tomorrow?” Mabel leaned forward, eyes wide.

“Tomorrow.” He replied, yawning.

Though, he admitted to himself later on in the day, it was actually kind of exciting. It had been a while since he’d had any proper mysteries to solve – he had become too attuned to Gravity Falls weirdness for it to classify as an actual mystery. He whistled his way to class, ignoring the weirded out side-glances Archie was giving him.

***

That night, Dipper had a dream.

He was in the lonely void – only, there was something there now. He was standing on the ground. He stooped to feel it. A strange material, neither smooth nor rough.

He walked forwards. There were words. He didn’t know how he knew it, but there were words. He traced them in the dark. The darkness pressed up against him, both oppressive and familiar. It slipped between his fingers as he traced the words inscribed in the ground.

TOWARDS THE HOUSE OF LIES YOU’LL GO

THE SEEDS OF THEIR DEMISE YOU’LL SOW

REMEMD THE YOUTH THEY BROUGHT SO LOW

CONCEAL THE TRUTH LIKE COINTELPRO

...
Dipper furrowed his brow. Wake up screaming? What was it talking about- 

A ghastly figure flew into his face, shrieking.

***

Dipper woke up screaming.

Chapter End Notes

BILL YOUR POETRY SUCKS.

Dipper woke up screaming.

He catapulted off the bed, switching mid-scream to yelling “Seriously, Bill?!” Because honestly, a screamer? Had Bill finally run out of ideas? And what was with that cryptic poetry? Why couldn’t he just tell Dipper what was going on?!

He realised, a little too late, that his movement had sent a small object flying off his bed and onto the ground. A small triangular object. Bill Cipher was sitting on the ground, rubbing his head? Face? Upper corner? Whatever it was, the fall from Dipper’s bed to the ground actually seemed to have hurt.

Hesitantly, Dipper reached out, but found his hand batted away by a glaring Bill Cipher. The venom in his look could probably have fried small animals. Dipper might have been afraid, if it wasn’t for the fact that this was the most expressive Bill had been in five years. He watched as Bill lifted himself off the ground, floating towards Dipper’s backpack. Bill insinuated himself inside the bag, shooting Dipper one last glare before a small hand reached out and zipped the pocket closed from inside.

… Right, Dipper had promised Mabel they’d go investigate the cathedral. Bill had probably overheard, and was planning to come along.

As if on cue, Mabel bounded inside. “Rise and shine, brother! It’s a beautiful day to get investigatin’!”

“Oh, uh… right.” Dipper mumbled, stumbling out of bed, shooting his backpack one last nervous look.

***

At least, Dipper mused, it hadn’t been called Chapelwick Chapel.

The cathedral was huge, its grounds spanning an entire block of land. It consisted of an enormous building, intricately patterned with complex layers of grey stone. A series of spires located at the four corners of the cathedral rose above the rest of the building, their tapered ends pointing towards the sky. In the centre was a rounded dome, open to the air. Within it rested a stout bronze bell.

Mabel stared at it in awe. “It’s so pretty.”

The grand double-doors to the Cathedral were wide open, so they slipped inside. Its interior was equally grand, row upon row of delicately carved mahogany pews leading to the altar. The altar was illuminated by two enormous stained-glass windows, which, Dipper realised with a jolt, happened to look a great deal like the window in their living room. The colourful light cast dancing shadows upon what Dipper realised must have been the statue in question.

The statue, like the rest of the cathedral, was meticulously carved, the folds of its clothes so lifelike that Dipper half expected it to flutter in the slight breeze blowing from the entrance. The Virgin Mary’s hands were clasped in prayer, her head bowed slightly. The shimmering white marble from which she was carved practically glowed, lending to her aura of serenity. However, two reddish tear
tracks trailed down the Virgin Mary’s cheeks, marring her otherwise peaceful expression.

Mabel stared closely at it. Dipper’s attention, however, kept straying back to the two windows at the end of the altar.

“Impressive, isn’t it?” A familiar voice came from behind them. Dipper started, turning around to face the principal.

“Oh, Principal Principelle.” He wasn’t entirely certain how he managed to keep his face straight while saying that name. “It’s… uh… nice to meet you.”

The Principal smiled graciously. “I suppose you two are students at Chapelwick High? Here to see the weeping statue?”

Mabel twirled around, hands behind her back. “It’s beautiful!”

“Yes. Yeah, it’s pretty nice.” Dipper agreed awkwardly. “I’m Dipper Pines, and this is my sister Mabel.”

“Oh, you two must be the twins.” The Principal folded her hands together, peering at the Virgin Mary curiously. “Crying statues. Quite the miracle, that.”

If it really is a miracle, Dipper didn’t say. Instead, he asked, “Do you come by the cathedral often?”

“Oh, I used to.” Principal Principelle replied, still gazing at the statue, wearing a puzzled expression. “Do you know that bell at the top of the cathedral? I used to ring that every Sunday.”

Mabel made an excited noise. “That sounds so cool! But it’s so high up! How did you manage to reach it?”

“Oh, there’s a room upstairs with a rope that leads to the bell. Pull down on it, and it moves the bell. It’s quite loud, though. You can hear it across town.”

“If you know this place…” Dipper began hesitantly. Principal Principelle glanced at him, giving an encouraging nod, and he hurried to continue. “Do you know the meaning of the patterns on the window? We’ve got a similar one at home.”

“And if you know this place…” Dipper froze – he was certain he’d heard that term somewhere before. Unaware, the Principal continued, “These two windows represent the nine circles of heaven and hell respectively. Or rather, Inferno and Paradiso, as they’re formally known.”

She gestured to the left window, which was largely coloured with shades of red. Within were nine circles depicting a tableau of suffering, which perhaps might have been horrifying were it not for the exaggerated and contrived expressions of those ‘sufferers’, which seemed to be a hallmark of whatever era the windows had been painted. “So this is Inferno, located in the Earth’s core. On the outside, you can see the Uncommitted – or rather, the souls of those who were neither good nor evil. Their punishment is to spend eternity being stung by insects and infested by maggots.” And indeed, the figures in the window were being pursued by what could be generously described of insects of some sort. Well, they had six legs, but Dipper had never seen any insects with grinning human faces before, even in Gravity Falls.

“That’s not fair.” Mabel frowned. “So they weren’t exactly evil, but they’ll still spend eternity suffering?”

Principal Principelle shrugged and continued. “And if you look at the outermost ring of the circle,
you’ll see Limbo. Notice how it’s rather different from the rest of Hell?" And it was, painted in shades of lush green which contrasted with the rest of the window. “It’s what you would call a lesser version of Heaven, for those non-Christians who were otherwise sinless. However, the other circles are very much what you would expect from Hell. They’re divided according to sin. If I recall correctly…” she squinted, clearly attempting to recall which circle was which.

“Ah, yes. The second circle is lust, followed by gluttony, greed, anger, heresy, violence, fraud and treachery. And in the very centre is Satan.” She gestured towards the middle, where a three-faced monster seemed to be chained down, its three faces showing very different, yet equally ludicrous expressions of suffering. “Trapped in Hell by a prison of ice. As you can see, he has six wings, and three faces. One red, one black, and one pale yellow.”

Dipper felt his heart plummet in recognition. Three faces. “Pale yellow?” he finally managed to make out.

Principal Principelle looked at him quizzically. “Well, yes. Or at least what I was taught when I was young.”

Mabel leaned towards him, looking unsettled, clearly having come to the same conclusion. “Hey, Dipper, you don’t think… that Bill…?” she whispered agitatedly.

Dipper shrugged helplessly. Well, it wasn’t like it was an uncommon colour scheme, right? Red… Black… Pale yellow…

Screw that. The moment he got back home, he was going to shake Bill until words came out.

…but wait. Bill was in his backpack. He’d probably overheard. Dipper gulped nervously, wondering exactly how the demon was going to react to this development.

“Uh, s-so!” He tried to change the subject. “What about the other window? That’s heaven, right?”

“Oh, that’s right. Or Paradiso, as they call it. As with Hell, they’re set in a series of concentric circles – only, instead of circles, we call them spheres. They’re based upon celestial bodies, which are depicted as orbiting around Earth.” She pointed to the centre of the window, within which was painted a round object somewhat approximating earth. Unlike its companion, the window depicting Heaven displayed a far greater range of colours, casting rainbow shimmers of light down upon the altar. “If I recall correctly, the first sphere from the centre is the Moon, followed by Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, the Fixed Stars and then the Primum Mobile, which is where the angels live. God is said to move this sphere directly, which causes all the other spheres within to move as well. Nine spheres in all, which correspond to the nine classes of angels. These orders of angels orbit around god – although that hasn’t been shown in the window.” Principal Principelle explained.

“Huh.” Dipper studied the window closely. “So basically all the planets orbit around Earth?”

The Principal smiled self-deprecatingly. “It’s based on a medieval geocentric model. Science has moved on since then, so don’t go using it in class. I’m not taking responsibility if you do.”

They shared a moment of silence, contemplating the windows. Well, Dipper was, and Mabel seemed to be squinting at the statue. It was probably fortunate that the Virgin Mary was fenced off from the rest of the altar, but Dipper was pretty sure a rope barrier wouldn’t keep an overly curious Mabel away for very long.

He flinched when a cough sounded behind him. “Excuse me.” An unfamiliar voice said. “What are
Principal Principelle turned around, looking even more surprised than he did. “Seraph? Is that you?”

The speaker was a young woman, who didn’t seem all that much older than Dipper, although her height could probably put Wendy’s freakish lumberjack genes to the test. Her black skirt trailed to her feet, making her look even taller than she really was. Her eyes narrowed. “Principal Principelle. Why are you here.” Her voice was flat, almost free of intonation. It was quite frankly pretty creepy.

The principal smiled warmly. Taking Seraph’s stony expression into account, it was like a study in contrasts. “Why, Seraph! I haven’t seen you in so long. I thought you’d left Chapelwick.”

“I did. I came back after hearing the news.”

“You certainly don’t waste words, do you? You’re the same as ever.” Principal Principelle laughed, seemingly unaware of Seraph’s rapidly darkening expression. “I suppose you meant the weeping statue. It’s quite a sight, although I’m not sure it won’t stain. Unless you’re not planning to remove it? I’m sure it could make quite the tourist attraction.”

You’re? So Seraph was in charge of…

The Principal must have seen the confusion on his face, because she continued, “Oh, Dipper, I suppose you don’t know what’s going on. This is Seraph Ironwood. Her family owns this cathedral – although technically it belongs to Seraph now, after her parents passed away. Of course, it’s being held in trust, so she doesn’t manage the day-to-day affairs of maintaining the building and suchlike. Seraph, this is Dipper and Mabel Pines. They’re students of mine.”

Mabel waved weakly, forcing a grin. Seraph didn’t respond.

Mabel quickly dropped both hand and grin.

“Uh. Sorry to hear about your parents?” Dipper offered.

“Mm.” Seraph made an indifferent noise.

Roundly abashed, both Mabel and Dipper fell silent.

“Seraph.” Principal Principelle said chidingly, as though she was talking to a five year old. “That was rude.”

“Cut the crap.” Seraph said, with a sudden intensity that made Mabel and Dipper jump. “You know what this means. The weeping statue.”

Principal Principelle was quiet for a moment. “I can’t say that I don’t. But wasn’t it just some farfetched town legend?” She glanced at Dipper and Mabel. “You see, there’s a very old story which was passed down through the generations in Chapelwick. Most of us locals have heard about it from our parents, although there should be records of it in the town archives as well. I’m a little fuzzy on the details, but basically the story went, if the statue in the cathedral began weeping, it would herald the arrival of… uh, I mean to say…”


Having already lived through one apocalypse, Dipper was less than impressed.

“Now, now, it’s just a legend. An old wives’ tale. Besides, we can’t be certain how the blood got on
the statue. Perhaps a vandal broke in—"


“Oh.” Principal Principelle subsided. “Perhaps we could move the statue to see—"

“No.”

“But, Seraph—"

“No. If there’s nothing else of importance, leave.”

The Principal looked disappointed, but eventually acquiesced. Upon Seraph’s glare being focused in their direction, Dipper and Mabel hurried to do the same. As they reached the exit, however, Principal Principelle spoke again.

“By the way, Angela sends her regards.”

Wait… Angela? As in… their Angela? As in flex-and-her-shirt-would-probably-tear Angela? Dipper wanted to ask, but Principal Principelle was wearing an expression which reminded him of someone who’d opened the box to their favourite sweets only to find it crawling with ants. It was the same expression as when she’d seen Chad and Thorne threatening Archie.

… Yeah, interrupting her was probably not a good idea.

As she walked away, Mabel quickly bounced towards Dipper. “Sooo… that was…”

“Suspicious.” Dipper completed her sentence.

“Definitely suspicious.” Mabel confirmed.

“You were staring at that statue pretty hard back there. What did you think?”

Mabel hummed, furrowing her brow and placing her hands on her hips. “I don’t think those tears looked quite like blood. Well, I mean, it was the right shade and all that. But its texture seemed off. If it really was blood, it must have been watered down.”

Dipper gave her an incredulous look. “Since when were you so familiar with the texture of blood?”

Mabel fluffed up proudly. “Firstly, Dipper, I am an artist.”

“… and that has something to do with blood why, exactly?”

“Secondly,” Mabel continued, ignoring him, “I experience a monthly event commonly known as a period.”

“Ah.” Dipper flinched. That word brought back bad memories. Bad, bad memories. Memories of standing in front of the supermarket aisles, frantically trying to figure out the difference between regular and thin pads, and winged and non-winged, and what exactly were tampons anyway? Memories of rushing back and forth to take out the trash, holding it as far away from him as humanly possible, and then fetching painkillers – oh wait, Mabel wanted some chocolate too? And a hot water bottle? Anything else, Your Majesty? Ow, okay, okay, she didn’t need to throw the pillow at him—“Okay. I get it.”

Mabel raised her eyebrows knowingly. “So… I was thinking. This new development warrants further investigation.”
“Yeah, we should come back when that girl isn’t around.”

“We should come back tonight!”

“Tonight.” Dipper confirmed. They shared identical grins.

***

The house was silent as they snuck outside. It was midnight, and judging by their snores, their parents were sound asleep. Despite the chilly night air and his relatively thin jacket, Dipper was too exhilarated to feel the cold. It’d been a while since he’d done this. He and Mabel scrambled onto a late-hour bus, ignoring the driver’s curious looks. The bus was mostly empty, aside from an elderly lady who peered disapprovingly at them over the rim of her glasses, and a half-asleep man with a briefcase propped up across his lap. He smelled of alcohol.

Mabel giggled excitedly, clapping her hands in anticipation. “This is gonna be so fun!”

Dipper pulled his backpack onto his lap. Bill was still in there – his eye closed, last time Dipper checked. He hadn’t had a chance to perform his intended interrogation earlier, but he was definitely going to be giving the demon a thorough combing-over once all this was said and done. Just you wait, Bill Cipher.

“You know,” Dipper began, and Mabel turned away from where her nose was pressed against the window to face him, “This evening, I had a look at the stained-glass window in our living room.”

Despite the similar design of the concentric circles, there had been several key differences. No fantastical characters, for one thing. Their window consisted of plain glass with different colours for each circle, textured to be almost opaque. An exception was the circle in the centre, which was ordinary transparent glass through which their garden could be seen. Another key difference was-

“The window in our house had ten circles, not nine.”

“Maybe it was just a coincidence?” Mabel suggested. “I mean, stained glass windows with circles in them can’t be all that rare.”

“Maybe.” Dipper frowned.

“Or it could be a mistake!” Mabel waved her hands around, the extra-long sleeves of her sweater flopping about. “Like, the artist miscounted and drew nine circles around the first one. Or maybe the extra circle symbolises something important. Like… uh…” She trailed off.

“Also, I figured out where I heard about the nine circles before. It was in the Journal.”

“Wait, what? Really?”

“Yeah, except it was in one of the parts that you can only read under black light.” The bus began to slow, and he hopped off the seat, Mabel following. The drunk businessman muttered something about pansies, then subsided. “I mean, it was just the words ‘the nine circles’ written out repeatedly, but it might have something to do with those windows.”

Mabel hopped off the bus. “Do you think he might be able to help?”

For a brief moment of confusion, Dipper thought she might be talking about Bill. Then he realised that asking Stanford would make far more sense. “I guess. I might call him later. Anyway, we’re here.”
The cathedral was far less welcoming in the dead of night. The spires which had stretched towards the sun now loomed ominously above them. Silhouetted against the night sky, the church bell looked like the pupil of a single glaring eye. They slipped quietly past the shadows, looking about nervously. Careful not to make too much noise, Dipper attempted to pull on the large front door. It was bolted shut.

“We’ll have to find another way in.” he whispered to Mabel, who nodded.

They circled around to the back of the cathedral. Unlike the front, which was kept completely pristine and orderly, the back was overrun with vegetation. The ground was uneven, and Mabel let out a small cry as she tripped over a tree root. Dipper caught her before she fell.

“Whoops! Haha, thanks brother.” With his help, she pushed herself upright. “Man, there doesn’t seem to be any way in apart from the front. Weren’t churches meant to have their doors, like, open 24/7 for us poor sinners?”

Dipper peered through the dark. “Maybe if we could get to the window up there…” He pointed to a slightly open window high above them. The small, rectangular frame was of the sort which was wound open and shut through a separate mechanism probably located elsewhere. “But I guess we wouldn’t be able to reach it.”

Mabel hopped towards him, nimbly dodging another tree root. “Ooh! I know! You should get on my shoulders, like they do in those cheerleading pyramids! I made friends with some cheerleaders, and they gave me some tips!”

“Don’t you need more than two people to make a cheerleading pyramid?” Dipper said sceptically. “Besides, I’m pretty sure ‘getting some tips’ doesn’t exactly equate to having the necessary strength and dexterity for cheerleading stunts.”

Mabel huffed. “Stop being such a killjoy, Dipper. I can do cheerleader-y stuff too, you know!” Before Dipper could protest, she rushed ahead, somehow performing a flip despite the uneven ground, before landing solidly on a raised wooden surface. “See?”

Unfortunately, the wooden beams making up whatever that surface was had clearly rotted with age, and Mabel’s “See?” was accompanied by a loud crack and her sudden disappearance. Dipper cried out in shock, rushing forwards.

“Mabel? Oh god, Mabel, are you alright?” He peered down what had turned out to be a trapdoor, wrenching pieces of wood out of his way so he could see. “Mabel?!?” Splinters dug into his hands, bits of sharp wood cutting into his flesh. He was fairly certain he wasn’t going to be able to write for the next month, thanks to the numerous cuts and abrasions which had opened up on his skin.

“Ow.” Mabel’s voice sounded not too far down from him, and Dipper gasped in relief as he leapt down to join her. She had fallen on her front, but she didn’t seem to be visibly wounded. Dipper frantically checked her for any major injuries – no broken bones, scratches on her knees and arms, no deep wounds – and hugged her tightly when he found her otherwise unharmed.

“Oh man, Mabel, don’t scare me like that again.” He said shakily. “Can you walk?” For the second time that night, he helped her to her feet.

“I’m okay, Dipper.” Mabel tried to smile reassuringly. “Boy, that was a stupid idea. You should stop me from doing dumb things more often.”

“I tried.”
Dipper gazed ahead. They seemed to be in a corridor of some sort. The walls were lined with what felt like flagstone, layered and paved to make both the walls and walkway. It was rough, which was probably what had scratched Mabel’s knees. Pulling out his phone, he switched it to flashlight mode, using it to guide their way. Plants brushed against his legs, clustering thickly at the corners of the room. The flagstone was lined with ivy. They came to a stop in front of a winding staircase.

“This feels familiar.” Dipper said. How many times had they discovered similar secret passage in Gravity Falls? Only this wasn’t oddball Gravity Falls, where mysteries were a dime a dozen. This was staid, respectable Chapelwick. Why would Chapelwick need a secret passage?

They trailed down the stairs, Dipper keeping his eyes peeled for any possible traps. Fortunately, Chapelwick was at least respectable enough that whoever built this passageway evidently didn’t feel the need to arm the corridors with mechanic guards equipped with poison-tipped arrows, or with pits of vipers, or with spiked crushers, or whatever it was the residents of Gravity Falls found it necessary to do.

As they continued on their way down, something occurred to Dipper. “Hey, Mabel?”

“Yeah, Dipper?”

“I kind of remember giving myself a bunch of cuts when I pulled the trapdoor fully open. But it’s weird.” He shone the light of his phone on his hands. “They don’t hurt. And they definitely don’t look injured.”

Mabel peered closely at his hands. “That is weird. Maybe they didn’t actually break the skin.”

Dipper frowned. “Yeah. It’s been a while since I’ve been injured. I guess I just forgot how resilient I am.” Come to think of it, it actually had been quite a while since he’d experienced an actual injury. There was that thing with Chad, but he’d somehow miraculously escaped getting a black eye—

‘Huh.’ Dipper thought.

His thought process was interrupted as they came to a long, narrow room with a slightly arched ceiling. Unlike the passageway, the room was quite high, flagstones again lining the walls. Dipper cast his torch about from side to side, taking in his surroundings. This far down underground, it was cold and damp, although his shiver was only partially due to the drop in temperature.

“Uh… You know…” he managed, “I think this might be a catacomb.”

Mabel turned to him, eyes wide. “You mean where they store dead bodies?” She took her hand away from the wall, where she had earlier placed it to support herself. “Eurgh. That’s creepy. And gross. Though at least it doesn’t smell like dead bodies.” She sniffed the air experimentally.

As they proceeded further ahead, Dipper noticed a number of niches dug into the wall, presumably for burial purposes. He wasn’t about to take a closer look to check.

Finally, they came to a strange stone mural lodged into one of the walls. Dipper shone his torch at it, squinting at the inscriptions. They were finely sculpted, in a similar artistic style to the stained window in the cathedral. A bunch of suffering humans at the bottom, what could be assumed to be angels (well, an approximation of winged humans, at least) above them, arms outstretched. Words lined the borders of the mural. They were written in a script he didn’t recognise. Although, what he did recognise was a familiar pattern of concentric circles positioned right in the middle. “Hey, Mabel—“

He turned around to face her. His eyes widened in horror. “Mabel, look out!”
Aaand cue cliffhanger. Pretend it's like the part before the advertisement break. Music swells, screen pans in on Dipper's terrified face and then cuts to black.

The nine circles/spheres are based upon Dante's *The Divine Comedy*. And that little detail about Satan was a nice little touch I found during research. I'm not too sure if it's a happy coincidence or an ALEX HIRSCHHH moment. I'm leaning towards the former.

I imagine the stained-glass window in Dipper and Mabel's house looks a little like [this](#).
Arc I Part 4: Redcaps

Chapter Notes

You know how there’s a warning for Graphic Depictions of Violence up at the top? Yeah. Just, uh, reiterating that it’s a thing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

His warning came too late. Mabel crumpled from the full force of a candlestick to the back of her head. “Mabel!”

Behind her, Seraph Ironwood glowered, a heavy-looking wooden crucifix clutched in her left hand, the aforementioned candlestick held in her right. Before he had time to fully register what had happened, she quickly struck with the crucifix, and Dipper found himself backhanded into the opposite wall, flagstones crumbling behind him. He yelled out in pain.

Seraph swung again, but Dipper somehow managed to dodge, tumbling to the floor as the candlestick lodged itself right into the wall. Oh god, that could have been his skull. What was it with him and ridiculously strong girls lately?

He managed to catch Seraph’s fist before it met his face. She looked surprised that he was able to hold her at bay. Score one for training sessions with Angela. What he didn’t expect was for her to immediately kick him, catching him right underneath the jaw. His vision blacked out. The coppery tang of blood filled his mouth. He’d bitten his tongue.

She lashed out again, slamming his head against the wall repeatedly. Somehow, over the overwhelming pain of continuing head trauma and his own screams of agony, he could hear her. She was speaking, her tone as flat as ever, as though she wasn’t battering him like a particularly vengeful tornado.

“It’s fascinating.” She flung him into the opposite wall and followed it with a knee into the solar plexus. He wheezed helplessly, choking on blood. “The human body can only withstand pain up to a certain level. An ordinary human being would have been rendered unconscious by now. Like your sister.”

Dipper howled as she wrenched his arm back, feeling the dull crack of bone followed by an intense, shooting pain as something snapped. Seraph continued, ignoring him. “You’re obviously not an ordinary human being, are you.” Another kick into the gut. The pain was starting to meld together into complete agony. Dipper could barely tell where Seraph was aiming anymore. He dully recognised a second cracking noise as indication that another bone had been broken. Oh, right. That was his wrist. And Seraph had just punched him in the face. His nose was probably dislocated. More warm blood trickled down from somewhere.

And then Seraph stopped. Dipper lay on the ground, gasping shallowly, groaning as sharp pangs of sensation returned to him. He tried to open his eyes, but all he could see were shadowy blurs. He wasn’t sure whether it was because of the darkness, or because Seraph had injured his eyes somehow.

He let out a surprised whimper as his shoulder jerked forwards of its own accord. The triangular scar
at his chest – the one linking him to Bill - twinged with prickly heat. Above him, he heard Seraph say something.

“I thought so.”

She picked him up by the back of his shirt. He didn’t have the energy to struggle. A finger prodded his arm. It hurt, but it was nothing compared to the suffering he’d experienced just moments before.

“It’s healing.” She lowered him back onto the ground. “Your bones are regrouping. Your bruises are fading rapidly. Your blood seems as though it is being drawn back through the skin.”

She paused for a moment, then asked curtly, “What are you?”

Dipper tried to speak, but his words were unintelligible to his own ears. He spat out some bloody phlegm, then tried again. “Just a kid.” He finally managed.

“Just a kid.” Seraph repeated, sounding entirely unconvinced. “Then what are you doing here.”

“I’m here… to solve a mystery.” With great effort, Dipper managed to push himself up, ignoring how almost every part of his body screamed in pain.

“A mystery.”

“Yeah. The weeping statue.” Dipper closed his eyes, wincing as he felt the healing processes of his body work. His skin was regrowing. His tendons were reconnecting. It felt like small stinging insects were crawling both over and inside him. “Mabel wanted to see if we could figure out why it happened. We’ve done it before. Solved mysteries.”

Seraph stayed silent for a few long moments.

“This morning.” She eventually said. “At the cathedral. When I met you. I trust my intuition. My intuition told me you didn’t belong in a church. I felt an aura radiating from you. Something demonic. Dangerous.”

“Me? Demonic? Dangerous? What do you mean?” He squinted up at her for a moment, before understanding dawned upon him. He suddenly felt lightheaded with giddy hysteria. “Oh my god. Oh my god.”

“Don’t take the Lord’s name in vain.” Seraph said absently. “And just what are you laughing about.”

“Just…” Dipper fought off a sudden attack of giggles. His temporary lack of sanity was probably due to the blood loss. “Just open my backpack, and tell me what you see inside.”

Warily, Seraph retrieved his backpack, which had tumbled to the floor when she’d initially attacked him, along with his thankfully undamaged mobile phone. She rifled through the contents, finally pulling out a triangular-shaped object. She held loosely it with the tips of her fingers, as though loathe to touch it. “And what is this.”

“That,” Dipper said, “is a demon. Or was, at least.”

“Oh.”

“We sealed his power a few years back.”

“I understand.” Seraph dropped Bill back into his bag, wiping her hand on her skirt. “So I was sensing this demon. I may have misjudged the situation. Although that doesn’t explain your healing.”
“I didn’t know about it either.” Dipper confessed. “Though a lot more things make sense, in retrospect. I’m guessing it’s due to the spell we had to use to seal him. It basically bound him to me, so he’s pretty much dependent on my energy for survival.”

“Mm.” Seraph made a considering noise. She tossed him his backpack and his phone, watching as he struggled to his feet. He was pretty sure the convenient handholds to his sides were probably tombs of some sort, but that was currently the least of his worries.

“So… Uh… Seraph, was it?” What was it with Chapelwick and weird names? “Did you know about this place before?”

“No.” Seraph replied. With one hand, she picked a still-unconscious Mabel up and slung her over her shoulder. Yep, ridiculously strong. “Heard a noise. Came to investigate. Took the candlestick and crucifix just in case. Saw you two. Knew your sister was likely human, so I only knocked her out. She should wake up soon.”

Dipper winced. “And what would have happened if I hadn’t been able to heal?”

Seraph shrugged. “You would have been knocked unconscious from the first blow. You hadn’t, so it confirmed my suspicions. I do apologise, though.”

An apology, especially one made so offhandedly, wouldn’t exactly cover for broken bones. Dipper didn’t dare protest though. “Why were you so on edge, anyway? Or do you usually go around beating people you find suspicious up?” He switched his phone to torch mode. By some miracle, the screen hadn’t cracked. His phone was far luckier than he was.

“I don’t.” Seraph replied, beginning to move down the corridor. She seemed vaguely interested in the murals lining the walls, tracing them with a hand as she passed. “I had to be wary. The weeping statue is a sign of Armageddon. There are beings which stand to benefit from this. With the demonic energy emanating from you, I believed you might have something to do with it. Which is why I attacked you.”

To be fair, Bill was a harbinger of the apocalypse. It was just that it wasn’t this apocalypse in question.

They came to a corner, and then another. Dipper had his suspicions about the shape of the structure they were within. “You know, I think this is a spiral.” He could see yet another corner coming up from the end of this relatively short corridor. The walls here were plain, apart from the holes-which-were-probably-graves. The stone mural had only extended to the length of that first corridor.

“You’re right.” Seraph said. “Perhaps the centre of the spiral might have answers.”

They continued moving. Dipper stumbled onwards, despite the lingering pain. Seraph didn’t seem affected, even with the burden of Mabel weighing her down. She gave him a quick sideways glance, before offering an arm. “I have a shoulder free, if you need help.”

Dipper stared at her in confusion, before spluttering as he realised what she meant. “Wait- There’s no- I mean- I don’t need to be carried.” He finally managed indignantly.

“If you say so.” Seraph replied, her lips quirking. Had she just made a joke?

They eventually arrived at a door. It was made of the same wooden planks as the trapdoor, making it look like part of a fence. Mould and mildew covered the surface. Seraph rattled the flat, patterned brass knob. “Locked.” She said. “Although it doesn’t have a keyhole. The lock must be elsewhere.”
Dipper located the locking mechanism located somewhat above the knob. He furrowed his brows, peering closer. “You know… this lock…” he shone his torch directly towards it. “…This lock is modern.”

Seraph frowned, understanding the implications. Her hand traced the lock. It was a large round deadbolt embedded into the surface of the door. Unlike the knob, it was silver. Probably stainless steel, though it was very slightly rusted thanks to the underground humidity. “Someone’s been down here. Fairly recently.”

Dipper examined the keyhole. “I think I might be able to get it open. I have a lockpicking set in my backpack—”

“No need.” Seraph replied. She moved back a small distance, settling Mabel down on the ground. She then rushed forwards, angling her body slightly – and before Dipper could fully get out the words “Are you serious?” her foot met the door, shattering the already weakened beams. Sharp bits of wood flew everywhere. The remainder of the door, which was still attached to the hinges, squeaked open pathetically.

Seraph nodded in satisfaction, hands on her hips. Dipper stared at her, his mouth agape. 

*Ridiculously* strong.

She moved into what appeared now to be a small room. The walls were lined with what appeared to be cylindrical tubes. Dipper tried to make them out, but he bumped right into Seraph, who had stopped dead.

“Jesus Christ.”

“Oh, so taking the Lord’s name in vain is okay when *you* do it? And what exactly are you looking at, anyw-” he froze when his eyes registered exactly what it was that Seraph had been staring at.

A bunch of tiny old men were huddled on the floor.

They stared with wide eyes at Dipper and Seraph. Dipper and Seraph stared right back.

One of the tiny old men was the first to break the silence, letting out a joyful whoop. “See! I told ya fellas we’d be able to get the message out! All we had to do was fill poor ol’ Chuck’s hat with water, and let that new-fangled doohickie suck it all out!” He whacked an iron pike – all these old men were carrying iron pikes for some reason – into what Dipper realised was a plastic pipe. Those things that were lining the walls were all pipes.

“… Uh… so what exactly are you?” Dipper finally managed. Next to him, Seraph seemed to have gone into shock.

The small men were fairly similar to the gnomes in Gravity Falls. They had the same white beards, the same button noses, the same red caps. The only difference Dipper could see was the fact that their eyes were red, their fingernails seemed to have grown out to look a little like claws, and the presence of the aforementioned pikes.

Another of the small men stepped forwards, doffing his cap. “We’re the Redcaps, young fella. We got trapped ’ere a while ago. Wandered in, closed this door and it locked right behind us. Bloody right mess we were in.”

“Why are you here.” Seraph seemed to have regained her presence.
The Redcap looked sheepish, scuffing his steel boot back and forth against the ground. “Ehehe. Well, lil’ lady, we live in the woods ‘round this place. We heard word that they were plannin’ to bulldoze the place down, so we decided to look for a nicer place to live. So we found this lil’ hole in the ground, pretty happy with it. But then we got stuck. Got trapped down here for Almighty knows how long—”

“Don’t take the Lord’s name in vain.” Seraph interrupted automatically. Dipper was still recovering after hearing her addressed as a ‘lil’ lady’.

“- right, right, gotcha. Anyway, so we were stuck ‘ere, and bloody starvin’ too. Poor ol’ Chuck, he didn’t last.” He gestured to what Dipper could make out as a small skeleton. “So we took his hat, and dunked it in the water over there—”

Dipper moved towards the small plastic container he was pointing to. It was a pale yellow washbasin, clearly a product of the modern era. He turned it over. ‘MADE IN INDIA’ was imprinted in small text on the rim. “Where did you get the water from?”

“Oh, it drips from the roof.” The Redcap gestured to a small puddle off to the side. “We weren’t lacking for drink, I can tell ya. So we moved the water to that doohickey over there, and took turns turning that wheel next to it, and whoomp! That water got sucked up like that bee up Peter’s great big nose! Aidan over there figured that if yer water turned red, ya’ll might come down ‘ere to check. And whaddya know, he was right.”

The Redcap he now knew as Aidan puffed up. “Told ya so.”

Seraph examined the mechanism. She sucked in a deep breath. “That piping likely leads to the statue’s eyes. Which explains the tears. But who…” she broke off, with the most emotion Dipper had heard in her voice so far. “Who would have had it installed? And why?”

“Beats me.” Another Redcap said. “I’m hungry. Let’s go get us some food.”

“Wait!” Dipper said, as the Redcaps began to assemble, chatting amongst themselves, as they picked up their caps and pikes. “I just wanted to know – have you met any gnomes before?”

One Redcap sneered. “Ugh. Yeah, we know the type. Bloody vegans. Completely insufferable, the lot.”

The rest of the Redcaps chimed in with disgusted agreement.

“Ya wanna know how to tell if a fella’s a vegan?” one Redcap called out. “Ya don’t hafta’, he’ll tell you!” This was met with uproarious laughter from his fellow Redcaps.

“Wait, so what exactly do you guys eat?” Dipper asked curiously.

Sudden silence.

Dipper felt a distinct chill in the air which was entirely unrelated to the underground temperature. The Redcaps looked at each other, then turned to face him with identical grins. Dipper realised another important aspect in which they differed from Gravity Falls’ gnomes.

Their teeth were very, very sharp.

Dipper took a step back.
He shared a glance with Seraph, who was at his side. They were too far away from the door. If the Redcaps decided to attack, there wouldn’t have any viable escape routes, what with the way the Redcaps had arranged themselves into a neat curved formation without their noticing. “So... about Chuck...” Dipper tried, angling for a distraction. “How exactly did he die?”

“Chuck didn’t last long.” One of the Redcaps said, leering ominously. “But least he lasted long enough to keep our bellies full and our caps wetted.”

He felt his stomach lurch. So their caps were red because of...

“So, it’s been nice knowin’ you.” Another of the Redcaps said. “Can’t thank you enough for lettin’ us out of this prison. Hope ya’ll don’t take this personally. Circle of life and all that.”

The Redcaps launched themselves towards their two unfortunate victims, converging towards them with teeth bared and pikes drawn. Dipper tried to fend them off, but they were surprisingly strong and agile, flipping away from his arms, crawling up his legs, pulling back their pikes to stab him. Dipper let out a scream as the sharpened metal impaled his flesh. They pierced into his legs, his abdomen, between his ribs to puncture his lungs.

Beside him, Seraph was having rather more luck keeping the Redcaps at bay, but it was all she could do to slam them back against the wall and kick at the ones trying to swarm her. They didn’t seem to be harmed by her actions, simply picking themselves up off the ground and re-joining the fray. She wouldn’t be able to hold them off for long.

Dipper's scream became a rattling sob as one Redcap stabbed him in the jugular, his pike lancing him right through the neck. Blood spurted from the wound as the Redcap withdrew the pike, only to stab him again.

“This one’s a hardy ‘un, isn’t he?” It exclaimed gleefully. “Most of ‘em would’ve keeled over by now!” Dipper could only take gasping breaths, oh god the pain the pain the pain the pain. This was so much worse than broken bones. Metal dug into his internal organs, only to be pulled out to impale him again. He was probably more wound than person now, and yet he could still feel oh god the agony.

Amongst the chaos, a Redcap’s voice sounded from the corridor. “Hey fellas! Guess what I found! Another fresh young’un, ripe for the taking!”

Even through the all-encompassing blinding pain pain pain pain, Dipper’s eyes widened in terror. Oh no, Mabel.

Mabel couldn’t heal. They’d kill her- he couldn’t let her die but he was so helpless he needed help nobody could help oh god the pain.

He gritted his teeth and tried to call out. No sound came out. He could only mouth three words.

Help ...

Me...

...Bill.
Chapter End Notes

No vegans were harmed during the making of this chapter. Dipper was brutally maimed though. Twice.

(I'm sorry Dipper ilu but this is for the sake of the PLOT)
A golden light flooded the room.

A familiar echoing laugh sounded, jovial and light-hearted and absolutely **terrifying**.

Dipper had never been so glad to hear that laugh before.

“WELL, WELL, WELL! Looks like you’ve got yourself in quite the scrape there, kid!” Bill Cipher was floating in front of him, as vivid and dynamic and animated as he hadn’t been the last five years. “I’d cut you a deal, if you hadn’t, y’know,” his voice pitched itself low and ominous, “CUT ME OFF FROM MY REALM AND FORCED ME TO RELY ON YOUR MEAGRE MAGICAL ENERGY TO SURVIVE. That sorta thing really gets a guy down, I can tell you!”

The Redcaps had paused in their attack to stare, transfixed, at the interloper. Finally one dared pipe up, with a “Who the bloody hell are you?”

“Geez, where have my manners gone? Certainly not into the TRANSIENT MEANINGLESS EXISTENCE WITHIN WHICH I HAVE BEEN FORCED TO SUBSIST FOR AN INESTIMABLE PERIOD OF TIME.” Bill’s entire body turned black, his single eye glaring pointedly in Dipper’s direction, before he returned to normal, swivelling towards the Redcaps. “I really should’ve introduced myself first!”

He bowed, his triangular body slanting downwards and his small black legs pushing outwards. “Bill Cipher, ex-dream demon, at your service! Only not really, because a CERTAIN SOMEONE bound our life force together, meaning I’m basically at his command! That aside, nice to meet you!” He pulled his top hat off, spinning it around with a finger. He pointed it at the Redcaps. “Gnome ripoffs.” He swivelled it towards Seraph, who flinched back. “Stoneface.”

Bill tossed his hat into the air, where it landed neatly on his head. “SO! Whaddya want, kid?”

“Me?” Dipper asked, or at least attempted to. All that actually came out was a gurgle as blood bubbled out of his mouth.

Fortunately, Bill seemed to understand. “Yes, YOU! You’re the one asking for help here! Or did you just call me out for shits and giggles?” He suddenly materialised in front of Dipper’s face, black cane in hand. “Though with those nice great big metal spikes stuck right through you, I could hazard a guess! And that guess is YES, YOU NEED MY HELP!”

He poked his cane against Dipper’s cheek, nudging him insistently. “What’s the matter, kid? Cat got your tongue?” Bill’s cane trailed down to Dipper’s neck, where it met the sharp piece of metal still lodged through his windpipe. His eye narrowed in understanding. “Yeesh, they really did a number on you, didn’t they?” He asked, a little more quietly. His cane knocked against the multiple iron
poles still lodged in Dipper’s body as it continued its passage downwards. Dipper squirmed in pain.

“In that case, I know what I should do! Hold still, kid, this might hurt a little! And by that, I mean it’ll hurt A LOT.” A gleeful note entered Bill’s voice.

He snapped his fingers, and the pikes suddenly vanished from Dipper’s body. They reappeared behind the Redcaps, who let out noises of alarm as the bloodstained metal poles clattered neatly to the ground behind them.

Dipper tried to scream as blood gushed from his now-open wounds, but more blood simply flowed from his mouth. The scar on his chest burned like a brand. His wounds began to heal, no longer fettered by the presence of the pikes lodged in his flesh. The process was painful, invasive, as the tissues of his internal organs began to knit back together. Dipper kept his eyes fixed on Bill’s single one, however, as he tried to speak. As the hole in his windpipe began to close, he managed a quiet rasp.

“Mabel.”

Bill’s eye widened, and then he threw his head (or at least the upper part of his body) back and laughed loud and long. “AHAAAAH! Boy, you are a HOOT! Never change, do you? Turned into Swiss cheese, and you’re worried about your SISTER?” His gaze met Dipper’s, and – was there something almost fond in it? “Your sister’s fine, kid. Which is more than I can say for you! So, whaddya say,” He leaned in conspiratorially, his tone shifting to a menacing echo, “to a little RETALIATION?”

Dipper stared at him dumbly. Bill and retaliation meant bad things. Violent things. Horrible, agonising, gruesome things to be inflicted upon Bill’s victim of choice. His gaze flickered to the Redcaps, who were huddled, wide-eyed, in a corner of the room. It then flickered past Seraph, who was clutching her bleeding arm to her chest, to the corridor where Mabel lay. Mabel, who was lying on the ground, unconscious and helpless. Mabel, who would have died if Bill hadn’t shown up.

He looked back at Bill. Bill’s eye was smugly narrowed, and he was casually tapping his cane against his foot, as though he already knew what Dipper’s answer would be. He probably did.

Dipper swallowed, and nodded his head.

“Excellent choice, kid!” Bill’s hands suddenly sparkled with blue flame. In a split second, he zapped in front of the Redcaps, who crowded back, evidently sensing his malicious intentions. “Welp, it was nice seeing some fresh new faces, but all good things must come to an end! And YOUR end’s coming up in just a few moments!” The blue fire at his hands glowed brighter. The Redcaps let out terrified noises. “Aw, don’t give me that look! You know it’s only part of the – what was it you said before? Ah, yes, the CIRCLE OF LIFE!”

And with that, a sharp wind blew through the room, knocking the caps off the Redcaps’ heads. They shrieked in alarm, trying to grab them back, but the wind was even faster than they were. It carried the caps to the plastic basin – which was suddenly filled with water – and immediately let them drop. The water was immediately dyed a bright, vivid red. To the side, the wheel connected to the plumbing mechanism began to spin. The blood-red liquid was drained away, to be immediately replaced by more clear water.

The Redcaps howled in agony. Dipper watched in morbid fascination as they collapsed to the floor, writhing in torment. Whatever their caps were, they were obviously dependent on them for survival. As their caps were continually doused with water, beginning to lose their colour, the Redcaps started to shrivel, looking like gaunt corpses, their expressions distorted into perpetual screams of horror.
Bill loomed above them, laughing maniacally. His eye suddenly swivelled to a Redcap near the corridor, who had somehow managed to hold on to his cap and was now attempting to extricate himself from the chaos.

“NUH-AH-AH! Sorry, shortstack, but there’s no getting off THIS ride!” A snap of his fingers, and the Redcap began to crumble into neat red cubes of flesh. He was screaming in pain the entire time.

Another Redcap attempted to claw his way towards Dipper. Dipper cringed back as the small emaciated figure tried to drag itself towards him.

“Mercy…” it croaked. “Mercy…”

Before he could react, it withered further. Glassy red eyes locked onto Dipper’s as the Redcap slumped to the ground, a shrunken husk.

Horrified, Dipper took in his surroundings. Shrivelled corpses of Redcaps littered the floor around him. A set of small pale-pink caps sat, sodden, in the basin. Bill Cipher was hovering in midair, humming an off-key tune. He snapped his fingers once again, and the caps were engulfed in blue flame, quickly burning to ashes. The Redcap corpses crumbled to dust.

Dipper screwed his eyes shut, bowing his head.

“And as for YOU, Stoneface!” His eyes flew open to see Bill floating in front of Seraph. Oh no. When Bill had mentioned retaliation, had he also meant-? “Ya see, I overheard you this morning, and I think you oughta realise something! About the apocalypse!”

Seraph, for her part, remained admirably composed in the face of the Redcap massacre. Although she did seem a little paler than usual. “What about it.” Her voice was the usual expressionless murmur, although there was a little waver in it.

“I think you overestimate exactly how hardy you humans are! C’mon, you’re these fragile fleshbags smeared over the surface of a great big rock hurtling through space at thousands of miles an hour! Practically every day which passes without the agonising death of every human being is a miracle! And here YOU are, spouting all these silly words about Armageddon!” Bill rolled his eye. “PUH-LEASE. Spare me the dramatics.”

With a popping sound, he disappeared, reappearing in front of Dipper. “And YOU, kid. Tsk, tsk. I give you immortality, and THIS is how you repay me? By pretty much falling into every sharp object in existence? I mean, I’m not complaining all that much. Shit’s HILARIOUS. Best show I’ve watched since the Hindenberg was sabotaged!”

Dipper started. “Immortality?” he managed.

“Yes, kid, IMMORTALITY. As in, you’re going to live FOREVER.” Bill loomed directly in front of Dipper’s face, his single eye fixed ominously upon him. Then he reached out and flicked Dipper in the nose. “Haha, kid, you should’ve SEEN your expression!”

He flew a small distance away, stretching his arms out casually. “Well, this’s been fun! But your limited magical capacity’s only gonna go so far, and I’ve pretty much used up all the energy I’ve been storing for the past five years! So I guess it’s time to say farewell! Remember kids, YOUR EXISTENCE IS A LIE, AND THE OBLIVION OF DEATH NOTHING BUT A DELUSION. See you around!”

“Wait, Bill-!” Dipper began, but the light surrounding Bill immediately vanished, and his triangular body plummeted into Dipper’s lap. He picked Bill up. Bill’s eye was closed. “Goddammit.”
“… Don’t take the Lord’s name in-“

“Right, right, don’t start with that again.” Dipper groaned, forcing himself onto his feet. Now that the shock of Bill’s sudden reappearance had worn off, he found himself completely exhausted. What time was it?

Seraph caught him as he swayed sideways. “Need help?”

“Nah.” Dipper slurred. “Jus’ need t’ close my eyes for a little-“

The world went black.

***

A brief flash of consciousness.

“Looks like you needed my help, in the end. At least I had that shoulder free.”

Dipper mumbled something and fell asleep again.

***

Dipper opened his eyes.

He was in an unfamiliar room. The sheets he was resting beneath were white, not green and black and patterned with aliens. The room was filled with old-fashioned mahogany furniture. The windows were covered with heavy gold curtains. A quiet snuffling noise caught his attention. Dipper turned his head to see Mabel, who was sitting on a cushioned chair next to him. Her head was resting in her arms on top of the bed. She was asleep.

His heart warmed with relief. Gently, he reached out to shake her arm. “Mabel?”

Mabel slowly blinked awake. Her eyes locked onto him, and Dipper felt the air knocked out of him as she embraced him in an overenthusiastic hug. “Dipper! Oh boy, you’re okay! Seraph told me about what happened!”

Dipper blinked. “She did?”

Before Mabel could answer, Seraph entered the room. She had a tray of tea in her hands. “Yes. I told her about everything. About how I knocked her out because I thought you were intruders. And then how we discovered the mechanism through which the blood was transported to the statue. And about how you then injured yourself, so I carried you both here.”

Dipper gave her an incredulous look. Everything? That was barely scratching the surface.

“Oh man.” Mabel moaned. “I missed the best parts!”

Seraph shrugged in response to Dipper’s stare. “I may have left out some small details.” Left out the most important parts, more like. “Also, I helped change you into some new clothes.”

Dipper glanced down at himself. Instead of the jacket and T-shirt he’d been wearing earlier, he was dressed in some frilly altar-boy outfit with poofy sleeves. “Uhh… thanks?”

“You can keep it.” Seraph said dismissively. “As an apology for earlier.”

“What happened to your old clothes?” Mabel asked curiously, gulping some tea down.
Dipper hesitated. “Um…”

“They weren’t in a wearable state.” Seraph interrupted, forcing a cup of tea into Dipper’s hands. It smelled like roses.

“Why, what happened?” Mabel’s expression turned mischievous. “Dipper, you didn’t fall into something gross again, did you?”

“Uh… something like that.” More like falling into a dozen sharpened pikes. Well, he technically wasn’t lying, that’d been pretty gross. Ugh, he was really getting sick of this whole ‘keeping things from Mabel’ business. But still, this was a pretty big thing. Immortality. Yeah, Dipper needed time to get everything in order (and wring out some answers from that goddamn stubborn ex-dream demon) before telling her – he didn’t want to make Mabel worry needlessly.

As Dipper sipped his tea, something occurred to him. “…Wait, what time is it? We are going to be so screwed if our parents figure out that we weren’t at home last night.”

“Five in the morning.” Seraph said, checking her watch. “The early-morning bus leaves in ten minutes.”

“Guess that means we’d better get moving.” Mabel gulped the rest of her tea down. “C’mon bro, let’s go! Thanks so much, Seraph!”

“It was nothing.” Seraph said bluntly.

Dipper stumbled out of bed, grabbing his backpack which had been placed to the side of Mabel’s chair. Mabel rushed out first, and as he made to do the same, a hand caught him around his arm.

“That demon of yours.” Seraph said, in a hushed tone. “He mentioned something about immortality.”

“Yeah. I’m still trying to figure that one out.”

Seraph watched him for a long moment, her gaze hooded. He tried not to squirm, recalling why he’d found her so menacing in the first place. Finally, she let him go. “Be careful. Demons are treacherous beings.”

“Yeah, I know.” He definitely knew. “Thanks anyway.” He hurried out to join Mabel.

As they stepped outside the house, Dipper turned his head. They had been in a small house adjoining the cathedral, presumably where Seraph lived. Seraph stood in one window, watching them leave. Her presence was like an ominous shadow, marring the otherwise tranquil landscape. Dipper shivered, then half-jogged to catch up with Mabel.

***

It was Monday, and Dipper hurt all over.

Despite spending the previous day convalescing in bed, his newly regrown flesh was still tender, and he really wasn’t in the mood to get bumped around by rowdy sports enthusiasts and tech geeks who were too busy staring at their phones to see where they were going. He staggered into history class, slumping into his seat with an audible thump.

Next to him, Archie regarded him with some sympathy. “Rough weekend?”

“You don’t know the least of it.” Dipper sighed. “How was yours?”
“Eh, nothing all that interesting. Though…” Archie’s eyes lit up. “Did you hear the news? Apparently the statue in Chapelwick Cathedral started crying tears of blood, not once, but twice. And apparently the second time round, it was basically haemorrhaging from the eyes. The entire statue was pretty much soaked in blood. Ended up soaking the carpet around it too. Man, the clean-up must’ve been a pain. Though I guess they could make it a tourist attraction or something. I mean, I’d like to go have a look just to see what all the fuss’s about. Wanna go check it out together?”

Dipper cradled his head in his arms and groaned.

Chapter End Notes

*cue laugh track*

And this concludes the first arc! I hope you’ll continue to stick with me for the next part of: ‘WHEN WILL THE BILLDIP ACTUALLY HAPPEN?’

Also, BILL WHY ARE YOU SO HARD TO WRITE IN-CHARACTER. The main difficulty lies in the fact that he’s a very active and dynamic character, which is far easier to capture visually than through words. I debated writing his dialogue in all-caps, and eventually compromised by having him speak in capitals whenever emphasising something. Which he does a lot.
Chapter Summary

Scientific theories are proposed, backstories are revealed, very few questions are actually answered and Dipper fails to use Doritos for their intended purpose.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Arc II: Serpent of the Sea

“She properties of electromagnetic radiation can also be applied to weapons,” Miss Tam was saying, her enthusiastic gestures towards the projection screen reminiscent of a windmill, “which can in turn direct heat, mechanical or electrical energy to a target, producing various, sometimes very subtle effects.”

The class stared back at her vacantly, eyes glazed. The only students who seemed to actually be paying attention were Dipper, who was busily jotting down notes as she spoke, as well as the auburn-haired girl sitting across from him. To be fair, it was the last class of the day, and the recent weather had been oppressive, the clouds clustering thickly outside the window bringing promises of thunderstorms. Furthermore, despite her evident passion for physics, Miss Tam was infamous for her tendency to launch into tangents at the flick of a switch. The workings of electromagnetic weapons probably weren’t part of the physics syllabus, and as a matter of fact likely weren’t anywhere near what they were supposed to be learning. Even Dipper was beginning to tire, missing entire sentences as his mind drifted off, wondering whether he’d be able to get back home before it started to pour. Both his parents were too busy to pick him up, and Mabel was staying back for some kind of organisational meeting for an upcoming school event, meaning he’d have to walk back home alone.

“When used against humans, the effects of electromagnetic weapons are actually pretty interesting. They might be used to affect the human nervous system – in other words, our cognition. They could be used to cause the sensation of pain, or induce feelings such as unease and dread. It’s been claimed by some that they hear voices or sounds resembling screaming when under the effect of these weapons.” Dipper’s attention snapped back to what Miss Tam was saying. He began frantically scribbling words down into the margins of his notebook, underlining and circling certain phrases. “We can’t be too certain their claims are true, but human rights and ethics groups are already quite concerned regarding the potential for misuse. Mr Phillips, if you must use your mobile phone, please do so after class.”

Chad scowled, but stuffed his mobile back into his pocket anyway.

Miss Tam eventually moved back to more physics-related topics, and the bell rang some minutes later to signal to the end of school. Students began filing out of the room, chatting amongst themselves about weekend plans. Both Dipper and the auburn-haired girl opposite him lingered behind.

“Uh, excuse me?” Miss Tam looked up eagerly from where she was grabbing notes from the desk and stuffing them into a small bag. “Could I just ask a question?”
“Sure! I can ask you with anything – I mean question – I mean I can help you with any question you want to ask!” she babbled rapidly.

Dipper blinked. “Um. Okay? So, about electromagnetic waves, uh, exactly how do people hear them? I mean, they’re energy, not sound waves, so…”

Miss Tam laughed. “Oh, that’s called the microwave auditory effect. It’s not completely understood, but the main theory is that microwaves become absorbed by tissue in the skull, which creates a wave sensed by the inner ear.”

“So the electromagnetic weapons operate on the same principle?” Dipper asked.

“I would assume so. They’ve actually developed an apparatus for audibly communicating speech through the radio frequency hearing effect, which might be used for covert suggestions and psychological direction. Fascinating stuff.” Dipper’s eyes widened, and he scrawled down several sentences in his notebook. Meanwhile, Miss Tam turned her attention to the auburn-haired girl, who was standing behind Dipper. “Cherie! Would you like to ask a question too?”

“Oh! Yes, this is kind of related to what Dipper was asking, but – since electromagnetic radiation’s around in nature, does this mean our behaviour might be influenced by, like, cosmic energy?”

Miss Tam looked thoughtful. “That’s a possibility. However, considering that we’d pretty much all be affected, I wouldn’t place too much stock in that theory. If it was true, I guess you could equate it to a higher power, though I imagine there would be a great deal of religious controversy around that idea.”

‘Huh.’ Dipper thought. That was… actually a pretty big question. The sort of question which challenged the very existence of free will. Bill probably knew the answer.

“I’m sorry I can’t help you more. But these were really good questions!” Miss Tam smiled, looking immensely pleased that two students in her class had actually been listening.

Dipper and Cherie exited the classroom. Neither of them spoke. The empty corridor was already half-dark, the dull grey rainclouds bearing down upon them repressively.

“So… Miss Tam sure seems to know a lot about physics, huh?” Dipper commented awkwardly, trying to fill the silence.

Cherie smiled slightly. “I know, right? She’s, like, the coolest.”

They lapsed back into silence.

“So, uh, I think I’ve seen you around before.” At the Populars’ table. Looking immensely out of place amongst the jocks and cheerleaders. “Are you Thorne’s… uh…”

“I’m his girlfriend, yeah.” Cherie said, an unidentifiable expression flickering across her face.

“So… How does it feel to have to sit across from Chad Phillips’ ugly mug every day?” Dipper said, and promptly clapped his hand over his mouth. He hadn’t meant to say that out loud.

Cherie gave him a dumbfounded look. And subsequently burst out laughing. “It’s awful.” She wheezed. “Just yesterday, he said something so stupid – I don’t quite remember what – that I just, like, wanted to take my mashed potatoes and hurl them into his face. Seriously have no idea why Thorne sticks with him. He’s such a douchebag.”
“Yeah, I know.” Dipper said, rather stunned that his accidental conversational choice had actually turned out so well.

“Yeah, I guess you would.” She gave him an understanding grin. “Hey, aren’t you Archie’s-“

She was interrupted by a yell further down the corridor. “DIIIPPER!!!!”

… Mabel? Dipper squinted down the darkened hallway. No, that wasn’t Mabel. Mabel didn’t have dark skin or wear braids or- “Dominique? Is that you? What’s wrong?” Dominique looked harried, clutching two pieces of cardboard to her chest.

“Oh thank god you’re here.” Dominique babbled. “I just went to the society room to fetch a book, and when I got there, I found this.” She showed him the two pieces of cardboard, which turned out to be the sign on the LGBT society door. It had been torn in half – but that wasn’t the most disturbing thing about it. Various crude messages and threatening epithets had been scrawled upon it in black marker.

“Wow, that’s just… horrible.” Dipper stared at the vandalised sign, disgusted. “Who would do this?” Well, technically they all probably had a good idea of who was responsible, but plausible deniability was still a thing. “Was it like this when you found it?”

“Well, the writing was there. The tearing it in half thing was all me.” Dominique looked somewhat abashed. “I was pissed off, dammit! I spent so much time on the lettering and making sure it looked presentable, and now someone came along to wreck it. Assholes.”

“Damn.” Cherie leaned down to survey the wrecked poster. “Have you tried, like, telling Principal Principelle? I’m pretty sure this qualifies as a hate crime. They could get in serious trouble for that.”

“Right.” Dominique ran her hands though her hair, looking frazzled. “I should do that. It was just that - when I saw that, my mind pretty much just shut down.”

Cherie sucked in a breath through her teeth, reading the messages scrawled on the sign, black spindly ink crawling across the paper like a hundred spiders. “Yeah, that’s understandable. Just remember, us sensible people’ve got your back. Don’t let some asshat ruin that for you guys.”

“Yeah.” Dipper placed a supportive hand on her back. “I can help you make a new sign, if you like.”

Dominique gave him a shaky smile. “Might just take you up on that offer. Though I guess I should tell the principal first.” With a nod of thanks, she sprinted past them. Dipper and Cherie watched her leave.

“Man, poor Dominique. She gets so much shit on a regular basis, dunno how she puts up with it. Anyway, as I was saying-“ Cherie was cut off a second time by a large arm wrapping around her shoulder. “Oh, hi Thorne.”

“Hey babe.” Thorne whispered.

Dipper tried not to cringe. Who said babe in this day and age?

He slipped away, and Cherie gave him a distracted wave as she and Thorne became occupied with other matters. Which, in non-euphemistic terms, meant they were making out in the middle of the hallway. Well. There was something to be said about teenage hormones.
Since their parents had arrived home so late, Dipper and Mabel were obliged to help them make dinner. Well, Dipper and their mother were the two actually making dinner, while Mabel and their father were currently engaged in a mock-swordfight with French breadsticks.

“En garde!” Mabel called out with a flourish, jabbing her breadstick into their father’s chest.

Their father swayed back, clutching his hand to his chest dramatically. “Alas, foul villain, thou hast slain me!” He fell backwards in slow motion, one arm outstretched, shaking his fist. “Curse you!”

“Haha!” Mabel laughed in triumph, planting one foot on their father’s prone body. “I stand victorious!”

“And for my dying words, my adversary, I am obliged to tell you the truth. Mabel Pines… I am… your father.”

Mabel clapped her hands to her cheeks. “Nooooo!”

“If you two are quite done,” their mother said, nudging their father out of the way with a foot, “can one of you take these scraps out to the pig?” Despite their initial reservations, their parents had actually grown quite attached to Waddles. He continued to live in the backyard sty, all his cares and wants fulfilled by their attentive parents. Dipper glanced outside, where Waddles was rolling about lazily from side to side on the ground. His tail flicked complacently. He seemed to be having a nice time of it.

“So!” Mabel said, plonking her elbows down on the kitchen bench and watching Dipper slice radishes. “Guess who’s on the committee for the school dance?”

“You are.” Dipper said, not taking his eyes off the chopping board.

“It’s gonna be totally awesome.” Mabel wriggled about excitedly. “We’re planning to do an under-the-sea theme. Since I’m head of design, I’ll be the one arranging all the decorations! I’ve already ordered a shipment of glitter!”

“Sounds like it’s right up your alley.” Dipper commented, stirring the soup.

“I know, right? I can’t wait to get started! First thing tomorrow, I’m commandeering the art room and grabbing supplies.” Mabel sighed dreamily. “You know, I was doing some research for artistic reference, and all that under-the-sea stuff reminded me of something. Someone.”

“Who?” Dipper asked, pouring some oil into a pan and heating it up.

“Mermando!”

“Who?” Dipper repeated, sliding some diced vegetables into the pan.

“You know, that cute merman? The one I dated in Gravity Falls? The one you reverse-CPRed?” Mabel stared out of the window wistfully. “Alas, Mermando. You and I were not meant to be. Like two ships passing in the night.”

“Mhm.” Dipper said, adding some water and leaving the vegetables to simmer.

***

Dipper tapped the wall impatiently, mobile phone at his ear. He’d dialled the Mystery Shack three times already. Grunkle Stan was weirdly averse to answering the phone during the Shack’s closing
hours, grumbling something about giving the customers bad habits. Eventually, on the fifth dial, the receiver was picked up. A gravelly voice filtered over the line.

“You have reached the answering machine of the Mystery Shack. Please leave a message-“

“Grunkle Stan, I know it’s you.” Dipper interrupted.

“Huh- oh- what- Oh, it’s you, kiddo.” Grunkle Stan chuckled. “Sorry about that, some lawyers’ve been bugging us lately. Geez, you sell someone one fake archaeological artefact and you suddenly get slammed with the mother of all lawsuits. So, what does my favourite nephew want? How’s Mabel?”

“Mabel’s good. I think she found another boyfriend. And actually, I sorta wanted to talk to your brother. If he’s available?”

“Oh. Right.” Grunkle Stan sounded a little disappointed. “Just a moment.” There was a shuffling noise, and then a different voice came over the receiver.

“Dipper? Is that you? Is there something you wanted?”

“Oh. Uh, hi.” Dipper began self-consciously. “I just wanted to ask… about something in the journal?”

“Go on.”

“Oh, well. In the journal, I saw something about the nine circles. Is that referring to the nine circles of heaven or hell?”

“Why, yes – that is, it’s referring to the nine circles of hell. The ones in heaven are called spheres, I think. Well, I wasn’t exactly in the most rational state of mind when I was writing that, so I might be wrong. Really can’t quite remember why I wrote it down. Why do you ask?”

“Oh. Uh, I was just at a cathedral, and their stained glass window was of the nine… uh… circles and spheres. Just wanted to confirm if they were the same thing.”

“Yes. I think so.” A pause. “Was there anything else you wanted to ask?”

Dipper cast around frantically for the questions which had been crowding his mind just a little while ago. “Um, actually! We have a similar window in our living room. Only it has ten circles, not nine. Do you know what that could mean?”

The voice on the other end was considering. “It could be just a coincidence. Or perhaps, the ten circles in your window could correspond to the ten sections of Purgatory.”

“Purgatory?”

“Yes, it’s what Christians refer to as where souls destined for heaven go after one dies. There, they go through trials which ‘purge’ them of their sins – hence, Purgatory. It’s typically depicted as a mountain. The first two sections are called ante-purgatory, where those who were excommunicated from the church or those who repented of their sins just before death are located. They are prevented from entering purgatory until they have waited a period of time equivalent to their lives on earth.

Then, the next seven levels correspond to the seven sins: Pride, envy, wrath, sloth, greed, gluttony and lust. As I mentioned before, souls must undergo trials at each level in order to be purged of these sins and admitted to heaven.”
“What about the last section?”

“That would be the Earthly Paradise, or the Garden of Eden. The purified souls prepare themselves there to enter heaven.”

“Huh. That’s, uh, certainly something.”

“It certainly is.”

Awkward silence.

“Um. And also? I just wanted to ask you about the nine circles of hell. About, uh, Satan?”

“What about it?” And was it just Dipper’s imagination, or was the tone on the other end a little guarded?

“Oh. Well, somebody told me that he had three faces, which were – pale yellow, red and black? So I was just wondering…”

“Has Bill woken up?”

“Uh. I’m sorry?”

“I asked, has Bill woken up?”

“No-no! I mean, uh, not really?” Yes he had, and left behind a trail of carnage to boot. “Oh, wow, look at the time! I really must be going!”

“Dipper-“ the rest of the sentence was lost as Dipper slammed the phone down, pressing a hand to his head. He really didn’t like the idea of keeping secrets from the people who’d proven time and again they’d rush to help him in a heartbeat, but the problem was, well – he wasn’t too sure what the problem was. The past week, Bill had remained stubbornly unresponsive, and had refused to respond to Dipper’s demands for an explanation. Dipper had tried shaking him, tried yelling at him, even tried prying his eye open, but to no avail. Bill had even refused to respond to the presence of Cinnamon Toast Crunch, and it wasn’t like there were any other foodstuffs Bill would react to…

…Wait.

An idea began to take shape in Dipper’s head. It was quite possibly his stupidest, most foolhardy idea yet. But hey, at least it would fit in with all his other stupid ideas where Bill was concerned.

***

Dipper huffed slightly, hands on his knees. It was a wet, dreary morning, and even the heat of strenuous physical exercise failed to hold the cold at bay for very long. The previous evening had been one of howling winds and heavy rain pelting at the window, as though it was demanding to be let in. However, this wasn’t enough to stop Angela, and by extension Dipper, from pursuing their regular morning workout. The ground was slippery and damp, and Dipper’s clothes were smeared with mud. At least he’d brought a change of clothes.

Angela jogged to a halt beside him. “Think that’s enough for today?” She looked completely unaffected by both the freezing weather and the exercise.

“Yeah, I think so.” Dipper threw on a sports jacket, gulping some water out of his thermos. Exercise and hot water didn’t usually mix, but today was cold enough he’d made an exception. He squinted as
a bunch of lanky, sun-tanned boys wearing only thin T-shirts walked past, loudly discussing the recent state of the surf. Firstly, he was pretty sure the closest beaches to Chapelwick still required a half-day’s drive to reach. Secondly, wasn’t it too cold to be wearing those clothes? Thirdly…

“Hey, Angela?” she made a noise of affirmation. She was doing some cool-down stretches. Dipper was a little bemused at how dedicated she was to physical activity. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but I’m pretty sure that the Groups didn’t include surfer dudes. Also, I’m fairly certain one of these guys was a Goth last week, last time I checked.”

“Eh.” Angela shrugged, switching to her other foot. “The Groups change up sometimes. Like, maybe there’ll be a knitting craze one month and a whole bunch of people’ll be strolling around leaving wool everywhere. And then the next month they’ll split up and move on to different Groups. It can get annoying, like that time we had the wannabe-idols. They wouldn’t stop singing, and they sounded awful and everyone else couldn’t wait for them to move on. But I guess that’s how trends work.”

No. No, that was not at all how trends worked. But still, Angela had been in Chapelwick longer than he had, so she was probably more familiar with how these things operated. Dipper wondered what it must have been like, growing up in Chapelwick. He straightened as he recalled the question he’d been meaning to ask her for the past week.

“No. No, that was not at all how trends worked. But still, Angela had been in Chapelwick longer than he had, so she was probably more familiar with how these things operated. Dipper wondered what it must have been like, growing up in Chapelwick. He straightened as he recalled the question he’d been meaning to ask her for the past week.”

“By the way, have you ever heard of someone called Seraph Ironwood?”

Angela paused. And then went right back to her stretches. Dipper almost missed how something rather like sadness flashed briefly across her face. “Yeah, I knew her. We grew up together. How did you meet her?” Her tone was casual, but there was an undercurrent of strain beneath it. Like the thin ice over a body of water threatening to crack.

“I met her at the cathedral when I was checking out that weeping statue.” And then again when she knocked out his sister and broke two of his bones. “I think it’s the one she owns?”

“Oh, so she’s back.” Angela said, seemingly more to herself than to Dipper. “What do you think of her?”

“Oh, she’s. Not very expressive.” Terrifying. Kind of really violent. “Not sure if I’d like to meet her in a dark alley at midnight.” Or in the darkened catacombs of the cathedral, for that matter.

Angela let out a quiet snort. “That’s Seraph, alright.”

“So you two were friends? Was she always like that?”

“Kind of, yeah.” Angela stood up, swinging her hands back and forth. “She was always that gloomy loner. Didn’t really like speaking. Though she was a lot nicer to me than she was to other people. She was actually the one who got me into training in the first place.”

“She was nice to you? How did that work?”

“Ahh, well.” Angela’s ears turned a little pink. “Uh, well, she’s really good at taking care of people. It doesn’t seem like she likes it, but there was this one time I got sick, and she basically broke into my house to bring me food and clean my room, even though I kept telling her there was no need. Though from the way she was complaining, you’d think I’d forced her to be there.”

Remembering how Seraph had carried him out of the catacombs, changed his clothes and pretty much forced her care onto him, Dipper had to admit that didn’t sound too far fetched. “And did she
That’s a funny story, actually. Seraph was the first person I came out to. I was really nervous about it – she’s pretty religious, you know. Though I never actually heard her saying anything, good or bad, about gay people. So, after psyching myself out for a week, I finally managed to tell her I was a lesbian. And all she said was, “Okay.” Just like that, and then she changed the subject. Neither of us brought it up afterwards, and I thought she might not have actually been listening, but I didn’t dare ask. Besides, it was still better than my parents, who basically tried to ‘introduce’ a new guy to me every week. But then half a year later, when I publicly came out, well, there was this senior called Buzz, who was in the same grade as Seraph. He was basically Chad. Groups might come and go, but there’s a Chad every generation, it seems.”

“Maybe they’re overcompensating for their awful names.” Dipper suggested.

“Ha, maybe. So – I wasn’t there, but apparently Buzz was saying some absolutely awful things. Something about lesbians and ‘corrective rape’. And then – Dominique was there, she was a junior at the time - she told me that Seraph didn’t say a word or even change her expression, she just picked him up and literally flung him out the window.”

Dipper burst out laughing. “Holy shit. That is – I can actually see her doing that.”

“The window wasn’t that high off the ground, so he wasn’t too hurt. But Seraph was suspended for a week. Technically that would’ve been grounds for expulsion, but I have the feeling Principal Principelle was involved.” Angela smiled fondly, twisting her ponytail in her hand. “Good ol’ Principelle. And when I visited Seraph and tried to thank her, she just brushed it off. Though the next afternoon she pressured me into learning self-defence. Martial arts are kind of a hobby of hers.”

“I… see.” Dipper tried not to cringe at the remembered pain. “Though… when did she leave Chapelwick?”

“Oh, that was… that was when her parents passed away. It was the talk of the town for a while. Mr and Mrs Ironwood went out for a drive one night and didn’t come back. Eventually, they discovered their car at the bottom of Terrace Lake. There was a huge search, but their bodies were never found.” Angela twisted her hands together. “Seraph left Chapelwick after that. I tried to call her, but she never answered. After a while, I gave up. Didn’t want to bother her.”

“Oh.” Dipper looked down at the ground. “Though now that she’s back here, maybe you could try…”

“Nah.” Angela shook her head. “If Seraph wanted to talk, she’d reach out first. That’s the kind of person she is.”

“I see.” Dipper said softly. He observed how she fiddled nervously with her ponytail, a sad smile on her face as she continued to reminisce. He blinked as a thought occurred to him. No. No, that couldn’t possibly be right. After all, Angela was such a fundamentally decent person, there was no way-

“Angela, did you… uh… did you like her?”

Angela whipped around to face him, cheeks flushing. “No! I mean – not in the like way, there’s no way that-“

“Oh my god. Oh my god. You and Seraph?” No matter how he looked at it, it just felt impossible. Like imagining a bottle of water falling in love with the colour magenta. It didn’t make sense, even
on an abstract level.

“Not like that!” Angela made a high-pitched noise of mortification as she buried her face in her hands. It did little to hide her burning ears. “So maybe I might have hero-worshipped her or something. But I never fooled myself into thinking she was a good person.”

Dipper waited for her to calm down before responding, “What do you mean?”

“Well, she’s not a good person. She’s rude and she’s got a mean streak a mile wide. And sure, she does good stuff sometimes, but it sort of feels like she’s doing it out of a sense of obligation. Like someone just sat her down and told her ‘This is what good people do.’ That being said, that might be why I like her. Like, maybe she wouldn’t be Seraph if she was a good person.” Angela buried her head back in her hands. “Argh, you probably don’t get it. It sounds weird to me too, don’t worry.”

A memory involuntarily flashed past the back of Dipper’s mind.

*Gravity Falls burning, all glowing embers and flames. The stench of destruction and ruin. The devastation of all he’d come to care about. And yet it wasn’t these visions of annihilation which was making Dipper’s heart clench, his breathing grow shallow, tears filling his eyes.*

“No.” Dipper said quietly. “I think I know what you mean.”

***

Miss Tam was ranting about Klein bottles. What that had to do with their upcoming group assignments was beyond Dipper, who stared at the leaflets she’d handed out at the beginning of class as though they were going to sprout teeth and bite him. He hated group assignments. It didn’t help that he was usually the one who ended up doing all the work. He’d always spent the evening before they were due jittery with caffeine, frantically rewriting his teammates’ last-minute submissions.

… Okay, so maybe he was something of a perfectionist. But that didn’t change the fact that group assignments sucked.

He shoved the papers into his bag. His fingers brushed a familiar surface. One that was neither smooth nor rough, the brief touch sparking a slight sensation at the triangular scar on his chest. His eyes narrowed. Although Bill had been unresponsive all week, he’d also begun popping up in places he wasn’t supposed to be. Sometimes Dipper would enter his room to find Bill propped up on his desk, eye closed and motionless. One memorable morning, he had stumbled into the bathroom, bleary-eyed from sleep, only to find that Bill had positioned himself in the perfect place to be reflected just over Dipper’s shoulder in the mirror. He’d had to convince his parents that his alarmed yelling was due to a stubbed toe.

Nonetheless, this was the first time (to Dipper’s knowledge) that Bill had decided to sneak out of the house in his backpack. He frowned, zipping the pack up. So maybe Bill might be getting a little bored just holed up like that in his closet. But in that case, why was he still refusing to talk to Dipper?

Dipper’s attention was diverted by the commotion across his table. Following Miss Tam’s announcement of the upcoming group assignments, Chad Phillips had strategically insinuated himself in the seat next to Cherie, and was currently needling her into working with him. Granted, he hadn’t directly asked her yet, but his ‘hints’ were growing increasingly heavy-handed, as though he was working himself up to that point. Cherie, for her part, was staring straight at Dipper, brows slightly furrowed, as if to say *get me out of here.*

Dipper looked nervously at Chad, then looked back at Cherie. Reminded himself that if he could
heal from having a dozen sharp rods of metal stabbed right through him, he could probably heal from whatever Chad could dish out.

“Hey, Cherie, would you like to work with me for the assignment?”

“Sure, Dipper, I’d love to.”

And that was that.

Sure, the glare Chad shot at Dipper made him feel rather like a small field mouse before an incensed viper, but at least Cherie seemed pretty competent at physics. So maybe working with her wouldn’t be so bad.

Dipper’s hope was affirmed further as the class began to file out of the classroom. Cherie half-jogged to catch up with him, shooting him a grin. “Hey, thanks for helping me out there.”

“Uh, no problem. So I guess we should be assigning parts-“

“Actually,” Cherie interrupted. “When is the assignment due?”

“In a month, but-“

“A month? Let’s see if we can finish it in, like, a week. The library’s open until late. Do you have anything on in the afternoons?”

Dipper stared at her. Cherie raised her eyebrows. He had the feeling that working with her was going to be a very different experience.

***

Chapelwick had one major mall, located right in the town’s centre. It was conveniently located en route to Dipper’s house, meaning he often stopped by to stock up on the necessities. And sometimes a few extra things. Unlike the rest of the town, it was gleaming, slick and contemporary, an incongruous intrusion upon the old-fashioned, dignified townhouses of Chapelwick. Practically every surface within the mall was sharply reflective, and more than once Dipper had almost slipped on its polished marble tiles.

Dipper shook both himself and his umbrella off as he hurried past its glass sliding doors. It was late afternoon, he and Cherie having spent the past few hours huddled in the library, efficiently making their way through their assigned work. They had spent this first afternoon researching, making notes which Dipper had then collated into one document. This was definitely the most productive groupwork session he’d ever been a part of, and it left Dipper quite optimistic regarding their later endeavours.

Stopping by first at the newsagency, Dipper began to cast about for any stationery he might need. Pens, pencils, correction tape… his attention was caught by a notebook sitting on the shelf directly above these assorted implements. Like the Journals, it was leather-bound, with metal hoops fastening the paper to the exterior, which was quite sturdy from the looks of it. However, what drew Dipper’s attention was the small upside-down triangle embedded into the cover. In juxtaposition to the thick black leather, the reflective gold decoration shone eye-catchingly. Before Dipper realised what he was doing, he had already picked up the notebook.

“Hey there, Dipper! Fancy meeting you here!” Dipper turned to see Dominique, looking rather cheerier than he had seen her last. She had a large roll of white cardboard tucked under one arm, and
was rifling though a set of paintbrushes with the other.

“Oh, hi Dominique. Is that for the new sign?” Dipper gestured at the roll.

Dominique gave him a half-smile. “Yeah, pretty much. Went to Principal Principelle yesterday, like Cherie suggested. She couldn’t do much, of course, but she said she’d look into it.” She exhaled as she turned back to the paintbrushes. “Man, but art supplies are ridiculously expensive nowadays. Eurgh, what a pain. Screw whichever stupid jerk decided to pull this crap on us.”

“Maybe you could go to the art room and use the stuff there?” Dipper suggested, remembering yesterday’s conversation with Mabel. “I mean, if it’s just one sign…”

Dominique stared at him for a while, before slapping herself in the head. “Right. The art room. How the hell could I have forgotten?” She smiled wryly, clapping Dipper in the shoulder. “Thanks for reminding me.”

“No problem. So you still don’t know who might have done it?”

“I know they’re probably a huge jerk. Speaking of huge jerks,” Dominique said, speaking slowly and meaningfully, “a little birdie told me that a certain Chadwick Phillips had his face punched in by one Thorne Lee today at lunch.” Her eyes sparkled, and Dipper was fairly certain it wasn’t out of the usual joy she derived from spreading gossip.

Curiosity prompted Dipper to ask, “But why would Thorne punch him? Aren’t they friends?”

Dominique shrugged. “I’m not sure, but apparently Chad was badmouthing Thorne’s girlfriend, and Thorne just lost it.” That made sense, considering what had transpired earlier in physics class. And also explained why Chad hadn’t made any attempts to make Dipper’s school life miserable like he seemed hell-bent on doing to Archie. He had probably been preoccupied with the fact that Thorne, of all people, had punched him.

Which was probably something to be thankful for. But Dipper frowned. “Thorne doesn’t seem like the sort to do that.” He hadn’t really interacted much with the guy, but despite his status as a jock and a member of the football club, as well as his awful taste in acquaintances, Thorne didn’t seem to be a violent guy. The few times they had interacted within a classroom context, Thorne had been almost shockingly well-mannered.

“Yeah, you’re right.” Dominique hummed. “But I guess maybe he’s changed? I mean, five years ago you wouldn’t have recognised him. He and Archie used to be best friends.”

First Angela and Seraph, now Thorne and Archie? Why did everyone he meet seem to have some kind of history? “What was he like?”

“Oh, he was ridiculously polite. I swear he couldn’t walk without apologising to the ground he was stepping on. Which is why I have absolutely no idea what he’s doing with a douchebag like Chad.” Dominique frowned. “Though Thorne punching Chad in the face might be a sign that he’s finally returned to his senses.” She sighed heavily, then checked her watch.

“Damn, it’s getting late. Gotta go. Looks like the rain’s gonna get even heavier this evening. Actually, Dipper?” she asked, sounding contemplative. “Is it just me, or does it feel like there’s gonna be a storm?”

… Now that she mentioned it, Dipper could feel it too. Despite the weather forecasts providing no indication of thunderstorms, never mind the fact that it wasn’t storm season in the first place, the atmosphere this evening seemed to have been charged with a sort of static energy. It tingled at
Dipper’s skin like the ripples of a wave, like the stinging breeze of the sea. “Yeah, I’ve been getting that feeling as well.”

“Hm. Weird. Well, anyway, I’ve gotta go. See you tomorrow!” Dipper waved back in response to her farewell. She wasn’t the only one who was going to have to hurry back home before it started pouring. After picking up some more pens, Dipper made his way towards the cash register.

Before he left the mall, Dipper made sure to pop into the grocery store to pick up a bag of Doritos.

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Combing his fingers through his hair, Dipper reached down to pull his socks off and toss them in the hamper as he passed the laundry room. He hadn’t managed to completely avoid the storm, and had ended up stepping in a small pond masquerading as a puddle. Outside, the rain was hammering at the window, as though demanding entrance. Fortunately, despite its age, their house was sturdy enough to hold its own against the elements.

The plastic bag in his hand crinkled as he set it on the desk, pulling his recently-bought items out. He then rifled through his backpack, pulling Bill out by the top hat and settling him on his desk, propping him up against the wall. Bill’s eye was closed, and he stayed as still as stone, as he had continued to do for the past week.

Dipper opened the notebook to the first page. He tugged the packet of Doritos open, pulling a chip out and popping it into his mouth with a crunch. He spared a glance at Bill, who, as expected, hadn’t responded.

Testing his pen, Dipper began to write. In the top margin, he wrote the word ‘REDCAPS’, underlining it twice. He propped his chin up on his hand, munching on a few more chips as he tried to figure out how to start.

_I first encountered these creatures in the catacombs of Chapelwick Cathedral. Although initially fairly affable, these gnome-lookalikes quickly became hostile-_ Dipper nibbled on the corner of a corn chip thoughtfully as he continued to write.

- although their hostility may have been, in part, due to the fact they hadn’t eaten for an extended period of time. Unfortunately for me, it appears their diet involves the consumption of humans. Note: in some circumstances, they may resort to cannibalism.

Licking his fingers to chase the remaining crumbs, Dipper dug his hand back into the bag of Doritos. He popped one into his mouth corner-first, flicking it with his tongue as he mused.

_Appearance: Very small males of advanced age, approx. 15 inches in height. V. similar to Gravity Falls’ gnomes. Red eyes, sharp teeth and fingernails (claws?), carry iron pikestaffs._

Dipper attempted a very rough sketch of what they looked like, but it soon became clear that an artist’s livelihood was not within Dipper’s perview. He chanced a glance upwards, and – well, well, what would you know, it looked that someone was actually awake. Bill Cipher’s eye was open, and he was staring – no, glaring - at Dipper so intensely that Dipper really should have had a hole bored into his skull by now.

_Habitat: Prefer forested areas, but do not seem averse to dwelling underground, if the group I found living in the catacombs was any indication. Possible issue of deforestation driving them to live closer to more densely populated areas? Must look into this._
As Dipper continued to casually munch on Doritos, Bill’s glare sharpened, sclera turning black, as if to say, *Kid, you are walking a very high rope right now. And I’m about to push you off.* Well, Dipper had a history of making reckless decisions whenever the ex-dream demon was concerned. Trying to provoke Bill by eating suspiciously triangular-shaped food was just another addition to a long line of stupidity.

*Diet:* Are carnivorous, with a penchant for human flesh. Uncertain if they are willing to eat meat of other animals. Actual eating processes uncertain – at least part of the reason they kill humans is to keep their titular red caps stained red with blood – without which they wither away and die. Thankfully, I was not in a position to determine if they also actually eat the flesh of their victims.

Slowly, deliberately, Dipper bit off each of the corners of a corn chip, until it formed a hexagonal shape. Bill flashed a dangerous shade of red. He did the same with the next chip. With the third, he nibbled carefully, biting off bits of the chip until it formed an almost-perfect circle. The demon sitting across from him practically vibrated with rage.

*Personality:* Personable and outgoing, though I am uncertain whether this might merely be a ruse to lure their victims in. Seem to have a dislike of gnomes, referring to them contemptuously as ‘vegans’-

Dipper slowly, leisurely licked up the narrow side of another Dorito chip, keeping an eye on Bill. To his surprise, Bill didn’t seem to be getting angrier. In fact, his red colour seemed to be fading…?

- They speak with an accent, although I cannot identify exactly which (Scottish? Irish? Australian?). Redcaps have a tendency to attack without warning. They are surprisingly strong and agile, unusually so for their size. This makes Redcap attacks particularly dangerous, as it is easy to underestimate them.

Interest piqued, Dipper continued to lick at the triangular corn chip. This time, he laved his tongue up and down the flat side of the chip, making sure to catch all the flavour. Bill was no longer red, instead… was he… was he glowing? That probably wasn’t a good sign, but now that he’d already Dipper might as well carry this… whatever-this-was to its conclusion.

Bill continued to stare at him as he persisted in tonguing at the poor, abused Dorito. It had by now occurred to Dipper that he was pretty much frenching the French fry, and okay, this was seriously weird, but now it was too late to stop and admit defeat. Although it did explain why Bill looked more curious than infuriated. He sucked one corner of the triangle into his mouth, making a quiet slurping noise as he withdrew it. Flushing a little in embarrassment, Dipper cautiously returned Bill’s gaze as he lightly raked his teeth over one of its sides-

Dipper let out a yelp of pain as his notebook was snatched off the desk and smashed over his head with surprising force. He opened his eyes to the sound of the closet door slamming shut. Both Bill and the bag of Doritos was nowhere to be seen.

He suppressed a sigh. Okay, so maybe Dipper had pushed Bill a little too with that ‘molesting triangular food with his tongue’ thing. That didn’t mean-

His thought processes were interrupted by an exclamation from within the closet. “HOLY SHIT kid, these mini-me’s are FUCKING DELICIOUS. Geez, no wonder you were pretty much making out with them! I’d make out with them too, if that wouldn’t be incredibly narcissistic of me! Haha, JUST KIDDING, the only thing stopping me from making sweet, sweet love to this bag of cheese flavoured mini-me’s is my lack of a mouth!”

Was he… talking?
Dipper flung open the closet doors. Bill was leaning against the wall motionlessly, one eye staring balefully at him. The bag of Doritos rested on the opposite side of the closet. A little disheartened, Dipper closed the doors to the closet again.

He drew his notebook back towards him, and continued to write.

Chapter End Notes

Time for the second arc! I was considering splitting this chapter, but decided otherwise as it was ridiculously talk-y and exposition-y. But is that Billdip I spy on the horizon?

Nah, it was probably just a fluke.
Chapter Summary

Dipper is roped into an investigation. Bill drinks coffee.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Yes, but it’s highly unlikely that the US could have engineered the first incident in the Gulf of Tonkin.” Archie tapped his finger impatiently against the desk. “I mean, sure, I’ll admit the second sounds pretty sketchy-“

“I’m not saying the whole thing was made up.” Dipper protested. “But c’mon, the intelligence itself says that the second attack didn’t happen. There’s nothing debatable about that. I mean, it’s pretty reasonable - the analysts made errors which were misinterpreted. So basically the Johnson Administration was launching retaliatory strikes based on faulty information.”

“Yes, but you’re trying to say that the original attacks never happened at all, which is completely wrong-“

“That’s not what I’m arguing at all! I was just saying that-“

The bell rang, and as was now their habit, they filed out of the classroom quarrelling the whole way. Their routine back-and-forth was interrupted as Archie raised his eyebrows, taking a few steps back. Dipper followed his line of gaze to see Chad, skulking down the hallway like a recently kicked bulldog, a dark purple bruise prominently visible on one cheek. He glared at them as he noticed their stare, but didn’t attempt to say anything insulting or otherwise mock them.

“Whoa, what happened to Chad?” Archie asked, as soon as the jock was out of earshot, although he still glanced over his shoulder nervously once he had spoken. “Quite a shiner he’s sporting there.”

“Thorne punched him yesterday for shit-talking Cherie.” Dipper informed him.

“Thorne did? That’s not something I ever thought I’d hear.” They trailed onto the end of the line waiting within the cafeteria. As usual, the groups were neatly squared away onto each of their individual tables. However, the surfer dudes had overrun the table where the band kids once sat. If Dipper looked carefully enough, he could see that some band kids had divided themselves among the other groups, meticulously changing their outfits and behaviours to fit in. Okay, that was weird. That was Stepford-level weird. “I guess he’s changed, though. Did you know me and him used to be best friends?”

Dipper blinked, forgetting about the emergence of the surfer dudes. A question about that had just been on the tip of his tongue. “Yeah. Dominique told me. What happened between you two? I mean, if you don’t mind me asking.” He added hastily.

“Eh.” Archie shrugged. “The usual. Grew apart when we reached high school, he got fit and popular, I stayed the nerd. I mean, he doesn’t usually join in Chad’s asshole behaviour, but he doesn’t stop him either.”
“Huh, so it was like that.” Dipper went quiet as the lunchlady ladled some pasta onto his tray. “You know, after hearing about Angela and Seraph, I sorta expected a bit more drama.”

“Angela and Seraph? Oh man, did you meet Seraph? At the cathedral? I’d pay to see that.” Yes, Dipper had, and no, he’d probably not like to see it, given that Dipper had subsequently suffered a few broken bones and various grievous injuries at her hand. However, Dipper deliberately omitted the latter part from his confirmation. “And no, it was nothing like their breakup.”

“Their… breakup?”

“It was totally a breakup. I mean, Angela basically locked herself up in her room and wrote depressing poetry, and knowing Seraph, she probably one-upped her by writing, I don’t know, a depressing novel or something like that. Which makes it so shitty that Seraph hasn’t even tried to contact her, and Angela’s too shy to try reaching out first.” Archie scowled at the ground. “Anyway, going back to Thorne, I get the feeling that it was probably his parents’ fault. Like, they always kept pressuring him to be their perfect little boy. Perfect grades, perfect accomplishments, perfect manners. So I guess joining up with Chad was sort of like his way of rebelling. And that’s why I’m not that pissed off at him. Still pissed off, but I’m mostly just sorry for him.”

“That makes sense.” Dipper said after a while. “…This might sound weird, but why does it sound like all your parents are assholes? I mean, Angela told me about hers, you’ve mentioned yours, and now there’s Thorne.”

Archie laughed humourlessly. “Maybe because we were all part of the same church group. It was like a congregation of the most religious bigots in Chapelwick, and us kids pretty much bonded over mutual hatred of our parents. And then two of the kids turned out gay, and one of the boys realised he was actually a girl, and that drove us all even closer thanks to how our parents handled the situation. I mean, I guess you could maybe make an exception for Dominique’s parents. They had to be dragged kicking and screaming even to acknowledge her as a girl, sure, but apparently their only condition for letting her transition was that her new name had to be close to her original. Which was miles better than how Angela and my parents were dealing with it.”

“That… seriously sucks.” Dipper placed a sympathetic hand on his shoulder. “So Dominique was part of that church too? Does that mean you all basically grew up together?”

“Yeah. If I recall correctly…” Archie counted up on his fingers, “So it was basically me, Angela, Dominique, Seraph, Thorne and his girlfriend Cherie.”

“You were friends with Cherie as well?” Okay, so everyone he knew also knew each other. That wasn’t too weird, right? Wasn’t like Chapelwick was that big… no, it was still pretty weird. Though it explained why Cherie seemed so familiar with Dominique that time with the sign.

“Yeah, though I wasn’t as close to her as I was with the others. At least she seems to have common sense. I know that she and Dominique get along pretty well. Apparently she’s been trying to pressure him into getting back with the rest of us, but I guess he thought-“

Archie’s sentence was interrupted by a yell. “DIPPERRRRR!!!”

Dipper squinted. Was that Mabel? Or was it Dominique? No, definitely Mabel this time.

“Dipper thank god I found you over here oh no it’s so horrible they won’t let anyone in now everything is RUINED!” Mabel grabbed Dipper’s shoulders, shaking him as she babbled incomprehensibly. “Oh man oh man you have got to help!”
“Whoa, whoa, Mabel, calm down!” Dipper said, a little spooked. “What’s wrong? Did someone get hurt?”

“No it’s worse than that! It’s absolutely horrible!” Mabel leaned in, voice hushed and expression serious. “Somebody vandalised… the art room.”

Dipper deflated. “Oh, is that all?”

“Is that all? Is that all?” Mabel repeated, her tone pitching higher. “Dipper, this is serious! Now I can’t use it to prepare the decorations for the school dance! This is a travesty. A travesty.” She made a dramatic swooning motion.

However, seventeen years of being her twin meant Dipper was well-versed in responding to her dramatics. “So the art room got vandalised, and now no one’s allowed in, right? That’s not a big problem. Why not just make the decorations at home? I mean, we’ve got plenty of art gear. And glitter.” Their house was full to bursting with Mabel’s collection of glitter. The front door practically leaked glitter some days.

“No, it’s the principle of the thing.” Mabel puffed up. “Do you know what this is?”

“… A travesty?” Dipper hazarded a guess.

“No, it’s an act of sabotage. Somebody obviously wants to ruin the school dance. So I need you—” here, she jabbed a finger into Dipper’s chest, “—to figure out what evil wrongdoer could possibly perform such a heinous deed, and why!”

“It was probably some stupid kid who wanted attention, Mabel.” Dipper sighed. “Besides, if they’re not letting anyone in, how am I meant to investigate? Can’t really figure out what’s going on without any idea of what the room looks like.”

“Oh. I forgot about that.” Mabel narrowed her eyes in concentration, tapping a cheek with a finger. “So we need to figure out a way to sneak you in…”

“Actually,” Archie, who had been watching their back-and-forth with some amusement, finally said, “I ran into Dominique earlier today. She was pretty much throwing a royal fit. Apparently she went into the art room early this morning, and discovered the vandalism. Kept yelling something about how destiny was trying to thwart her at every turn.”

“Wait, so Dominique was the one who discovered the vandalism?” Dipper raised his eyebrows, before he remembered yesterday’s conversation. “She must’ve been planning to grab some materials to make the new LGBT society room sign.” It’d been his suggestion, too. Eerie coincidence, that.

Mabel jumped up and down. “You should go investigate! Cross-examine some witnesses, Detective Dipper!” She suddenly paused, lifting her head into the air and scrutinising her surroundings like an inquisitive meerkat. “And while you’re at it, can you try figure out what that weird smell is? I’ve been smelling something strange all day.”

“It’s actually attorney. Attorneys cross-examine witnesses.” Archie corrected her. “And yeah, I thought it was just my imagination, but can you guys smell something… fishy?”

Dipper sniffed the air. Now that they mentioned it, the air did smell subtly off. Like their garden after their parents had poured that clear blue fertiliser concentrate over the flowerbeds. Or their kitchen that time a five-year-old Mabel decided a frozen fish was too pretty for eating and quietly snuck it behind the fridge, with the intention of defrosting it so it would come back to life “just like in the cartoon with the caveman and the dinosaurs!” Their parents had given them a long talk about
hygiene and the fact that frozen fish “don’t come back to life, now please stop crying, Mabel.”

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Dipper hadn’t needed to look very far to find Dominique – in fact, Dominique was the one who found him. He was poking around the science wing of the school, which was favoured by the senior students for the main reason that the shadowy alcoves of the dimly lit hallways were rarely patrolled by teachers, making them the perfect place to engage in… rather more private activities. In less-euphemistic terms, Dipper was now vaguely scarred for life and wondering whether he’d missed a few critical stages of puberty, because he could not for the life of him understand why people would do that in a public place. Therefore, he was rather relieved to turn a corner and immediately be swept up in a whirlwind of braids and bright orange fabric as Dominique grabbed him and started gabbling something about how she could swear somebody was deliberately trying to sabotage her efforts.

“I dunno,” Dipper finally managed once he’d recovered from her sudden appearance. “I still think it was probably some dumb kid who wanted attention. Mabel pretty much said the same thing – that someone was trying to interfere with the school dance. I’d say your theory’s a little likelier, but it’s probably still a coincidence. I kinda doubt the person who vandalised the sign would have the foresight to vandalise the art room too.”

Dominique frowned. “But what if they just decided to, I don’t know, go on a vandalism spree? Like, they’d defaced a sign, why not go the whole hog?”

“Yeah, but then why the art room and not the LGBT Society room?” Dipper reasoned.

Dominique immediately deflated. “Good point. Maybe I didn’t think that one through.”

“Do you know what the graffiti looked like? Mabel roped me into investigating, but they’re not letting anyone in.”

“You’d do anything for your sister, huh?” Dominique grinned warmly. “Well, you’re lucky. I actually whipped out my phone and took pictures the moment I saw it. And I might’ve also uploaded it to several social media sites. Because, trust me, that shit was way too disturbing not to share.”

Dipper accepted her proffered phone, silently thankful for Dominique’s gossipmongering ways. After a few horrified moments of staring at the photos, however, he understood exactly what Dominique meant. “Oh wow, this is definitely not the same person who ruined the sign.”

“What do you mean?”

“That one was clearly an asshole with an agenda. This… this couldn’t have been done by someone in their right mind.” He scrutinised the photos keenly. Practically every surface of the art room was covered in unsettling characters, as though reality itself had glitched into a disturbing mess. The walls, the tables, the chairs, were all covered in eerie red scribbles. It was like looking into the mind of a psychopath. How long must’ve this taken?

“What’s that red stuff? It’s not blood, is it?”

“Nah, it’s red paint. They probably used the acrylic paint stored in the room.” Dominique lingered over his shoulder. “But that’s not the disturbing part. Zoom in.”

Dipper did as she said, and sucked in a breath between his teeth as he realised what he had initially thought were random scribbles were, in fact, neatly penned characters of some unrecognisable script or code. The characters reminded him of some ancient cuneiform writing system, with strangely curved characters far removed from any of the modern scripts Dipper was aware of littering the art
room’s surfaces. Perhaps they were unsettling hallmarks of some dead language. Perhaps they were a code of some sort. But to methodically and systematically paint these characters upon every single surface of the art room was probably not the typical behaviour of some stupid kid trying to get attention.

While scrolling through the rest of the pictures and zooming in, one particular character caught his eye. It was composed of two halves – the left half looked like an approximation of a person, arms held upwards, while the left half looked to be of a winged creature of some sort. Or perhaps not, the characters were too minimalistic to tell. Dipper scrolled to the next picture, zoomed in.

He almost dropped the phone.

There, on the art room table, clustered thickly like the cells of some bacterial colony, were numerous nines, all individually separated by a single circle. Dipper’s chest thudded with recognition.

_The nine circles_.

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“Okay, so what’s up with you?” Cherie demanded. “Man, today’s been weird. The school smells like the wrong end of a swamp, I rock up to find that Thorne’s punched Chad in the face and that the art room’s been vandalised, and now you’re jittering around like it’s the fifties. What happened?”

“Probably the coffee. Drank too much this morning.” Dipper lied though his teeth, laughing nervously. “So! Assignment! We should do that. Yep. Also do you mind if a leave a little early? I’ve, uh, got a thing on.”

As a matter of fact, Dipper’s excess energy was due to his impatience to get back home and review the security tapes he’d managed to wrangle out of visual arts teacher Mr Saunders. As a matter of fact, he’d entered the art teachers’ staffroom to request entry to the art room, only to find a bleary-eyed Mr Saunders staring blankly at the CCTV footage at his computer. It had been surprisingly easy to convince him to give Dipper a copy – all he’d needed was the truth. He’d mentioned Mabel, and how she was absolutely convinced someone was out to sabotage the school dance. He then went on to mention his prior experience in solving mysteries.

“Oh, I don’t know.” Mr Saunders had said, scratching the hair under his beret. Mabel had once told him that Mr Saunders wore the beret to disguise his all-encompassing apathy towards the world around him. Dipper could sort of see it. “That wouldn’t be. Wouldn’t be professional.” He yawned, a great jaw-cracking stretch.

“If you want proof, they published some of the things I did in the newspaper.” Dipper informed him.

“Did they now.” Mr Saunders had replied, with more than a hint of condescension.

“And besides, it’s not like it could do any harm.” Dipper continued, ignoring him to the best of his ability. “I mean, it’s possible you might’ve missed something. Two sets of eyes are better than one, and all that.”

Mr Saunders actually seemed to be considering this. The sleep deprivation seemed to tip the scales in Dipper’s favour, as he had finally said with clearly feigned reluctance, “Fine. Of course, I’m not expecting too much.”

Which led to the present moment, with Dipper practically buzzing with barely concealed eagerness to investigate. Ever since he’d seen those circles in Dominique’s photos, his mind had kicked into overdrive with theories. There was no way this could’ve been a coincidence. _The nine circles._
Cherie gave him a sceptical look, then nodded. “Well, sure. Like, if it’s that pressing. What’ve you got on after this, anyway?” her expression suddenly turned mischievous. “Is it a date?”

“Wh- wha- no.” Dipper spluttered. “No. No dates.”

“Are you sure? Like, you can totally tell me if.”

“No. No dates.” Dipper cut her off. “Let’s, uh, hurry up and get this over and done with.”

Cherie gave him a knowing look, but returned her attention to her laptop. They continued to work, as per their usual routine, with Cherie researching and Dipper typing and both of them puzzling over equations. The next hour passed rather unremarkably, if productively. Dipper, still rather antsy over the prospect of his pending investigation, nearly jumped out of his chair as an approaching figure cast a sudden pall over him, blocking out the too-bright fluorescence of the library lights.

“Oh, Thorne.” Cherie looked startled. “Didn’t know you were still here. What’s up?”

Thorne swaggered up to her, looping an arm around her shoulder. “Just wanted to see you, babe. So you’ve been spendin’ your afternoons with this square, huh?” He nudged a shoulder in Dipper’s direction. Dipper tried to keep his expression neutral.

Cherie, for her part, looked irritated. “Look, I’m trying to get an assignment done, and Dipper’s, like, been the goddamn-best groupwork buddy I’ve had so far. And you know how I get with assignments.”

“Yeah, but you don’t hafta be so cold.” Thorne said coaxingly. “Haven’t seen you all day. Can’t you clear up some space in your schedule for me?”

Dipper sat there, growing increasingly uncomfortable as their one-sided argument continued. It eventually occurred to him that this was, in fact, an opportunity. As Thorne opened his mouth to spout some more mawkish blather, Dipper took the opportunity to leap to his feet, grab his books and laptop and shove them in his bag, spouting something along the lines of “Oh look at the time really must be going nice working with you see you tomorrow!” and sprinting away from the oppressively awkward atmosphere at approximately the same pace one would exit a burning building.

Once outside, he breathed a sigh of relief, pulling out his umbrella and stepping out into the pouring deluge. The previous days of consecutive rain hadn’t lessened the downpour - if anything, it had only grown heavier.

Dipper was halfway between the shopping mall and his house when he heard the sound of shoes pounding against wet pavement grow rapidly closer. He instinctively shifted to the side in order to allow the other person to pass. The sound stopped. Curious, Dipper turned his head to look behind him.

There was no one there.

***

Dipper frantically rifled through his bag for the USB stick where the security tapes had been copied. He pulled out several textbooks, a few notebooks, Bill Cipher, a binder full of notes and a pencilcase before finally finding it nestled at the bottom of his bag. Which was suspicious, because he clearly remembered placing it securely in the little zip pocket on the inside of his bag. Dipper cast a glare at the small triangular figure he’d flung face-down on the desk, who failed to even twitch in response.

Plugging in the USB, he quickly navigated to the relevant video files. There were two, each of them
displaying the feed from two CCTV cameras installed around the art room. The first pointed diagonally down the hallway leading up to the room. The second camera was located outside, providing an overhead view of the courtyard immediately outside the art room, as well as the art room’s back entrance. The recordings were set to begin at six, after the janitors had left for the day. Dipper played both videos simultaneously, adjusting the timing so the timestamps at the bottom of the screen aligned. He leaned forwards eagerly,

On the screen, he saw one of the aforementioned janitors sidle down the hallway, cleaning supplies in hand and face mask secured around their head. Dipper squinted, but failed to discern any identifying features. Less than a minute later, he saw the janitor then exit through the back door. Not enough time to produce the graffiti which he had seen thoroughly dispersed throughout the room. Although maybe the fact that he’d never seen one of the janitors without their usual face mask could be considered suspicious. Then again, he’d wear a face mask too, if he was ever confronted with the daily ordeal of cleaning the quagmire Chapelwick High attempted to pass off as a boys’ bathroom. Dipper made a note to investigate later anyway.

His enthusiasm quickly faded after several long minutes of absolutely no activity on his screen, whereupon he eventually came to the realisation that he really hadn’t thought this through. He continued to watch despite the brain-numbing boredom. The screen gradually darkened. The lamppost in the courtyard flickered to light. The rain continued pouring, both on the screen and outside Dipper’s window. Over the pattering of rain, he could hear Mabel’s voice, muffled through the wall partitioning their rooms. She was probably skyping to their friends back in Gravity Falls again. Dipper found himself listening as a distraction from the complete monotony that was reviewing these recordings.

“Wait, Grunkle Stan did what again?” Mabel was laughing. Dipper could practically see her swinging from side to side in her swivel chair. “These poor lawyers!”

“Yeah, so after he sicced that five-eyed lizard-monster at them, Mr Pines turned to me and was like, ‘Soos, do you know the difference between a lawyer and a trampoline?’ And I was like, ‘I got no idea. You tell me, Mr Pines.’ And he was like, ‘You take off your shoes before you jump on a trampoline. Also, I’ll give you a raise if you go jump on them for me.’ Dude, you should’ve heard them yell. Surprisingly springy, though.”

Mabel giggled. “That’s Grunkle Stan for you! I bet the lawyers won’t be back. By the way, how’s Melody?”

“Oh, I forgot to tell you last time, but she got a cat. He’s just the fluffiest, cutest lil’ guy.” Soos gushed. “Though he kept biting and scratching me last time I went to visit her in Portland. But that is of no consequence to one as indomitable as I. I have vowed that I shall become the cat whisperer and win over this contrary feline.”

Dipper could hear Mabel clapping her hands together, as well as the squeak of her swivel chair as she bounced up and down on it. “I’m in your corner! Make sure to send me some cute cat videos once you two become friends.”

“Can do!” Dipper imagined Soos saluting, that comically serious expression on his face. He felt a pang of nostalgia, some wistfulness for the warmer days of summer.

A rustling noise caught his attention. Bill had deposited the bag of Doritos onto his desk, and was attempting to fish a corn chip out of the bag. His small limbs flailed ineffectually as he grappled with the foil packet. Even elongating his arms failed to help, as the cheese-coated morsels consistently eluded his grasp. Dipper suppressed a laugh as he pretended to ignore how Bill overbalanced and toppled top-hat first into the bag of Doritos, foil crinkling and chips crunching as he struggled to
extricate himself from his newfound prison.

Bill eventually succeeded in escaping from the confines of the Dorito bag, hovering over it with his arms crossed like a disappointed parent. Having evidently grown impatient, he flipped the bag upside down, scattering its contents across Dipper’s desk. Bill then flopped atop a sizable pile of Doritos, face-down. He waved his arms back and forth against the surface of the Doritos, as though attempting the triangular demon version of a snow angel. A Doritos angel? A snow triangle?

Whatever it was, Dipper couldn’t ignore the involuntary warmth which had inconveniently decided to take residence within his chest. He rationalised it as the aftershocks of the lunchroom curry, which had consisted of some rubbery substance he’d failed to identify as either animal or vegetable.

***

It was three a.m. in the morning, and Dipper Pines stubbornly refused to acknowledge the fact that sleep was a thing. He continued to squint at the screen of his laptop, although absolutely nothing had changed over the past few hours. He propped his head on his arms, gazing blearily at the video feed. As usual, the courtyard was completely empty. The sole lamp-post merely provided a limited ring of vision, while the hallway was almost completely dark, the scarce light provided from the windows barely adequate to distinguish between silhouettes. Trying to make out objects in the gloom was like trying to spot a crocodile amongst a herd of alligators. Somewhere along the midnight mark, Bill had floated away, presumably out of boredom. Dipper had lazily finished off the Doritos he’d left strewn over the desk, wondering if this was an exercise in futility.

Still, he refused to back down. Finding out who had been responsible for literally painting the art room red would be key to discovering the significance of the nine circles. Dipper was determined to pursue this mystery with the same single-mindedness that he’d demonstrated during his hunt for the journal’s author. If only he could keep his eyes open…

He perked up at the smell of coffee.

Bill Cipher floated into his field of vision, a steaming mug almost as large as he was grasped in his hands. When had Bill figured out how to use the coffee machine, anyway?

But that was beside the point. What mattered was that there was caffeine, and it was almost within grasping distance. The smell itself served to revive him. Dipper shifted slightly. If Bill wasn’t going to give him the coffee, there was nothing stopping him from going out and making himself a new batch. Or maybe there was some still left in the coffeepot-

Dipper yelped in alarm as Bill lifted the mug of coffee above his top hat and poured it over himself. The mug of freshly-brewed, scalding coffee.

Bill seemed pretty nonplussed about being snatched out of the air and frantically manhandled in an attempt to check for injuries. Dipper breathed a sigh of relief as his search yielded no results aside from coffee-stained hands. Which was stupid, because Bill Cipher was an indestructible ex-dream demon. If the Stans’ attempts to nuke him in their laboratory hadn’t left a scratch, what could a bit of coffee possibly do? Embarrassed, Dipper released the small triangular demon from his grasp, hoping that the contemplative look in Bill’s eye was just a figment of his imagination.

He stared instead at the puddle of coffee which was beginning to spread and drip off his desk. It was fortunate that Bill hadn’t decided to pour the coffee over the floor, but Dipper’s carpet wouldn’t stay stain-free for long if he didn’t clean up. He pulled out the tissue box stored on his bookshelf for occasions such as these, and wiped the mess away, before slumping back into his chair. On the screen, absolutely nothing had changed.
The clunk of ceramic against wood, followed by a sliding sound. Dipper glanced to his left to observe Bill nudging the now quarter-full mug of coffee towards him. Still, he didn’t react until Bill had pushed the mug right up to him and persisted in pushing it against his arm. Registering it as a clear offer to share, Dipper hesitantly accepted the proffered mug, taking a sip.

It wasn’t until he was several sips in that Dipper realised that Bill must have flavoured the coffee with salt instead of sugar. He continued to drink, because getting caffeine in his bloodstream was currently a higher priority than the actual taste of whatever he was drinking.

Bill, for his part, proceeded to perch himself atop Dipper’s head. Which was unusual, but Dipper accepted it without complaint not only because it was three in the morning and he was sleep deprived but also because it was Bill, and one didn’t protest when Bill freaking Cipher decided that one’s head was the perfect place to perch. He didn’t even react when Bill began swinging his coffee-sticky feet back and forth, knocking against Dipper’s forehead in the process.

They sat in companionable silence for a while. Dipper vaguely wondered why Bill was being so uncharacteristically cooperative. The best answer his limping brain could provide was ‘It’s been five years, maybe he’s mellowed out.’ Although, his brain eventually reminded him, the Redcap massacre clearly indicated otherwise.

Dipper’s mind was dragged back to the present as the leisurely back-and-forth swing of Bill’s feet became a rapid, urgent drumming against his skull. “Ow, ow, okay, what is it?” he demanded, pulling Bill off his head and glaring at him. Bill glared right back, his arm extending to tap impatiently at the screen.

Dipper looked. There, in the courtyard, was movement. Drowsiness forgotten, he eagerly grabbed the laptop, peering at it closely. At that point, however, the omnipresent rain began to fall harder, obscuring the environment from view. A little irked, Dipper slid the timer back a little, waiting for the relevant moment. And there it was. A flicker of movement. A silhouette, clearly avoiding the light of the lamp, was moving towards the art room. It was so subtle that Dipper was fairly certain that had Bill not pointed it out, he would’ve overlooked it entirely.

Rather frustratingly, Dipper was unable to discern any identifying features from the footage, due not only to the darkness, but also to the heavy rain as well as the grainy quality of the recording. He continued to watch, even as the on-screen rain grew so heavy it completely obscured the courtyard from view. That person – almost certainly the vandal they were looking for – was bound to leave at some point. His attention was so focused upon the footage of the courtyard that he almost missed a light streaking across the hallway, much like a sudden lightning bolt. He frowned, rewinding the footage. Watched the light flash past again, too fast for his eyes to identify. Next to him, Bill Cipher hovered closer to the laptop, gazing fixedly at his screen, tapping his arm in thought.

Dipper tried to pause at the moment the light streaked through. He failed. He tried again. And, again, failed. On his fourth failed attempt, Bill batted his hands away from the laptop, rewinded the footage and paused it just as the light sped through the hallway. Dipper ignored his pointed look of smugness in favour of examining the paused video. The light was, in fact, a coiling, twisting object which, despite the low-quality footage, clearly resembled a snake. Dipper squinted. Screencapped it for later perusal. Watched the section again.

“Do you know what that is?” he finally turned to ask Bill. Bill just held his arms out in a no-shouldered approximation of a shrug. Dipper frowned, replaying the section again.

Outside and on the screen, the rain continued to pour.
Dipper, stop being such a .resolution.
Arc II Part 3: Raincoat

Chapter Summary

Rain falls, fish die and Dipper attempts to handle a stalker in a manner it would be best not to imitate.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“And of course, the upcoming school dance is going to be held at the end of next week. We do encourage you all to buy a ticket and participate in this social event. The theme is going to be ‘Under The Sea’, which I am certain the dance committee is doing a marvellous job of organising.”

Dipper smothered a yawn as most of Principal Principelle’s address failed to register in his sleep-deprived brain. He’d stayed awake for an hour after discovering the existence of the shadowy figure and the inexplicable snakelike light, reviewing the footage and attempting to determine the moment the shadowy figure left the art room. Unfortunately, the pouring rain almost completely obscured the courtyard feed, rendering it almost impossible to make out anything. Dipper had eventually given up in frustration, flopping down on his bed and falling asleep to the early-morning calls of Chapelwick’s bird life. Forcing himself out of bed a few hours later was like struggling out of quicksand. An unfortunate Bill Cipher, who had been peering out from his backpack at the time, had been immediately met with a deluge of books as Dipper sleepily shoved its contents in and zipped it up.

Next to him, Mabel crossed her arms, grumbling something about the committee’s hard work being ruined something something art room something something administrative failures. She scuffed her shoes across the floor sulkily.

“On a more serious note, however, I have recently received reports of vandalism around the school. I’m sure most of you are aware of this already, but the art room has been closed until further notice while we investigate. Should anyone have information about what happened, please do step forward.” Dipper was pretty sure that graffiti ordinarily wouldn’t require so much ‘investigation’, but it was clear by now this wasn’t run-of-the-mill vandalism. The staff were probably as puzzled as he was by these enigmatic, occultic symbols as he was.

“Furthermore, some of you may have noticed a strange smell about the school. After due inspection, we have discovered that a mass death of fish occurred recently in Terrace Lake, likely because of the past week’s heavy rain.” Mass death of fish? And wasn’t Terrace Lake where Seraph’s parents went missing? Dipper straightened, suddenly paying attention. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Mabel do the same. Murmurs travelled across the gathered student body. “The smell was due to a number of fish somehow transporting themselves into our drainage system, where they subsequently died.”

Over the rising noise of the seated students, Principal Principelle continued to speak. “Fortunately, as Terrace Lake is not our source of drinking water, it should still be safe to use water from the tap. However, we do encourage you all to exercise caution. We are working in tandem with the Local Council in order to further understand this unusual occurrence. For now, our drainage system has been cleaned, meaning the smell should no longer be an issue. Should anyone have any questions or issues, please do speak to me or another member of the staff.”
The school assembly moved on to other issues and presentations, but Dipper’s mind still buzzed with the recent information. A mass death of fish. The recent vandalism. The snakelike light on the video footage. Maybe it wasn’t just a coincidence. He recalled the strange red symbols lining every surface of the art room. What if they weren’t the deranged scribblings of someone out of their mind, but instead some sort of ritual?

‘Huh.’ Dipper thought.

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“Wait. So you actually managed to make Mr Saunders give you the security tapes? Brother, you are a miracle worker.” Mabel ruffled his hair roughly, sending a sleep-deprived Dipper pitching forwards. “So, how was it, Detective Dipper? Find any clues about the identity of the dance-sabotaging villain?” She skipped ahead of Dipper, spinning about to face him, a grin of expectation on her face.

“I don’t think that the person responsible was doing it because they wanted to ruin the dance.” Dipper said, rubbing his eyes. “I think there might be another cause. A supernatural cause.”

Mabel’s eyes went wide in a way that reminded him of a spooked cat. “Supernatural? Dipper, is your brain stuck on Gravity Falls again? How much sleep did you get last night?”

Right. Seraph had never told Mabel about the Redcaps. “There’s nothing wrong with my brain. I got enough sleep last night.” Which was a lie on both counts. “Mabel, the security tapes-“

Mabel shushed him, holding up a hand as they entered the cafeteria. “Shhhhh. My petty high school drama senses are tingling.”

“Petty high school drama?” Dipper frowned. “What are you talking-“

“You couldn’t even spare me the time to talk? It was him, wasn’t it? You’ve been spendin’ all your time with him.” Centre stage, Thorne and Cherie, against a backdrop of bystanders who were attempting to pretend they weren’t staring at the arguing couple. To their left, an awkward-looking Chad whose eyes were darting around, as though seeking out potential escape routes. Cherie slammed her hands on the table. “Are you kidding me? I already told you, it’s for an assignment! You bloody well know how seriously I take my work-“

“I know you’re lying.” Thorne looked absolutely awful. He seemed even more sleep-deprived than Dipper, dark circles etched beneath his eyes. His black hair flopped limply down his ears. “You’re sick of me, aren’t you? That’s why you’ve started hangin’ out with him, isn’t it?”

“For god’s sake, what is wrong with you?” Cherie flung her hands out helplessly. “You’ve been, like, acting weirdly jealous all week! What’s gotten you so paranoid?”

“I’m not paranoid! I’m just pissed off because you’re obviously more interested in Dipper Pines than you are in me!”

Cherie let out a frustrated sound. “For the love of God, there’s no way that I’d be interested in Dipper, and that’s because he’s gay!”

“I am?” Dipper asked, startled.

“He is?” Mabel asked, equally startled.
Cherie ignored them, proceeding to bluster on with her rant. She was obviously on a roll. “And even if that wasn’t the case, it’s pretty clear that you don’t trust me at all, do you? And that means you don’t respect me. You don’t respect me, or what’s important to me.”

“Babe, please-” Thorne began in a placating tone, but Cherie cut him off.

“You know what? I think we need a break. I want you to sort yourself out, and stop taking out your problems on me.” Cherie stood up, grabbing her lunch tray. “We’ll talk when you get over yourself.” She marched out, leaving a silent cafeteria in her wake.

Mabel whistled lowly, clapping Dipper on the back. “Teenagers, man.”

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Dipper gingerly seated himself across from Cherie. He chanced a look upwards. Her expression could give the rainclouds clustered outside the window a lesson in ominousness. He gulped, turning his attention back to his laptop. They worked in silence for a few minutes, until the atmosphere became so oppressive that Dipper felt compelled to say something, anything.

“So. All those fish dying. Pretty cool, huh?” No not that. “I-I mean it’s scientifically fascinating. All that rain probably caused a chemical imbalance, like a lack of oxygen. Or maybe it changed the temperature of the water. I mean, fish are pretty sensitive to that sort of thing.” Stop it. You’re embarrassing yourself. “Or maybe all that rain washed some kind of chemical run-off into the drains, and it poisoned the fish life.” Why.

“I’m sorry for assuming you were gay.” Cherie said abruptly, not looking up at him. “I mean, I saw you hanging out with the LGBT Society all the time and I just, like, assumed. Dick move, in retrospect.”

“Oh. It’s, uh, it’s okay.” Dipper stammered. “Easy mistake to make.” To be frank, he hadn’t exactly considered what other students might think of his relations with Archie, Angela and Dominique. It certainly made Chad’s sneering accusation of his being ‘Archie’s boyfriend’ make a good deal more sense.

“And I’m sorry about Thorne. Seriously don’t know what’s gotten into him lately.” Cherie exhaled, rubbing her temples. “He’s not usually like this. Normally he’s pretty polite. Maybe his family’s been nagging at him again.”

“Oh yeah, Archie told me about them. Was it true you guys were part of the same church group?” Dipper lowered the screen of his laptop.

“Archie? Yeah, we were. Did he tell you that Principelle, like, used to be our youth group leader?”

“Whoa, Principal Principelle was? That explains why she’s always helping them out.” Dipper mused. “So I’m guess she wasn’t as fundamentalist as your parents?”

“Ha, she’s nowhere in their league.” Cherie grinned wryly. “But enough of that. I’m thinking we can probably finish by tomorrow if we focus extra-hard. Man, it’s been kinda awesome working with you. Why aren’t you in all my classes?”

***

Dipper said his goodbyes to Cherie and left the library, whistling quietly. He flipped his umbrella open, as today’s rain somehow still refused to abate. He spared a glance at the darkened skies, the thickly crowded rainclouds blocking the sun from view, as they had done for the past week. The rain
pounded against his umbrella, dripping in rivulets down the spokes as Dipper made his way ahead. The streets were quiet, aside from the pouring rain. Perhaps it was the rain, or perhaps it was the late hour, but there were no other pedestrians on the street. The occasional car passed, driving rather slower than usual due to the water hammering at the windscreen at speeds too rapid for the wipers to remove them. Dipper hopped past puddles, holding the umbrella slightly behind him so the rain didn’t soak into his backpack, and by extension, Bill. But it was mainly to protect his laptop. Because his laptop probably wasn’t waterproof. Bill probably was. That was why Dipper was holding his umbrella tilted at an angle to cover his backpack. To protect his laptop.

He was some ways past the mall when he felt a prickling at the back of his neck. All these summers in Gravity Falls had led Dipper to place a great deal of stock in his intuition, and his intuition was currently telling him he was being followed. Dipper glanced sharply in both directions, but didn’t change his pace or turn his head. Experience had taught him to quieten his footsteps, keeping his ears peeled for movement. That was when he heard it. Footsteps. Growing closer. Dipper walked onwards, deliberately refusing to speed up or show any sign he was aware of his pursuer. The pace of the footsteps accelerated. Dipper still kept his eyes firmly locked on the pavement ahead of him, even as his heart rate quickened with the rising pace of the footsteps against the wet ground. His pursuer was getting closer, was moving faster, was almost behind him-

“Aawful weather, isn’t it?” Dipper asked pleasantly, spinning about on his heel. His pursuer, whoever it was, froze. They were dressed in a dark blue raincoat (who even wore raincoats nowadays?), the hood drawn up past their head, obscuring their face. They were taller than Dipper, their build broader (not that meant much) and they had just turned tail and run in the opposite direction.

“H-hey! Wait!” Dipper spluttered, but the figure had already disappeared. Rather confused, he attempted to follow them, but gave up after coming to a four-way intersection and realising he had absolutely no idea where they’d gone. He continued his walk back home, stopping often to look around, but to no avail.

It wasn’t until later, after an already half-asleep Dipper had flopped down on his bed, that he remembered the figure on the security tapes hadn’t been carrying an umbrella. Which could mean they were fine with being soaked to the bone.

Or it could mean that they had been, perhaps, wearing a raincoat.

***

“We rock.” Cherie punched the air, tilting her chair legs back. Across from her, Dipper sighed and relaxed, watching the screen as their work was backed up to his USB.

“Finished with three weeks to spare.” He said with satisfaction. “I swear that’s a new record.”

“I bet nobody else’s even started yet.” Cherie laced her hands behind her head, looking as smug as the cat that caught the canary. “A victory for those of us with no social life.”

Dipper looked up, curious. “No social life? Don’t you hang out with Thorne and the rest of the popular kids?”

Cherie made a face. “Kinda, but we’re not really friends. They, like, tolerate me because I’m his girlfriend, but we don’t have that much in common. Which is probably a good thing. I swear you
could replace their personalities with tissue paper and it wouldn’t make a difference.”

Dipper snorted, browsing through his bag for his mobile phone. Maybe he could call his parents and ask them to pick him up. He and Cherie had decided to work overtime at the library, and the little light that managed to filter through the rainclouds had long since faded away to night. “How did you and Thorne get together anyway? Was it when you were part of that church group?”

Cherie huffed out a laugh. “Oh man, that was, like, a disaster. So basically he and Archie used to be best friends, yeah? And when they’re eleven, kids can be such dumbasses. So they got the brilliant idea to, like, prank Angela by stealing her dog and pretending he’d disappeared. Naturally, it blew up in their faces, and I caught them trying to sneak the dog back in. Honestly, they were lucky I was the one who found out~” Cherie didn’t explain why, but Dipper had the feeling it had something to do with Seraph “~ but you can bet I verbally flayed them. So there they were, and there I was, yelling at them, and then Thorne started crying. Like, I can’t describe what it’s like to hear Thorne cry. It’s like, the sound a kitten makes when you kick it times ten. And then he ran off. He has a habit of running away from things whenever he can’t handle a situation.”

“I see.” Dipper said, abandoning his search for his phone as a futile endeavour. Maybe his missing phone had something to do with Bill. The ex-dream demon had been in a right royal huff earlier that morning, most likely due to Dipper ignoring his presence the previous day. Obviously he could dish it out, but he couldn’t take it.

“So obviously I followed him. I found him sobbing on a street corner. He was always kinda… emotional. So I tried to be nicer, because I was eleven and making someone cry was like, a cue for panic. So he told me that it was actually Archie’s idea, and he just went along with it because he wouldn’t be able to assert his way out of a paper bag. And then he kept crying, which made me start crying, because we were overemotional little kids. And somewhere along the line we became friends.” Cherie propped her head on her hands, smiling slightly. “Dunno if Archie was too happy about that – he always seemed to be avoiding me. And then we hit high school, Thorne got popular, he and Archie drifted apart and now I’m pretty much the only person from our old group who still hangs out with him. So, y’know, the usual high school stuff.” Cherie sighed.

Dipper gave her a sympathetic look. “At least you and Dominique seem to get along well.”

“Yeah, we’re keeping on. Though I’m pretty sure Dominique is like, everyone’s friend. Bit like your twin sister, from what I’ve heard.” Cherie began packing up as the janitors (their masks in place, as usual) began vacuuming the library. They’d stayed a little past closing hours.

“Mabel? Yeah, they’re pretty much the social butterflies of the school.” Dipper smiled wryly, sparing a glance at a janitor as they passed. The janitors had donned some kind of full-body suit which seemed like it would be better placed in a nuclear plant than a high school. Their facial coverings actually consisted of a surgical mask covering the mouth and chunky, opaque goggles wrapped around the upper half of their head. It reminded him of something an engineer might wear. Or maybe a mass murderer. Either way, it was kind of creeping him out.

Dipper waited for the janitors to exit through a door marked ‘STAFF ONLY’ located behind the shelves of encyclopaedias (which likely hadn’t been touched for decades) before turning to Cherie and remarking in a hushed voice, “Is it just me, or are these janitors kind of suspicious?”

Cherie snorted. “Trust me, they’re like Chapelwick High’s own personal brand of lizard people.” She slung her bag over her shoulder.

“…Lizard people?”
“So, like, apparently it’s been a school policy for the last thirty years to have the janitors wearing these weird face masks. Naturally, because we’re all dumb high schoolers, kids keep making up all these weird conspiracy theories about them. Depending on who you ask, they’re either secret agents here to steal state secrets they keep buried under the school, or they’re aliens who kidnap kids and probe their brains, or they’re actual lizard people and Chapelwick High’s the meeting place for their ‘shadowy cabal of evil’.” Cherie rolled her eyes, making quotation marks with her fingers.

Dipper would be lying if he said that none of these possibilities had ever crossed his mind. “So… uh… you don’t think they’re suspicious at all?”

“Nah. I mean, if you’ve ever seen what it’s like inside the girl’s bathrooms, you’d get why they need so much protective gear.” Cherie crossed her arms, frowning slightly. “And I’m kinda fond of ‘em. Once I lost my wallet, and a janitor found it and personally handed it back. Couldn’t really hear what he was saying though, the mask muffled it a bit.”

They parted ways outside the library. Dipper squinted at the sky as he pulled out his umbrella. The past week of consecutive rain hadn’t lessened the downpour a bit. Like yesterday, the streets were empty and silent. Recalling yesterday, he debated taking a different path back home. On one hand, creepy stalker. On the other hand, investigating creepy stalker and their links to the vandalism. On yet another hand, what if creepy stalker wasn’t stalking him today? On a fourth hand, what if creepy stalker was stalking him today, and was planning on actually physically harming him? On a fifth hand, Dipper could heal. And what could be worse than the Redcaps? On a sixth hand, was Dipper so stupid that he’d knowingly flinging himself into dangerous situations? On a seventh hand, what, exactly, would have so many hands? Maybe Bill might, if he really wanted to.

Right. Dipper forced his mind back on-topic. This was something he was no stranger to, having spent his summers stalked by various creatures in the woods of Gravity Falls. He could handle this.

The sudden oppressive feeling of being watched. Dipper stiffened. But like yesterday, he pretended to ignore it. In Gravity Falls, reacting to the presence of one’s (usually supernatural) chaser could have two results. Firstly, it could scare them off. Secondly, it could make them strike sooner. Meanwhile, ignoring them would usually result in a little more time before they actually attacked, and would give Dipper the advantage of surprise, as they weren’t usually aware that he was stalking them.

It was this advantage which he was relying upon. Dipper walked onwards, hyperaware of his surroundings. No sound of footsteps. Perhaps his pursuer had learnt to mask the sound of their steps under the constant barrage of water against pavement.

…No, that couldn’t be it. Dipper slowed down, glancing at his shadow, which stretched out ahead of him under the streetlight. Instinct told him there was someone nearby, but there was no visual indication of anyone’s presence. No telltale shadows. No reflections in any of the surrounding puddles, or in the side mirror of the car Dipper had just passed. He knew there was someone there, but where were they?

A rustling of leaves. So quiet it could be mistaken for the brush of rain against the trees. But it was enough warning for Dipper to glance sharply up, and jump back just in time to leave the raincoat-clad figure sprawling on the floor with a heavy thud.

Dipper debated his options. He could run. He could stay and question the figure. He could stand around and poke them with the toe of his shoe, which was perhaps the least useful of the lot. Unfortunately, it was also what he was currently doing. “Uh… you okay?”

No response. “Have you been following me?”
Still no response. It was like Bill Cipher all over again. “Thorne, I know it’s you.”

That merited a reaction. Thorne scrambled to his feet, looking panicked. The lines under his eyes had deepened to ditches, and he swayed slightly, as though under the influence of alcohol.

“Have you been following me?” Dipper repeated, hand tightening on his umbrella.

Thorne stared blankly at him for a moment, as though he was still registering Dipper’s presence, then blinked rapidly. “I dunno.” He finally mumbled. “Can’t remember. Been forgettin’ things. Lately.” His hands bunched his raincoat tightly as his brows furrowed in what was probably confusion.

“Forgotten things?” When his question yielded nothing other than a glassy-eyed stare, Dipper pursued a different line of questioning. “Were you the one who vandalised the art room?”

“Dunno. Just leave me alone.” Thorne turned away. But Dipper was having none of it.

“You were the one who basically tried to attack me. Why?” He shifted to block Thorne from leaving.

The wind picked up, scattering sodden leaves across the puddle-pitted street. Thorne’s expression didn’t change from the impassive, dead-eyed mask he’d had from the beginning. “I said I dunno. Please leave me alone.”

“Look, Thorne-”

“I said, leave me alone.”

Two things happened in that moment. With a wailing howl, the wind ripped through the street, scattering debris in its wake. The rain pelted down harder than ever. The flimsy fabric of Dipper’s umbrella could barely stand against the deluge. The sudden intensity of the weather proved too much for the overhead power lines to bear, and the streetlamp – currently the sole source of light - briefly flickered off. The outage only lasted a few seconds, but it was enough for Dipper to notice one important fact.

Thorne’s eyes were glowing.

Déjà vu crashed over Dipper like a wave. He’d seen eyes like that before. Memories flashed through his mind. These inhuman eyes, overlaid over his own face. Those unsettling expressions, so much like his, yet so unlike. The terror of seeing that thing in his body.

He was possessed.

The revelation must have shown on Dipper’s face, because Thorne’s eyes snapped straight to his. He muttered something in a language Dipper couldn’t understand. What Dipper could understand, though, was the arm which suddenly struck out and grabbed him by the neck, closing in on his throat like the fangs of a serpent. Dipper grunted as he was lifted off the ground, scrabbling frantically at the fingers at his throat. This only led to the grip on his throat tightening, constricting the air flow through his wind pipe. Dipper kicked out, but Thorne seemed unaffected, his expressionless face unchanging even as Dipper lashed out as hard as he could.

…Wait, Dipper was immortal. At least according to Bill, who was an admittedly unreliable purveyor of such information. But despite the increasing length of time both Dipper and his brain were being deprived of oxygen (which was an immensely uncomfortable sensation in its own right) he was somehow still fully conscious. He fought back the instinctive panic and urge to struggle and forced himself to go limp, a task which was easier said than done. Thorne didn’t know he could survive
this, after all.

It only took a few seconds of playing dead before Dipper slumped onto the floor with a thud, water immediately soaking into his clothes. Which was unpleasant in more ways than one, but he’d been through worse. He held back the involuntary urge to cough and gasp, subtly squinting through slitted eyes to observe Thorne, who was staring down at his hands in horror. Good. Well, not actually good, but that was probably a sign Thorne wasn’t about to hurt him any further.

So it was a surprise to both parties concerned when a snakelike light, the same colour that Thorne’s eyes had glowed, flashed between them. Dipper caught a brief glimpse of an open, gaping maw before he was hurled backwards, an all-encompassing burning pain centred about his chest making itself apparent. He wheezed, the familiar tang of blood returning to his mouth. He looked down at his chest.

Goddamnit, not again.

There was a gaping hole in his chest cavity. The snake-creature had driven right through his chest, presumably breaking through his ribs and taking a fair chunk of his heart right out. Well, if Dipper had any prior doubts about his immortality, they had been rather thoroughly dispelled by this turn of events. Dipper’s one consolation was that he felt more lucid than the last time he’d been in such a situation. Evidently, grievous bodily injury was something which improved upon acquaintance.

His attention was ripped back to the present when the snakelike creature looped around through the air, hurtling straight towards him. With great effort and immense pain, Dipper managed to roll out of the way, sending the creature drilling straight into the ground. It re-emerged in a flash of scales, scattering clods of earth everywhere. Dipper staggered to his feet, clutching his chest (which was already halfway healed – had the wound’s proximity to the triangular scar connecting him and Bill accelerated his healing?) and began to run.

“TESTING, TESTING! One, two, three, like the corners of me…” A familiar sing-song voice echoed in Dipper’s consciousness. “Are you hearing me, Pine Tree?”

Bill? Dipper glanced about, but failed to see any traces of the ex-dream demon. He dodged to the side as the creature attempted to strike at him again.

“Oho, looks like the mind link is WORKING! Sorry to deprive you of my GLORIOUS PRESENCE, but since we seem to be at two different points of that overrated concept you lumps of meat refer to as ‘space’, it looks like I can’t be with you in person at the moment! Of course, that’d mean nothing to a being of pure energy with no weaknesses, but unfortunately I’m not a being of pure energy with no weaknesses right now! AS YOU WOULD KNOW.” Was Bill ever going to get to the point?

Dipper looked up nervously as the snakelike light again tore its way out of the ground, sharply angling itself to aim at him.

“Get to the point? Kid, I already have THREE!” For some reason, the image of Bill lounging atop a fancy sofa, drink in hand, popped into Dipper’s head. It was dispelled like the ripples of a reflection in water as the snake-creature tunnelled through the air, narrowly grazing Dipper’s arm. “Buut in any case, it looks like you’re in quite the THORNy situation! How’s about I give you a helping hand, huh?”

Knowing Bill, he was probably going to give Dipper a literal hand. “Yeesh, suspicious much? I mean that sounds HILARIOUS (and like something I’d actually do), but I’ve got bigger fish to fry! Like that oversized worm right over your shoulder! No, not your right, your left.” Heeding Bill’s warning, Dipper dodged again, narrowly escaping its attack. “I bet it’d taste GREAT dipped in batter! That aside, I’m here to offer you two options.”
A deal? Dipper recoiled from the implications, even as he ducked and weaved and dodged away from the flashing light intent on hounding him. Meanwhile, his mental image of Bill gesticulated dismissively with the hand not currently holding his drink. “No, kid, not a deal. I’m giving you OPTIONS. One! You summon me here, I deal with that pesky little THORN in your side! But since you’ve got the magical potential of a slab of concrete, s’not like I can just rock up and slice that sea slug into sashimi! I’ll have to cut off its power at the source. And by that, I mean your friend’s gonna have to suck it up and face the Grim Reaper a little early!” So… Thorne was going to have to die? No. Nonononono. Not an option. Most emphatically not an option. “Tsk tsk, you’re not gonna get anywhere with a close-minded attitude like THAT, kid! Well, that leaves us with option two! You hold out for fifteen minutes, and I find a solution which DOESN’T involve the gruesome, agonising death of what’s-his-face! See, doesn’t that sound so BORING and INEFFICIENT?”

‘Find a solution’? As a matter of fact, that sounded dangerously open-ended. And open-ended agreements with dream demons were a recipe for disaster. C’mon, couldn’t Bill come up with something a little more concrete? “Aren’t YOU a picky one! Well, technically you DO have a THIRD option! And that’s to let ol’ Razortooth over there gore your body to bits! We’ll see how well you heal after becoming MINCED MEAT!” Was it just Dipper, or did Bill sound rather offended? “Course I’m offended! LOOK, kid!” and here Bill’s voice took on an uncharacteristically serious tone – “I’m trying to do you a solid here. Ignoring the fact that ‘truth’ is a concept coined by those puppeteers at the top in order to keep the masses suggestible and compliant, I’ve been as truthful as I can POSSIBLY be without rapidly decaying my physical form and phasing to a different dimension altogether. Right now, I’m dependent on you to survive. And I HATE it. So I only think it’s fair, kid, to have YOU dependent on ME for a change. That make sense?”

That… actually made a surprising amount of sense. In that special, Bill Cipher-y way where it also made absolutely no sense whatsoever. Nonetheless, Bill had a point. “THREE, kid!” Alright, awful puns aside, Dipper could admit that Bill’s arguments had some merit. Still, that first option wasn’t feasible. That left the second.

And the second was too open – the only restriction was that Thorne wouldn’t die. No guarantee against physical or mental injury, nothing to ensure that Bill would actually find a solution- “I guarantee it.” – huh? “Is your brain as empty as it looks? I SAID, I’ll guarantee it! NOBODY gets maimed! The BARE MINIMUM of mental suffering possible for you FRAGILE SACKS OF FLESH WHO HAVE EVERY REASON TO LIVE IN PARANOIA OF THE UNKNOWN! AND I’ll get you out of this situation if you just have the patience to wait! So, how does it sound?”

That sounded… way too good, for Bill. Ducking to avoid a swooping attack, Dipper frantically tried to think up ways this could go sour. “Oh, looks like I CAN guarantee that someone’ll get brutally tenderised! And that’s YOU if you don’t stop lollygagging and LET ME HELP.”

Alright. Fine. Did Bill want Dipper to depend on him? Dipper was going to depend on him.

“DING DING! Looks like you’ve chosen the correct answer, kid! So just wait fifteen minutes – it’s fine if you lose one or two limbs in the meantime, they’ll grow back! Don’t worry, you can trust ME!”

Could he, though? As Dipper dove to the side, attempting to dodge an attack which nonetheless succeeded in ripping out a sizable chunk of his side, he realised that he pretty much had no choice. He was completely helpless. Everything was in Bill’s hands now.

…Was this how it felt to be Bill on a day-to-day basis?
So! Who's not ready to have their headcanons annihilated on July 13th? *raises hand*
Cherie stretched, letting out a satisfied yawn. Her brain was comfortably fuzzy, the kind of sensation which went hand-in-hand with a job well done. Blinking drowsily, she contemplated how she was going to spend the rest of her evening. Preferably face down on her bed, asleep.

Though, with a twinge of guilt, Cherie considered that maybe she ought to consider reaching out to Thorne. It was quite possible, she silently admitted to herself, that in her preoccupation with work, she might’ve abandoned her boyfriend. Not that justified being a total jerk about it, but still. Maybe a phone call might be in order. Maybe she could invite him out to lunch for some one on one time. They’d both handled that rather badly.

She started as a loud noise shattered her reverie. It took her a moment to recognise the noise as being her own phone. It was blaring a disturbing screeching sound which seemed like the cross between the tortured screams of a multitude, nails raking down a chalkboard and TV static. Cherie frowned at her phone, more than a little creeped out. Was it malfunctioning? She checked the caller ID. Dipper Pines. They’d traded phone numbers when the assignment started, but why was he calling now? Maybe he’d accidentally taken one of her textbooks.

She selected the ‘Answer’ button. “Hello?”

Silence on the other end.

A little chilled, she tried again. “Is that you, Dipper?”

“Heh, is it?” An unfamiliar male voice filtered over the line. “I mean, you fleshbags are all so ALIKE. After a while you all merge into this homogenous slush of BLOOD and TISSUE and TENDONS and CRUSHED BONES! Or is that what happens when you’re put in a blender? I think that’s what happens when you’re put in a blender!”

Definitely not Dipper, then. “I’m sorry, is there anything you want?”

“SIX HUNDRED AND SIXTY SIX HUMANS TO BE OFFERED UP AS SACRIFICE! WIDESPREAD FAMINE FOLLOWED BY THE INEVITABLE BREAKDOWN OF SOCIETY AND THE EVENTUAL STARVATION OF EVERY HUMAN BEING! Wouldn’t go wrong with a bag of Doritos either! Point is, there’s a LOT I want, so you’re gonna have to be more specific!”

Cherie’s brows furrowed. “Is this, like, a joke call?”

“Yes it is, and your INSIGNIFICANT HUMAN EXISTENCE is the punchline!”

Okay, enough was enough. Her finger hovered over the ‘End Call’ button. “NUH-AH-AH! I wouldn’t do that if I were you! After all, your prickly boyfriend’s continued existence depends on you!”
Prickly boyfriend? “You mean… Thorne?”

“Ya see, I don’t take kindly to people hurting Pine Tree! Unless it’s ME, of course!” Pine Tree? As in, a literal pine tree? Was this guy out of his mind? “OF COURSE I AM! But I guess you’d know Pine Tree as Dipper Pines! Boy, I keep forgetting how you humans can’t read minds! Would make ruling over you a little inconvenient, if I was still into that sort of thing! AAANYWAY, Pine Tree’s in danger thanks to your boyfriend, and how well YOU do is directly correlated with whether I’ll give your boyfriend a SLOW, AGONISING, GRUESOME DEATH or not!”

“Are you…” Cherie started hesitantly, “are you threatening me?”

Whoever – no, whatever was on the other side ignored her, continuing to pontificate in that gratingly cheerful voice. “And by that I mean you have approximately FIFTEEN- no, FOURTEEN minutes to get to – where is he now? – ah, yes, MUIRFIELD PARK and convince your boyfriend to lay off my-“ for the first time during their conversation, the voice faltered – “to lay off Pine Tree, otherwise I’m stripping the rose of its thorns!”

“Who the hell do you think you are?” Cherie demanded. “Do you think I’m really going to trust you?”

“For your first question: Bill Cipher, ex-dream demon! Nice to meet’cha! And for your second: HAH! It’s funny that you think you’ve got a choice! Lemme get some things straight. You DON’T.”

“And why not?” Cherie challenged, losing her temper. “Y’know what, this prank’s gone on long enough. Fuck off.” Before the voice could respond, she pressed the ‘End Call’ button.

Her phone immediately began ringing again, with that disturbing, ear-piercing noise. She refused the call, and switched it to silent.

It began ringing again.

Cherie stared down at it, at the words ‘Dipper Pines’ positioned innocuously at the top of her phone screen. Had her phone been hacked?

Didn’t matter. She switched her phone off, pocketing it, and continued down the street.

A chorus of faint ringing noises (actual ringing noises, not whatever hellish screech her phone had been making) began to sound. It took a moment of confusion before Cherie realised that the ringing sounds were coming from the houses surrounding her. That they were coming from the phones inside these houses. And that it wasn’t just one or two phones. The entire street’s phones were ringing. This was getting really, really creepy.

_Demon_, a voice in her head reminded her.

She ran. More and more phones joined in the clamour, their repetitive rings creating a disjointed mechanical uproar, until that now-familiar high-pitched noise of her mobile phone added its voice to the chorus.

Stubborn irritation warred with the icy terror now gripping her heart. Terror won out, and she pulled out her mobile phone from her pocket, pressing ‘Answer’.

Every other phone went dead silent.

“Thirteen minutes.” The voice said, infuriatingly smug. “Muirfield Park. Best of luck!”
Dipper glanced around nervously. He’d fled to the nearby Muirfield Park, as its copious amount of vegetation promised some kind of hiding place. In doing so, he’d managed to incur a minimum of injury from the snake-creature, despite his existing aches and pains screaming in agony whenever he moved. He’d eventually succeeded in losing the creature somewhere within the thick underbrush of Muirfield Park’s forest. Score two for training with Angela.

He was currently huddled under a bush, trying not to make a sound. How long had it been? Bill had promised fifteen minutes, but it already felt like an hour. At least his reprieve from the creature’s attack had lasted long enough that the majority of his wounds had fully healed. They were still tender, and the sharp leaves and twigs which dug into him every time he so much as breathed didn’t help with that at all. The rain was still falling in torrents, dripping down from the overhead foliage and soaking through Dipper’s shirt. Well, what was left of it after that snake-creature had ripped right through him. Dipper probably looked like he’d been dragged through the mud and left to rot in a ditch. His only consolation was the fact that somewhere along that continuous conga line of injury, he’d become completely numb to the cold.

Dipper froze as he heard a cracking noise come from above. An owl hooted, and flapped away. He exhaled.

And then froze again as a flash of teeth and scales darted into his field of vision.

It vanished just as quickly, but the sight immediately left him on edge. The creature was searching for him.

C’mon, Bill.

No matter how hard he concentrated, Bill didn’t respond. Either the demon was ignoring him (which wasn’t outside the realm of possibility) or that ‘mind link’ that Bill was referring to only went one way.

The light flashed again. It was getting closer. And again. So close that Dipper shifted backwards instinctively.

That was a mistake. A stick snapped as he moved, barely audible above the pouring rain. The creature immediately swivelled its head in his direction, before shooting at him, gaping maw outstretched.

Panicking, Dipper attempted to disentangle himself from the bush’s grasp, but the thickly clustered branches which rendered it a suitable hiding place were now a hindrance to his attempts at escape. He struggled, twigs digging into his skin like claws. His efforts were in vain, and he could only thrash helplessly as the creature once again plunged right through his chest, the force sending him hurtling upwards like a ragdoll.

He landed with a thud and a snap. Probably broken bones. Again. He was unable to place exactly where the damage was, due to a generalised sensation of agony emanating from every part of his body.

Groaning, Dipper cracked open his eyes to see a pair of feet. His gaze travelled upwards to meet Thorne’s.

Thorne’s expression was blank, his irises glowing that unnatural grey colour. An involuntary vision of cloud-smothered skies and grey seas flashed past Dipper’s eyes before he was snatched up off the
ground by the neck. Was possessed-Thorne going to try strangle him again? Hadn’t he figured out by now that wasn’t going to work?

Apparently so. Dipper’s eyes widened as Thorne’s other hand came up to grab him at the shoulder. His mangled body was unable to struggle as, with supernatural strength, Thorne began to pull-

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Cherie, like most teenage girls, had gone through phases. One particular phase involved a particularly unsettling fascination with the morbid, as well as an increasing affinity with the Goths. She had spent hours poring over books detailing the increasingly gruesome ways one could die. Decapitation, whilst nowhere near the worst cause of death a person could experience, had always held a particularly strong interest for her.

The separation of the thinking parts of the body from those that functioned. The realisation that the human head – that critical control room which housed the senses, which contained the brain – was tenuously linked to the rest of the body by a relatively fragile link known as the neck. And that neck could be so, so easily broken with the right tools. She’d stared at the mechanisms which made up the guillotine, simultaneously repulsed and intrigued.

One thing which had stuck with her was the theory that beheaded victims didn’t immediately die. That the head could survive some seconds after being severed from the rest of the body. That the still-living person could remain in an excruciating state of consciousness, completely aware of the torturous pain, until the brain was deprived of oxygen and death finally claimed them. She had shuddered, closed the book, and moved on to the next. But this fixation had remained with her, a fear deeply entrenched in her subconscious which only emerged to flavour her nightmares.

None of this had prepared her for the sight of her boyfriend literally ripping Dipper Pines’ head off his shoulders.

Cherie let out an involuntary, choked-off scream.

Thorne, still clutching Dipper’s dismembered head, spun to face her. Blood dribbled profusely from his fingers, pooling on the ground. The rain puddles gathered at his feet quickly stained crimson.

But what struck her the most was the completely detached expression on Thorne’s face. Not a single facial muscle had twitched since Cherie had seen him. In fact, he seemed completely unaffected by the fact he had just torn a boy’s head off his shoulders.

She cringed back in fear as he registered her presence. His eyes changed subtly, losing an unearthly light which Cherie had failed to notice until now. His expression changed as well, to one of dawning horror as his eyes darted between Cherie and the head he currently held in his hands.

His fingers slackened, his grip loosening.

Dipper’s head fell to the ground with a dull thud.

They stood unmoving in a moment of mutual shock. Even the rain had briefly ceased to fall. Their surroundings were completely still, as though time itself had paused to process this turn of events.

Thorne took a step back, his entire body beginning to shake and shiver. He clutched his head in his hands, letting out a tormented roar. And time suddenly, inconsiderately, sprang back into action.

Dipper’s body – the one which had been deprived of its head and therefore logically should not have been able to move – began to scramble forwards, using its arms to propel itself across the ground. It
reached outwards, grasping blindly, until one hand closed around Thorne’s left ankle.

Thorne made a sound caught between terror and repulsion, stumbling backwards, kicking out in an attempt to extricate himself. Cherie could only watch in disbelief as Dipper’s headless body clawed upwards, lurching to its feet and staggering forwards, arms outstretched as though seeking retribution for its fate. Thorne let out a noise of panic, thrashing away like a frightened animal. He backed away, his eyes wide and terrified. As the gruesome apparition continued to advance, he backed away, further and further until a final stumbling lunge forwards sent him sprinting away.

Cherie, for her part, continued to watch, uncomprehending, as Dipper’s decapitated body flailed about aimlessly. The ‘aimlessly’ part didn’t register until a few minutes of staring rooted to the spot, whereupon Dipper’s body only succeeded in wandering about blindly, bumping into trees and lurching over the thickly bunched shrubbery. It reminded her of something out of a cartoon – something that would be almost comical if this wasn’t real life and this wasn’t her friend’s somehow still-moving decapitated body.

Maybe she was dreaming. That would explain the insanity of this evening. She dug her fingernail into her palm, feeling a sharp sting. No such luck.

Or maybe, she thought desperately, this was one of those prank shows. Any moment now some guy was going to pop up from the bushes with a camera and yell out something along the lines of “You just got KER-PRANK’D!” There was a show like that, right?

A few more minutes of staring dumbly at the back-and-forth flounder of Dipper’s body indicated that maybe, just maybe, this might not be a prank.

Cherie jumped as her phone buzzed with noise. This time, it (thankfully) wasn’t a call, but instead a short high-pitched beep indicating the reception of a message. Keeping an eye on Dipper (who had tripped over a tree root and was now attempting to roll under a bush), she pulled it out of her pocket, glancing at the screen. A message from ‘Dipper’. Of course, since it was obvious that Dipper was currently in no state to be handling a phone, the message was evidently from that previous caller.

_Dipper Pines: LOOKS LIKE PINE TREE CAN’T KEEP HIS HEAD IN A CRISIS!_

Of course. Cherie wasn’t entirely certain why she should have expected this, but she probably should have seen it coming anyway. She managed to type a message one-handed while simultaneously stepping back to dodge Dipper’s shambling attempts to claw his way… not towards her, but in her general direction.

_Cherie McKay: ok his heads off but his bodys still moving wtf do i do_


_Dipper Pines: BUT FIRST CAN YOU FIND PINE TREE’S HEAD AND STICK IT BACK ON HIS BODY_

_Dipper Pines: WATCHING HIM EMULATE THE UNDEAD GETS OLD REAL QUICK_

So… Dipper was only ‘emulating’ a zombie? That meant he wasn’t actually dead, right? Cherie stared at Dipper’s headless body, which had seemingly abandoned whatever futile quest it had set out to accomplish and was now lying flat in a puddle, occasionally twitching. Cherie flinched, and
looked back at her phone.

Cherie McKay: stick it back on

Cherie McKay: how

Dipper Pines: JUST TAKE HIS HEAD AND PUT IT BACK ON HIS BODY. PINE TREE’S HEALING SHOULD DO THE REST. YEESH, THIS ISN’T NECROMANCY 101!

Cherie swallowed. Dipper’s head was lying on the ground, having rolled a little ways from where Thorne had dropped it. Sidestepping the rest of Dipper’s body, she stooped, reached out, hesitated. Drew her hand back a little as her stomach lurched. Grimaced, steeling herself. Tentatively gripped Dipper’s hair in the tips of her fingers so as to minimise contact. She managed to lever herself back to a standing position, holding Dipper’s dismembered head far away from herself as though it physically repelled her.

Blood leaked from Dipper’s neck as his head slowly swayed and turned in the wind. Eurghhh. Cherie’s only consolation was that his eyes were closed. She wasn’t entirely certain how she’d be able to cope if she was doing this with Dipper’s eyes open. Or even worse, moving. Which wasn’t entirely improbable, given what the rest of his body was capable of doing.

Nervously, she approached Dipper’s decapitated body, which was languishing on the ground in a sodden heap. The only signs of life were a periodic twitching, like a dead frog being sprinkled with salt. Cherie lowered Dipper’s head, dangling it above his neck in an attempt to align them together. A few failed attempts later, she was confronted with the unwelcome realisation that she might actually have to touch him to get it to work.

Cherie reluctantly reached out to grasp Dipper’s shoulder, feeling a little as though she was sticking her hand into a bear trap. She shuddered. His skin was clammy and cold to the touch, and damp with what was either rainwater, sweat, or blood. Probably all three.

With the other hand, she tried to reconnect Dipper’s head to his neck. The cut hadn’t been clean, jagged edges of flesh and torn skin dangling from Dipper’s head like a particularly macabre wind chime. Even so, she eventually managed to connect Dipper’s extremities back together, her feat culminating in the gradual emergence of a subtle blue light glowing within Dipper’s chest. It flickered like a flame, so faint she wouldn’t have been able to see it if Dipper’s shirt hadn’t already been torn to shreds (what was with that, anyway?).

Cherie stared in repulsed fascination as the wound began to knit itself back together. Bones regrouped, tendons rejoined and muscle interwove itself back into its original state with a sickening squelch. She watched as skin crept across the wound, like burning paper in reverse, until every last trace of damage had vanished.

And then she stood, letting Dipper’s limp (but now whole) body tumble to the ground, and threw up in the bushes.

Chapter End Notes

Whoa, this update was long overdue! Break ended for me a while back, and I’ve been pretty busy lately with other priorities. Updates will definitely slow down, but I’ll do my best to keep them semi-regular. Many thanks for your patience!
Also, I imagine that Bill’s ‘ringtone’ sounds like this (WARNING: DISTURBING LOUD NOISE). That being said, I’m pretty sure that was just Bill screwing with some hapless victims and their recording equipment. I have it on good authority that the sounds of Hell are in fact ‘It’s a Small World’, played on infinite repeat. After all, as everybody knows, Disney is the Illuminati and Gravity Falls just serves to prove it.
Dipper woke up.

He immediately regretted it. Every inch of his body ached with a dull, throbbing pain. He swallowed. The muscles around his neck were stiff, tightening convulsively as he did so. His throat felt like it had been replaced with razorblade saws. What was going on?

…Right. Thorne. The last thing he could recall was Thorne, in that possessed fugue state, attempting to extricate Dipper’s head from his body. Judging from the pain emanating from Dipper’s neck, he’d succeeded. It was probably fortunate Dipper couldn’t remember that part.

To his side, there was a hacking noise. It took a moment for him to register it as someone coughing. With great effort, Dipper gritted against the pain, turning his head towards the source of the sound. He squinted, trying to make out the silhouette. Too small to be Thorne, and that coughing noise was distinctly female. He tried to call out, but his vocal chords refused to cooperate, letting out a hoarse croak instead.

It was enough to attract the attention of the figure, who spun around and sprinted to his side. “Dipper? Are you okay?”

Cherie? What was she doing here?

Dipper’s thoughts were interrupted as the world threatened to spin around him. He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth, riding out a wave of nausea. A hand gripped his shoulder firmly. “Looks like you’re mostly okay.”

“What happened?” he finally managed to croak.

Cherie was silent for a moment. “Thorne ripped your head off. Like, literally ripped it off. I put you back together. Which shouldn’t have been possible, but I know I didn’t imagine your headless body stumbling around like an extra in a freaking Michael Jackson music video. So you’ve, like, got a lot of explaining to do.”

Dipper’s head was spinning, and it was only partially due to his remaining vertigo. He closed his eyes, trying to process recent events in his head. So Cherie knew about his immortality – or at least his ability to heal from decapitation. And Thorne had managed to tear Dipper’s head off his shoulders. It was a testament to all Dipper had been through that the thought failed to merit more than a vague sense of relief that at least he couldn’t remember the incident.

Though there was still one question left unanswered. “How did you know where I was?” Dipper said, sitting up. He was drenched in rainwater and his shirt was in tatters, but self-consciousness was the last thing on his mind at the moment.

“Your friend called me and told me you were here.” Cherie pulled out her phone. “He made some thinly veiled threats to murder Thorne if I didn’t come. Which was, like, the least weird thing about him. He was using your number. Called you ‘Pine Tree’ a lot. There were some disturbing things which happened when he called which I’d normally chalk up to coincidence, but after seeing Thorne decapitate you…” Cherie paused, glancing sharply in his direction. “…He wasn’t human, was he? What was he? And while we’re at it, what’re you?”
So this was Bill’s idea of help? This was what he meant when he’d asked Dipper to depend on him? Calling up Thorne’s girlfriend on the off chance she might be able to ward him off? That was… that was…

… Actually, that wasn’t too bad, as far as Bill’s ideas went. Simple solution, no hidden swindles, minimal maiming. Well, Dipper got maimed, but that was beginning to become par for the course. “Uh. So. This is going to sound hard to believe-“

“- I just watched your headless body do its best interpretation of an Egyptian mummy.” Cherie interrupted impatiently. “Like, there’s not much I’d find hard to believe at the moment.”

“…Right. So the guy who called you is a demon. His name’s Bill Cipher. To make a long story short, he was trying to do some pretty terrible things, so Mabel and I had to seal him. The spell we used bound him to me, meaning he needs my energy to survive. And it probably has something to do with the fact I can’t die. I’m not too sure, though. We haven’t exactly been on speaking terms for the past few years.” Dipper scratched his head sheepishly, bracing one hand beneath him in a motion which usually would have given him the momentum necessary to roll to his feet. In his current condition however, all he managed to do was let out a pained hiss at the sensation ripping though him the moment he attempted to exert his strength, followed by a defeated slump.

“So, like, he really was a demon?” Cherie held out her hand, which Dipper accepted gratefully, helping him up to his feet. “That explains all the ringing.”

“The ringing?”

“Never mind, it’s nothing.” Cherie said, a little too quickly. “So you have any idea why Thorne’s suddenly developed homicidal urges in your general direction? Like, he’s been acting weirdly jealous, but not murderously jealous.”

“I think,” Dipper began cautiously, “he might be possessed.” He waved away Cherie’s proffered arm and immediately regretted it. His legs screamed with every step he took.

“Possessed?”

“Yeah. His eyes were glowing a weird colour, and he somehow summoned this creature made of light. Looked like a snake.” Dipper closed his eyes, focusing for a moment. “Where’s my bag?”

“Your bag? Didn’t see it anywhere.” Cherie scanned the immediate area. “Nope. Did you, like, drop it somewhere?”

“I probably dumped it on the ground when Thorne was chasing me.” Dipper sighed, rubbing his face. Cherie let out a helpless-sounding laugh. “My boyfriend’s possessed, you’re immortal and there’s somehow a demon involved. There’s, like, a lot I have to take in right now. This is all so weird.” Dipper patted her sympathetically on the shoulder. “You’ll get used to it.”

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They found Dipper’s bag on the side of a pathway leading up to Muirfield Park. Cherie was the first to spot it, running up to snatch it from the ground, slinging one strap around her back, her other shoulder being occupied with her own bag. She staunchly refused to let Dipper carry it.

“I’ll walk you home.” She said firmly. “That way I’ll be able to ward off Thorne if he tries to attack
you again.”

Dipper privately thought that there was little Thorne could actually do by way of permanently wounding him, but appreciated the company nonetheless. They slowly made their way to Dipper’s house, Cherie subjecting Dipper to a constant barrage of questions about the supernatural, about Gravity Falls and about Bill Cipher.

“Well, he helped you out, so he can’t be all that bad, right?”

“I don’t know about that.” Dipper said. “In my experience, everything Bill does is for his own benefit. He’s always playing people in order to further his goals, and he’s always got a bunch of plans up his sleeve. Best case scenario, he’s doing this because he depends on me to survive. Worst case… well, I’d rather not think of the worst case scenario.”

Cherie hummed. “Didn’t get that vibe from him. But anyway,” Cherie cut off as she and Dipper ducked under some particularly low-hanging branches, “does Mabel know about this? You mentioned she helped you seal him.”

Dipper groaned. “Yeah, I haven’t told her yet.” He lifted the umbrella higher above their heads. He had insisted on carrying it, seeing that Cherie was currently toting both their bags. “It’s just really complicated, and I don’t want her to worry or freak out. I swear I’ll sit her down and talk to her about this at some point, but right now even I don’t know what’s going on.”

Cherie gave him a sceptical look. “Just don’t, like, keep trying to lie and hide it from her. Secrets this big are basically time bombs. The more you wait, the more likely it’s gonna blow up in your face.”

“I know, I know.” Dipper sighed. “I’ll tell her. But right now I’ve got bigger problems. Like figuring out whatever’s going on with Thorne.”

“How are you planning to do that?”

“Well, there’s been a recent trend of supernatural occurrences in Chapelwick, and Thorne’s possession fits the pattern.” Dipper said, foregoing further explanation. “So I guess I’ll have to research. Back in Gravity Falls, I usually looked for books or people who could tell me more about it.”

Cherie brightened. “I know the perfect person you could ask! There’s a friend of mine who lives at Chapelwick Cathedral. Her name’s Virtue, and she’s lived in Chapelwick since, like, forever. Plus she knows so much about mythology. Kinda religious – like you couldn’t tell from her name – but she likes to read about other religions and folklore and that sort of stuff.”

“Wait. Doesn’t Seraph live at Chapelwick Cathedral?” Dipper asked, startled.

“You met Seraph?” Cherie stared at him, wide eyed, a perfect echo of Archie a few days ago. “I thought she left Chapelwick.”

“Apparently she came back.” Dipper shrugged.

“Boy, wonder how Angela’s handling that.” Cherie murmured, sotto voce. Louder, she said, “Virtue actually became Seraph’s legal guardian after Seraph’s parents passed away. She… uh… partially owns the cathedral or something? I’m not too clear on the details, but basically Virtue’s the one who manages the cathedral.”

“Like a trustee?”
“Something like that.” Cherie waved a hand dismissively. “You want someone to talk to about old-time Chapelwick magic-y junk, she’s your woman.”

“Thanks.” Dipper said. “So, uh, that’s my house.” Fortunately, none of the windows of the house were lit, indicating that everyone had gone to bed already. His family had already become accustomed to his late arrival times since he’d started working with Cherie. He could probably sneak in with little fuss.

“No problem.” Cherie handed his bag over, before giving him an up-and-down glance. “Shame about your… uh…” she gestured at his tattered clothes.

Dipper grimaced slightly. “It’s not that big a deal. I’ve got, like, ten of the exact same outfit.”

Cherie raised a judging eyebrow, but otherwise didn’t comment. “Well, stay safe. Call me if anything comes up.”

“Yep. And sorry about all the trouble. And the trauma.” Dipper flushed self-consciously.

“I’ll get over it. Eventually.” Cherie shrugged. “Good night!”

“Night. And… uh… you should probably text me when you get home just in case anything happens.”

“Sounds like a good idea.” Cherie smiled.

Dipper waved at her from the front porch as he unlocked the door and slipped in. The house was, thankfully, silent. He made his way up the stairs, skipping the one which always creaked. As he entered his bedroom, his previously dammed-up exhaustion broke over him like a wave. He barely had the energy to strip out of his ruined clothes and stash them under his mattress for later disposal. He could deal with any questionable stains later.

Dipper was already half-unconscious by the time he collapsed into his bed. He quickly sunk into the abyss of sleep. With his last vestiges of awareness, he felt something pull the covers to cover him.

In his fatigued state, he had failed to notice a familiar triangular shape balanced atop his headboard, its single eye gazing down upon him impassively.

As Dipper dreamed, Bill watched over him, a silent, unmoving guardian.

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Dipper squinted through the sun’s rays as he stumbled off the bus, mumbling thanks to the driver. Chapelwick Cathedral loomed above him, the towering stone monument intimidatingly still. The redwood which made up the large double doors suddenly gave him the impression of a gaping maw, a feeling which wasn’t helped by the fact that these doors were closed.

He frowned. Why would the cathedral be closed in the middle of the day?

Dipper attempted knocking on the door, the sound loud enough to echo within the cathedral itself, but there was no response. Weird.

Resigning himself to a wasted trip, he turned around with the intention of heading back home. When he did so though, something caught his attention. A small grey puppy was running back and forth energetically across the cathedral’s lawns. He glanced around for its owner, but the grounds seemed otherwise deserted. Shrugging, he began to make his way back towards the bus stop, when he
noticed an insistent pressure nudging against his shins.

A cursory glance behind him revealed it was the puppy, which was nuzzling its head into his legs. Smiling slightly, Dipper kneeled down to pat it. The puppy responded eagerly, lifting its head and jumping into his arms – OH GOD WHAT HAD HAPPENED TO ITS FACE.

The small creature in his hold was quite unusual in the fact that it seemed to be missing any facial appendages. No, rather than saying it had no face, it was perhaps more accurate to say that its face had been replaced with a pulsing concave orifice of dark crimson flesh, as though some callous individual had seen fit to take a carving knife to its features.

Dipper stared dumbly as the puppy (?) wriggled around in his arms, seeming none the worse for wear. What was even going on-?

“SURPRISEEEL!” A familiar voice reverberated around him, sending vibrations rumbling through his surroundings. The world started to shake, and Dipper could only watch in a numbness born of shock as it began to crumble into fragments, falling apart before his eyes. Before long, he was in that familiar black void, the faceless puppy still clutched in his arms. The ground beneath him was neither smooth nor rough, and despite the lack of any visible source of light, he could still see his arms and legs clearly.

“…Bill?” He asked hesitantly, taking a few steps forward.

“DOWN HERE, KID!” The ground beneath Dipper suddenly lit up with a golden glow. Dipper, for his part, was confronted with the rather disconcerting revelation that he had been standing on top of Bill all along. “Didya like my present? Adorable, isn’t it?”

“Are you talking about this?” Dipper pointed at the puppy, whose tail was rapidly flicking against his arms and who, alerted to Dipper’s attention, tried to squish its fleshy cavity of a face into his. He managed to dodge what was either a gesture of affection or an attempt to devour him. “Because this isn’t exactly what I’d call adorable.” The puppy made a gurgling noise and rested its head in the crook of its shoulder.

“Yeesh, picky much? You humans have NO taste. Can’t even give someone a wailing possum skull nowadays without them freaking out and calling me a ‘weirdo’ or ‘psychotic’!” Bill rolled his eye, shifting to a vertical position so he could face Dipper.

Unfortunately for Dipper, Bill had also been what he’d been standing on, so the movement was accompanied with a plummeting sensation and sudden freefall. He yelled in alarm as he plunged towards the likely bottomless void beneath him.

Fortunately, a gigantic black hand caught him before he could drop too far. “WHOOPS! Sorry about that, kid! Keep forgetting how deeply ingrained you fleshbags’ sense of gravity is!”

Still rather winded, it took Dipper a while to regain his bearings. The faceless dog in his arms, however, seemed none the worse for wear. It snuffled into his shirt, leaving a smear of blood on the fabric. Dipper tried not to wince.

A giant finger prodded his side, sending him stumbling a little. ”You alright there, Pine Tree? Shame you don’t wear that nifty lil’ hat anymore! Now my nickname for you makes no sense! But that’s fine, because I DON’T MAKE SENSE ANYWAY!”


“Funny you should ask that, ’cause I was about to ask the same thing! Only,” Bill leaned in, his
single eye staring down upon Dipper, somehow casting a shadow upon him despite the absence of light. “I ALREADY KNOW WHAT YOU WANT.” His final words were spoken in a deep, menacing tone which echoed throughout the void despite its lack of any viable surfaces for words to echo from.

Dipper fought off the instinctive creeping fear which always seemed to rear its ugly head whenever Bill decided to act like this. Judging by the smug look in Bill’s eye, he wasn’t doing a very good job. “Since you seem to know better than I do, what do you think I want?” He crossed his arms defensively.

“Oh, it’s OBVIOUS. You want ANSWERS, don’t you?” Bill somehow managed to imbue these two sentences with pure, distilled condescension. “And I’m the only one who can give them to you! Even so…” Bill’s entire body turned black and began to smoke at the edges, “do you really think I’m going to give them away just like THAT?” He snapped the fingers of the hand which wasn’t holding Dipper. “After that STUNT you pulled five years ago?” He sounded genuinely angry, his voice reverberating with the force of five years’ pent up resentment.

Despite his better judgement, Dipper stared down at his feet, feeling guilt course though him. Even the puppy in his arms had gone completely still. “So that’s it, then.” He said quietly. Bill wasn’t going to forgive him. He wasn’t going to explain. He’d only saved Dipper because his existence depended on him. Which was to be expected, really, but some small part of Dipper which had dared to hope-

“So that’s it…?” Bill repeated slowly, as though he didn’t quite understand. His body slowly faded back to yellow.

“You’re not going to help me.” Dipper said resignedly. “And you’re still pissed off about Gravity Falls. I get it already.”

Bill stared at him for a moment, before flinging his head (or rather, his entire body) back and laughing. Dipper stood there, a little bemused. It took a few aborted attempts at speech before Bill could control his laughter enough to manage coherence. “…Pine Tree. Oh, Pine Tree. I just remembered why I liked you so much! You’re just so endearingly OBTUSE!” He devolved into a fresh peal of laughter. “HA! TRIANGLE PUNS!”

“What are you talking about?” Dipper demanded, and squawked as a gigantic finger reached out to ruffle his hair. The puppy in his arms wriggled upwards eagerly, attempting to smush its head into Bill’s hand.

“Kid, didya really think I’d go to all THIS trouble for someone I hate?” Bill spread his arms wide, his body flickering with images of the past few months. The Redcaps, Thorne, something that looked like the mangled corpse of a horse. Most of it was lost on Dipper, who let out an alarmed sound, forced to drop to a crouch so as to avoid being swept off by the sudden motion. “Sorry about that! But you catch my gist, don’t you?”

“You need me to survive.” Dipper said, desperately trying to quash the hope growing in his chest. “That’s pretty much why you’re helping me.”

“Psssht.” Bill flapped a hand dismissively. “You’re IMMORTAL. If I wanted to, I could just let you hit EVERY branch on the way down the immortality tree. But instead, I’ve saved you TWICE, saved your sister, let your thorny friend live even though it would be infinitely more satisfying to DISMEMBER HIS LIMBS AND PLUCK HIS SINEWS LIKE VIOLIN STRINGS, oh, AND I’ve shared my coffee with you! I don’t just share my coffee with anyone, kid!”
… Dammit. Try as he might, Dipper couldn’t suppress the hope which flared up inside him once again, like a particularly stubborn ulcer. “So… now you’re saying that you are going to help me? You’re sending some real mixed messages here.”

Bill let out an exaggeratedly put-upon sigh. “I’m not saying I’m going to HELP you, kid. I’m saying I’ve been HELPING YOU ALL ALONG.”

“And if I said I wanted answers?” Dipper raised his chin, looking Bill in the eye.

“Then I’d say, Pine Tree,” Bill’s gaze turned promising, “that we need to talk.”

Chapter End Notes

Eleven chapters, more than forty thousand words and Bill and Dipper finally have their first proper conversation.

…I think I’m Billdipping wrong.
“Then I’d say, Pine Tree,” Bill’s gaze turned promising, “that we need to talk.”

Bill tried to keep his expression neutral, to suppress the relief that had him nearly lightheaded. “Wow, okay.” Nice, that didn’t give him away at all. He cleared his throat awkwardly and continued. “So. Uh. Guess that means you’re talking now.”

“And that means you should be honoured, kid! The pearls of wisdom falling from THIS mouth aren’t for just anyone’s ears! You wouldn’t BELIEVE the things people’ve offered me for just a titbit of advice!” Bill snapped his fingers, a rain of treasure showering down upon them, before disappearing into the endless void beneath their feet.

“Yeah, I probably wouldn’t.” Dipper replied dryly, dodging an incoming gold ingot about the size of his head. The puppy in his arms made a noise that either a whine or a scream of agony. “So why haven’t you been talking for the past five years? Were you asleep or something?”

Bill’s eye flickered sharply towards him. “Sleep is for the weak and vulnerable, Pine Tree. A time for the oblivious to close their eyes and ears to the terrors which lurk just outside their field of consciousness, lulling themselves into a false sense of security. Which conveniently gives demons like ME free access to the terrors which lurk inside THEM!” He paused. “Well. GAVE, anyway.”

“So… you weren’t asleep.” Dipper concluded, ignoring the rest of his tirade. “In that case, why weren’t you talking?”

“WEEEELLLL…” Bill’s eye flicked from left to right. “Alright, kid, I’ll concede I’m not exactly used to being gotten the better of. So for the first year I MIGHT’VE been in something resembling a state of shock. I mean, you would too if you were an OMNISCIENT BEING OF PURE ENERGY CHANNELLING AND STORING EVERY SINGLE BIT OF INFORMATION GENERATED BY EVEN THE MOST INCONSEQUENTIAL UNICELLULAR ORGANISM, only to get ripped away from it all and forced into the crudely linear perspective of a single human being. I mean, the number of dimensions you fleshbags can perceive is still in the single digits! It’s SCANDALOUS, I tell you!”

“Bill,” Dipper said, suspicions beginning to form in the back of his mind, “were you…”

“And MAYBE I spent the years after that working through the Kübler-Ross model – only except of bargaining, us demons have this thing where we raze the nearest village—“

“Bill.”

“- to the ground in an inferno of destruction and suffering. Except I couldn’t do that for obvious reasons, so I was stuck in this feedback loop—“
“Bill.”

“... and that really only made things worse! It wasn’t until I murdered those gnome-ripoffs that I could begin working on that backlog of latent emotional issues-“

“Bill.” Dipper said. Surprisingly, Bill stopped rambling. “Were you giving me the silent treatment?”

“HAHAHA, ME? Give YOU the silent treatment?” Bill said, a little too loudly and more than a little too quickly. “That would imply I’d have anything to say to you in the first place! BESIDES, that’s not what we demons call it! There’s a lot of cultural nuance lost in translation, but the rough interpretation is-“

“You gave me the silent treatment for five years.” Dipper said, more awed than angry. “You managed to sulk about Gravity Falls for five whole years.”

“Oh, like YOU haven’t held grudges before.” Bill snapped, turning red. Steam was beginning to rise off his surface. “Maybe I thought you were too far below me to be worth forgiving! For instance, would you bother forgiving a mosquito for sucking your blood?”

“A mosquito never ruined the plans I spent centuries putting into place.” Dipper said pointedly.

“In that case, how does another CENTURY OF SILENCE sound to you?” Bill demanded, growing in size until all Dipper could see was his glaring pupil, his voice thundering through the void. The puppy let out another whine-scream sound and tucked its head into Dipper’s armpit.

“Whoa, okay there.” Dipper held out a placating hand. “I, uh, didn’t mean to rub it in or anything. And for the record, I didn’t exactly know what activating the zodiac was supposed to do. It was... more of a group effort.”

“OF COURSE you wouldn’t.” Bill said, smoothly reverting to his previous size, sounding almost normal again. “You simpleminded fleshbags’ brains are ridiculously limited in capacity. I would know, I’ve been living in YOURS for the last five years!”

Dipper made a mental note to himself that stroking Bill’s ego was an effective tactic in volatile situations. Out loud, he said, “So does the fact that you’ve started talking to me again mean you’ve forgiven me?”

When Bill failed to reply for a long moment, Dipper glanced up nervously. The demon was fiddling with his bow tie, as though lost in thought. “Pine Tree,” he finally said, “I’ve tried to drive your family apart multiple times. I’ve manipulated you. I’ve used you as my puppet. I almost brought the apocalypse down on your head.”

“Yeah. You, uh… certainly did all that.” Dipper said, a tad bemused. “And?”

“And do you forgive me for that? For actively trying to make your life a miserable mess? Well, more of a miserable mess than the average human standard, I mean.” Bill quickly amended. “CAN you forgive me for that?”

Dipper looked away from Bill’s knowing stare. He tried to think of a reply, either affirmative or negative, but his brain seemed as empty as the void they were currently standing within. The puppy extricated its head from his armpit and tried to nose his face again, leaving a streak of blood. Dipper absentely wiped it off with the back of his hand.

“Well?”
“Yeah, I get what you mean.” Dipper finally mumbled.

“Glad to see we’re on the same page, kid!” Bill said, incongruously light-hearted cheer returning to his voice. “It’s not that I WON’T forgive you, it’s that your actions don’t fall within the general range of activities one can be forgiven for! Likewise,” Bill shrugged, tilting his top hat slightly, “I’m not gonna kid myself that you’re going to forgive me for all the GLORIOUS ATROCITIES I’ve committed! Looks like we’re even stevens for now, Pine Tree!”

Dipper was privately certain that being forced to seal a demon out of duress was nowhere near the level of attempting to bring about the end of the world via sheer power-hungry malice, but he kept his thoughts to himself. Besides, it was probably the same thing under Bill’s abstract sense of morality. “So where are we, exactly?” he said instead, turning his head to examine the void. As to be expected, there was little to actually examine.

“…My mindscape. Or part of it, anyway.” Bill answered reluctantly, sounding as though the answer had been dragged out of him. Dipper gave him a surprised look.

“Whoa. This is your mindscape?” He looked around again. “A little emptier than I expected.”

Bill waved his hand dismissively. “If I was in the habit of inviting guests, I’d have spruced the place up a little! Besides, it’s still an improvement from the STIFLINGLY OPPRESSIVE CLOSETS you keep shoving me in! And you’re SURPRISED I wasn’t talking to you!”

Dipper looked down, a little embarrassed. The puppy in his arms seemed to have tuckered itself out from overexcitement, and was (presumably) snoozing away, having positioned itself in a manner that its pulsing crimson orifice of a face directly pointed towards Dipper. He shivered and looked back up. “Do you know if we can get to your mindscape from here? I’m pretty curious to see what it looks like. And also a bit creeped out by how desolate Bill’s mindscape felt. He was finding it hard to reconcile the disparity between Bill’s dramatic antics and this empty echoing chasm of his mind.

“Well, duh.” Bill said, as though it was obvious. It probably was to him. “Yeesh, you’re thicker than a brand new Scientology recruit! Haven’t you learned ANYTHING from your time in the mindscape? Newsflash, genius: this is your DREAM. Anything’s possible in your dreams!”

“Oh, right.” Dipper flushed, remembering the events of Grunkle Stan’s mindscape. “So if I just focus like this…”

He closed his eyes, concentrating on the thoughts flowing through his mind like a stream within the woods.

When he opened his eyes, he was somewhere else entirely.

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Black-and white conifers stretched overhead, forming vectors which drew his eyes to the overhanging sky. As per usual for the mindscape, Dipper’s surroundings were cast in chiaroscuro, like one of the Stans’ old-timey films. The only source of colour were the lights swirling overhead. It was as though shooting stars had flocked together in a vibrant spiral of motion, leaving trails of colour behind them like the lights of an aurora. Twigs and leaves crunched as Dipper walked forwards, his eyes locked on the dancing luminosities above him. He could hear the sound of water running over rocks some distance away.

The puppy in his arms snuffled awake, and Dipper stooped to let it wriggle out of his arms. It headbutted him affectionately before scurrying away on its short legs.
“So it’s true what they say! You can take the Pine Tree outta the woods, but you can’t take the woods outta the Pine Tree!” Bill’s voice rang out behind him. “Guess you really FELL for Gravity Falls, didn’t you?”

Dipper felt a corner jab into his neck as Bill, now what Dipper had come to term his ‘regular’ size, perched himself on his shoulder. “It did leave an impression.” He settled down on a conveniently large log, keeping his eyes locked on the stars. “So… this is my mindscape, huh?”

He rather liked it. Grunkle Stan’s mindscape had been stifling, the air thick with old regrets and deceptions. But this place was peaceful. Calming. Dipper felt his entire body relax as he inhaled its familiar woody scent. “Have you been here before?”

“Ehh, I swing by sometimes.” Bill said, snapping his fingers. A nearby pile of sticks burst into blue flames, forming an impromptu fireplace. It must have been for appearances, since Dipper couldn’t sense any change in temperature, nor had he felt any chill in the first place. “Full disclosure: I MIGHT’VE accidentally jumbled a few of your memories while poking around. On a completely unrelated note, have you ever heard of the Purple Polyglot?”

“The Purple Polyglot?” Dipper frowned. “No, I don’t think so. What is it?”

“Definitely nothing of crucial importance!” Bill briskly tapped his cane against his foot. “Or at least I don’t THINK it was!”

“Bill,” Dipper said, a little helplessly, “can you try keep the messing-with-my-mind thing to a minimum? I’d really like to hold onto as much of my sanity as I can.”

“Kid, messing with people’s minds is WHO I AM!” Bill flew to face Dipper, spreading his arms wide in emphasis. “Now that you’ve tied our souls together like a trefoil knot, you’re the only way I can get my kicks nowadays!”

“Wait,” Dipper’s eyes went wide, “our souls? You already mentioned that we’ve got a mind link and a… uh… lifespan link, but now you’re telling me that our souls are joined together as well? What the hell did that spell even do?”

Bill gave him a long, disbelieving look. “Yeesh, kid! Guess I’m on exposition duty, since it looks like I completely underestimated the sheer depths of your incompetence! Every time I think you’ve plumbed the ultimate lows of stupidity, you’re ready to prove me wrong! You could probably house an ENTIRE RING OF ELDER GODS in that ABYSS OF IGNORANCE!”

“Hey!” Dipper said, nettled.

“Shut up and sit down, Pine Tree.” Bill shoved his hat into Dipper’s mouth, effectively cutting off Dipper’s protest that he was already sitting down, geez. “SO!” Bill switched to a lively tone more suited to a television host, a spotlight appearing out of nowhere to shine down upon him. “Have YOU been experiencing strange phenomena lately? Have you been healing unnaturally quickly? Hearing voices in your head? Having strange, prophetic dreams? HAVE YOU SOMEHOW MANAGED TO BIND AN ALL-POWERFUL DREAM DEMON TO YOURSELF WITHOUT FULLY UNDERSTANDING THE CONSEQUENCES OF YOUR ACTIONS IN A SEVERE LAPSE OF COMMON SENSE AND GOOD JUDGEMENT? No, no, don’t answer that!” Bill flattened his hand against the front of Dipper’s face, hindering Dipper’s efforts at extricating the top hat from his mouth.

“In that case, it looks like you could be displaying the symptoms of a DEMONIC VESSEL! The symptoms of course being bonded body, mind and soul to an almighty being who definitely doesn’t
deserve to be stuck in this position! So kid, do you know what the implications of having ME as your vessel are? OF COURSE YOU DON’T, YOU’RE AN IDIOT!” Bill lifted his cane, the end of it having transformed into a neon sign reading ‘CUE LAUGHTER’. Disembodied sitcom-esque laughter began to sound from the trees around them. Dipper ducked his head and scowled around the top hat in his mouth.

“So, as we all know – or as we all SHOULD know, but obviously Pine Tree here DIDN’T GET THE MEMO – a vessel renders its bearer pretty much impervious to injury! The flipside being that any injury sustained by the vessel is then transferred onto the bearer. So if the vessel’s destroyed, its bearer is too! Simple, right? Well, obviously not simple enough for YOU, but if we always had to bring things down to your level, the earthworms might find they have some competition!”

*Your metaphor doesn’t even make that much sense,* Dipper thought resentfully.

“So what does it mean if your vessel’s an indestructible dream demon, HMM?” Bill poked Dipper in the cheek with his cane. “No answer, huh? Well, lemme tell you! That makes you IMMORTAL! Do you get it now?”

Dipper finally managed to extricate Bill’s hat from his mouth. He tossed it away, but it vaporised before it could hit the ground, reappearing atop Bill’s head in a burst of blue flame. “Yes, okay, I get that! What I was *asking* was exactly what the spell did to bind us like this! Like, what were its mechanisms?”

“Mechanisms?” Bill angled his body curiously. “It’s basically a deal! Well, except for the part where YOU’RE the only one who’s getting anything out of it!”

“But how did it manage to take away all your magical energy?” Dipper pressed on. “I mean, the only thing I knew about it was that it would take you out of the mindscape, and that it was supposed to ‘stop’ you.”

“The answer’s in your question, kid! You severed all my links to the mindscape, which NOT-AT-ALL-COINCIDENTALLY was my source of power! The only mindscape I had access to was yours, meaning that the only power I could access was yours! Recursive reasoning at its finest!” Bill rolled his eye. “And the proof is in the pudding! And by PUDDING, I mean that nifty little mark you’ve got right over here!” His hand shot out to jab Dipper in the middle of his chest.

“You mean the scar?” Dipper rubbed his chest self-consciously. It tingled, as though reacting to Bill’s touch.

“Well, DUH. It’s a triangle, I’M a triangle, and YOU seem to have misplaced your brain cells along with your head!” Bill rapped Dipper’s knuckles sharply with his cane.

“Ow!” Dipper hissed, snatching his hand back. “Geez, what’s gotten into you?”

“Five years of suppressed fury’ll do that to you, kid! Don’t worry, I’ve gotten most of it out of my system by now!” Bill twirled his cane back into a vertical position at his side. “ANYWAY! Any other questions I can mock you for asking?”

“Yeah, because *that’s* so encouraging.” Dipper mumbled to himself. Louder, he said, “So what’s the deal with Chapelwick, anyway? I thought Gravity Falls was meant to be this weird outlier, but it’s like the weirdness hasn’t *stopped*. In fact, I’m pretty sure it’s worse. I never got *this* mangled back in Gravity Falls.”

“That’s because you’ll never be completely free of the secrets WHICH LURK WITHIN THE
SHADOWS OF THE UNKNOWN! Wherever there’s a gap – a CHASM – in humanity’s knowledge, these mysteries lurk, ready to pull you down with them into the void! The only reason why Gravity Falls seemed ODD” – Bill made quotation marks with his fingers around the word ‘odd’ – “was because it didn’t bother to hide them! But ya wanna know something funny, kid?”

Dipper flailed backwards as Bill suddenly appeared before him, less than an inch from his face. “Secrets left to rot in the depths far beyond humanity’s comprehension… well… they fester. They grow, like an infected wound. And the longer they go without discovery, the more dangerous they become.” Bill’s voice was uncharacteristically hushed, lacking its distinctive echo, yet more conspicuous for the fact. Dipper could only watch in paralysed uncertainty as the demon slowly reached out, splaying his hand above Dipper’s scar. Again, it tingled, like calling out to like.

“And a town like this? It’s kept its secrets buried for a long, long time.” Bill’s voice deepened, his finger tracing the three dots which made up Dipper’s scar again and again. Dipper shuddered, letting out an involuntary noise. “And now YOU come. You start snooping around, wrenching all these hidden things out of their hiding places. Honestly, Pine Tree, what did you expect? That you could uproot them so easily?” A fond note crept into Bill’s voice. His hand trailed up, up, crawling up Dipper’s throat like a spider, a single finger crooking out to tilt Dipper’s head so their gazes met.

“Well, kid? No answer?” Dipper couldn’t respond, his throat clogged with something like terror, and yet not. He swallowed, his Adam’s apple brushing against Bill’s hand as he did so. His breaths had gone shallow. “Because I know what you SHOULD expect. You’re going to keep digging, like the foolhardy creature you are. Until the day you get in over your head. One day you’ll uncover something… something that’ll jump out at you AND GO ‘WARGHHHHHHH!’”

“WARGHHHHHHH!” Dipper screamed, falling off the log. He lay there on the ground awhile, rather dazed. A completely bemused expression crossed his face as he listened to Bill laughing his ass off. Annoyed, he swiped outwards with his foot, making contact with something that was hopefully the ex-dream demon. “That wasn’t funny, asshole!”

“Au contraire,” Bill said, “that was HILARIOUS!” Two arms extended to pull Dipper back into a sitting position, patting his head condescendingly before returning to their regular length.

Dipper huffed, rubbing the back of his head. His heart was still racing. “So your point – before you decided to screw with me – is that Chapelwick’s got a whole bunch of secrets, right? And they’re more dangerous than the ones in Gravity Falls because they’ve stayed hidden for longer? How does that even work?”

“Well…” Bill said, thoughtfully adjusting his bow tie, “have you ever heard of the New World Order?”

“…No?” Dipper said, a little warily, in case Bill was going to insult his intelligence again.

“MY POINT EXACTLY!” Bill proclaimed cheerfully.

Dipper gave him a disbelieving look, but decided to drop the subject. One learnt to pick their battles when it came to Bill Cipher. “Well, since you seem to know so much stuff, mind giving me a heads up on what to expect from Chapelwick?”

“FUNNY YOU SHOULD ASK, KID!” Bill snapped his fingers, blue flame licking across the floor in ordered patterns. Dipper quickly drew his feet up to his chest as fire sparked into existence dangerously close. “If you recall, I was doing some calculations with these nifty breakfast paradoxes-“
“Breakfast paradoxes?” Dipper asked, baffled.

“You know! Those swirly cinnamon things! The ones kids love the taste of!”

“You mean…” Dipper began hesitantly, “Cinnamon Toast Crunch? The cereal?” So those patterns Bill had spread across his floor were calculations?

“Yeah, that.” Bill said dismissively. “So I managed to scrape together a de facto oracle by using them to perform some third-tier metaphysical calculations, and came up with THIS!” He gestured proudly at the flames which had spread across the ground, and which Dipper could now decipher as words. Very familiar words.

TOWARDS THE HOUSE OF LIES YOU’LL GO
THE SEEDS OF THEIR DEMISE YOU’LL SOW
REMINDE THE YOUTH THEY BROUGHT SO LOW
CONCEAL THE TRUTH LIKE COINTELPRO

He frowned. “An oracle? So that’s supposed to be some kind of prophecy, right?”

“Yep!” Bill said. “And before you ask, no, I can’t help you with figuring out what it means! I’ve already distilled it to its most basic form! Trust me, kid, if you saw the original, your eyes’d pop out of your head. LITERALLY!”

He then added, a little snidely, “Plus your brain cells could probably use the exercise!”

Dipper ignored him, examining the poem carefully. “So… the house of lies, huh? That could be the church, couldn’t it? The first time I read this was the night before I went to the cathedral.” he mused, lifting his head to look at Bill. “Either way, it probably is to you, right?”

Bill shrugged. “The oracle isn’t necessarily directed towards us. It’s a general expression of where the future’s going to lead, applicable to anyone within the general vicinity! But yeah,” his tone grew sour, “I’m not too fond of all those false hope-mongers. Yeesh, just ACCEPT that life sucks, already! The sooner you suck it up and face the fact that existence is a cruel mistress, the less time you spend moping around and whining!”

Dipper listened to his tirade with some interest. “Well, that’s easy enough to say when you’re immortal.” He pointed out, and hurriedly continued speaking when Bill swivelled around with a glare. “A-anyway, that reminds me! There was something I realised when I was at the cathedral. I asked great-uncle Ford about it, but he wasn’t exactly any help. Are you…” he hesitated.

“…Are you Satan?”

Bill stared at him for a long moment.

“I-I mean, there were those windows in the chapel! And they were talking about some ‘beast with three faces’, so…” Dipper fiddled nervously, wondering whether this was going to be the thing which finally convinced Bill that vaporisation via ocular laser beam was the way to go.

“Kid,” Bill finally said, calmly, “say my name really quickly. My full name.”

“Huh?” Dipper wasn’t entirely certain what he had expected, but it certainly wasn’t that. “You mean…”
“No, not THAT one.” Bill thumped his cane against the ground. “The name I have NOW.”


“Yes, OH. Normally this’d be the part where I’d insult your intelligence, but I figure you’ve done a pretty good job of that yourself!”

“Shut up.” Dipper mumbled, pressing his head into his hands. He almost wished Bill had gone the vaporisation route. “It was just… too obvious, y’know? I figured you were just… like… paying tribute, or something.”

“HAH! Me? Pay tribute? And there I thought you might know me, Pine Tree!”

“Shut up.” Dipper repeated. He looked up at the prophetic poem merrily burning away in front of him. “Let’s get back on topic. Apparently someone’s going to be sowing someone else’s seeds of demise. That’s pretty vague, so I think I’ll skip that for now, though there’s the possibility I might’ve sowed someone’s seeds of demise by visiting the cathedral. Maybe it was the Redcaps – anyway, there’s… something about youth? How young are we talking here?”

“Hopefully it’s in human terms! ’Cause if we were talking about DEMONS, well, you all look pretty young from where I’m standing!”

“Point taken.” Dipper said dryly. “It’s that ‘COINTELPRO’ bit that’s got me curious, though. I think I’ve heard about it before. The FBI, right? It was their counterintelligence program against those political parties they didn’t like. Like, they made up all sorts of fake information, blackmailed them, framed them for crimes, all sorts of horrible things. Though that ended in the 70s, didn’t it?”

Bill hummed. “Pine Tree, I’d think Gravity Falls would’ve taught you better than THAT. Well, at least there’s no SUBVERSIVE POLITICAL MOVEMENTS PRESENT IN CHAPELWICK WHICH MIGHT BE THE TARGET OF EXTENSIVE HARASSMENT ON A SEMI-REGULAR BASIS.”

Dipper stared at him incredulously. “You aren’t saying that the LGBT Society-“

“All I’m saying,” Bill said, “is that you’d better take the advice you learned in Gravity Falls to heart. That is: TRUST NO ONE.”

“Yeah, no.” Dipper said sceptically. “Not like that advice has a history of backfiring or anything. Besides, weren’t you asking me to trust you earlier?”

“I was asking you to DEPEND on me.” Bill snapped his fingers, blue flames extinguishing from the edges inwards. Which was probably fortunate, since they’d come dangerously close to climbing up a nearby conifer. “There’s a DISTINCTION. Besides, I’d think we’re WELL BEYOND TRUST by now, right, kid?”

Dipper stared at the smoking ashes on the ground soberly. “Yeah. I guess we are.” Trusting Bill after all he’d done would be unthinkable. He could depend on Bill about as much as Bill depended on him – all things considered, not an inconsiderable extent. But that wasn’t trust, and he’d be doing himself a disservice if he even entertained the idea of trusting Bill Cipher.

“Well,” he said abruptly, “dependence doesn’t exactly explain why you saved Mabel. Or why you didn’t kill Thorne.”

“Oh, THAT? That’s simple!” Bill flapped his hand forwards in a trivialising gesture. “Didn’t I already tell you? I LIKE you, kid! I mean, you’re smart, funny AND resourceful! Doesn’t hurt that
In a burst of blue flame, Bill manifested a metal button, which he then tossed at Dipper. Dipper tried not to wince as he realised his reflection appeared to be screaming and pounding at the gleaming surface.

Instead, he pocketed the offending item, giving Bill his best cynical expression. “You know, I seem to remember someone insulting my intelligence multiple times over the past hour. For some reason, I’m finding it hard to take your compliments at face value.”

“ACTUALLY, it’s…” Bill’s pupil briefly turned into one of a ticking clock, “more like five hours! Time passes funny in the mindscape, y’know! And BESIDES, aren’t I allowed just a LITTLE hyperbole? You know how you say things and don’t mean them? That’s what I was doing there!”

“Mm.” Dipper put his hands in his pockets, exhaling. “Alright, Bill. What’re you hiding?”

“ME? HIDING SOMETHING? Pine Tree, you must be mistaken!” Bill protested, his eye wide. “I am the PICTURE OF INNOCENCE right now! Quite literally! This one time, I stole the picture of innocence and replaced it with my self-portrait!”

“You’ve only ever complimented me when you were trying to manipulate me.” Dipper explained patiently. “You’re not telling me the full truth of why you helped out. If it was only about your ‘dependence’ on me, you’d only care about keeping me alive, right? Actually, since I’m ‘immortal’, you wouldn’t even need to do that – you’d only need to keep me in a condition where I’m able to perform the magic transfer ritual. Which means you haven’t been telling me something about our connection. What is it?” Dipper glanced up sharply, staring Bill in the eye.

Bill was silent. He looked just a little dazed, which Dipper counted as a triumph. “Looks like I underestimated you, Pine Tree.” He finally said, lowly. “WELL! Since you’ve gotten so far, why don’t you have a crack at the answer yourself, kid? Save yourself the trouble of sorting through my WEB OF LIES.”

“You mentioned the spell was like a one-sided deal, right? Given my healing ability, I’d say it’s got some pretty potent long-term effects. In other words, this was meant to grant more than a single wish. In fact, I’d guess that there’s no limitation on the number of wishes you’re meant to grant. You’re under the obligation to do whatever I command, aren’t you?” Dipper crossed his legs. “Subject to the limitations of my magical capacity, of course.”

Bill stared at him. Dipper stared back, letting just the slightest trace of smugness slip into his expression. “…Not bad, kid. Though you’re overestimating its potency somewhat. I wouldn’t get locked into following your commands since the generality of the spell diluted it, so I’d say it’s more like a strong compulsion to do what you tell me to. And I can resist it, which is why I managed to keep my trap shut for five years even though your INCESSANT, INFURIATING NAGGING.”

…Whoa. So he could pretty much command Bill Cipher to do whatever he wanted? That was a heady thought if there ever was one. “So,” Dipper said, keeping his tone casual, “if I wanted you to do… say, the Lamby Lamby-“

“Don’t try to go all power-crazy on me, Pine Tree!” Bill thwacked Dipper’s head with his cane. “Also, if you try to make me perform that VILE SACCHARINE ABOMINATION, I’ll remind you that there are certain conditions even immortality doesn’t cure! How does the idea of BEING BURIED ALIVE UNTIL THE CONCLUSION OF THE SLOW, AGONISING DECAY OF YOUR PLANET SOUND?”

“Okay, okay!” Dipper protested, rubbing his head. “I was just joking anyway! Mostly.”
“Besides, most of your commands lack the mental strength to sway me! MASTER OF THE MIND, remember?” Bill tapped his top hat. “You’ve only ever managed to force my hand in situations of extreme desperation, like when your sister’s life was at risk!”

Dipper had the sneaking suspicion that Bill was significantly downplaying the spell’s effects, but decided not to push it. “Well, I get why you weren’t exactly chomping at the bit to tell me.” He said instead, lacing his fingers behind his head and watching the stars dance across the sky, leaving trails of colour in their wake.

“Huh, those’re actually really pretty.” He murmured, changing the subject.

Bill silently followed his gaze.

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They watched the lights in the sky for an incalculable stretch of time, before Dipper felt a pressure on the top of his head. Clearly, Bill had once again decided his head was the perfect place to perch.

“Y’know, kid.” Bill began, and Dipper let out a soft hhm in response, “I’ve always liked the stars.”

“Really?” Dipper asked. “You’re not going to tell me that it’s because they’ve, like, already supernovaed, leading to the destruction of countless planets, and we’re just seeing their ghosts from millions of years ago, right? You’d probably spin that into something about the futility of the human existence.”

“You know me too well, Pine Tree.” Bill huffed out a laugh. Dipper felt his ears warm. “But actually, I’ve always felt something of a connection to the stars. Especially the ones bright enough to still be shining in the morning.”

Huh, Dipper thought.

They lapsed back into silence. It was surprisingly pleasant, and not as awkward as he’d expect. If nothing else, it was a nice break from the emotional whiplash which went hand-in-hand with conversations with the ex-dream demon. Of course, given Bill’s previous refusal to talk, their tentative truce had pretty much been founded on these occasions of mutual wordless understanding.

…Which made a lot of sense, really. Bill used his words as weapons, and their absence meant he trus-felt comfortable enough around Dipper to keep them sheathed. Naturally, that was a wholly different matter from the silent treatment Bill had been subjecting him to for the past five years, whereupon he’d been using the absence of words as a weapon, but still…

In that temporary bubble of quietness, Dipper felt closer to understanding the enigmatic ex-dream demon than ever before.

“Okay, kid. What’s got the gears in your brain grinding this time?” Bill nudged Dipper’s forehead with a foot. “I can practically HEAR them. Really distracting.”

Dipper flushed, embarrassed. “Well… uh… I was wondering. What are those lights, exactly? I mean, stars aren’t usually that colourful, so…”

“They’re your memories, Pine Tree! As for why they’re zooming around up THERE, well, it’s probably got something to do with that constellation you’ve got going on down HERE!” Bill rapped his foot against Dipper’s forehead again.

Dipper blinked. That made sense. He’d been wondering where his memories were, seeing as this
was his mindscape and all. “So… how do I get them down?”

“It’s YOUR mindscape, kid!” Bill reminded him.

“Oh, right.” Dipper muttered. He closed his eyes, focused. Opened them again to see a rectangular shape hovering before him. “That’s… a memory, right?” It was like an image taken straight off a flat-screen TV. He watched, curious, as past events unfolded before him.

*Gravity Falls burning, all glowing embers and flames. The stench of destruction and ruin. The devastation of all he’d come to care about. And yet it wasn’t these visions of annihilation which was making Dipper’s heart clench, his breathing grow shallow, tears filling his eyes.*

*His eyes were locked upon one single one. Above him, stretching up to the crimson-tinged clouds, was a towering triangular monolith. A sane person might feel despair, the complete desolation of any chance of hope. After all, Bill’s presence was ultimately a sign of his failures. His own weaknesses.*

*But that wasn’t what he was feeling.*

*He’d reached the worst possible revelation at the worst possible time.*

*A gigantic, inhuman pupil deigned to meet his own gaze. “WELL, KID? ANY LAST-“*

“AAAAAAAHHHHHH!!!!!!” Dipper screamed. Beside him, Bill made a noise like a siren going off, his entire body glowing, pupil transforming into an exclamation mark.

“What the fuck, kid?! What the fuck is THAT doing here?!” He screeched, voice like nails on a blackboard.

“I don’t know! This wasn’t on purpose, I swear!” Dipper yelled. “How do I make it go away?!”

“WISH IT AWAY! I DON’T FUCKING KNOW!” Bill flung his hands out in exasperation.

“I can’t! I’m trying as hard as I can!” Dipper said, panicked. On the screen in front of him, past-Dipper opened his mouth to speak. That was it. That was the thing that was going to kill Dipper. He was either going to die of embarrassment on the spot, or Bill was going to murder him. Hopefully it was going to be the first one.

Bill, for his part, was doing quite the accurate rendition of a danger sign. “FOR FUCK’S SAKE, KID-“

Two black arms grabbed the memory, wrenching it out of his hands and hurling it with maximum force towards the sky. It disappeared with a mocking twinkle. Both Bill and Dipper let out sighs of relief. Dipper then buried his head in his hands, cursing himself for well and truly ruining the moment.

“Pine Tree.” Bill’s voice came from behind him.

Dipper tensed, and finally responded with, “Yes?"

“I’ve got a deal that I’m pretty sure you won’t refuse.” As Bill spoke, Dipper wearily lifted his head out of his hands and faced him. “If you don’t talk about THAT,” he gestured at the sky, “I won’t mention it either. As far as I’m concerned, it was equally humiliating to both of us.”

“Deal.” Dipper held out his hand unflinchingly. They shook on it.
Bill withdrew his hand first, staring towards the horizon as though contemplating something outside Dipper’s field of vision. “In any case, looks like it’s nearly time for you to wake up and get going, kid!”

“W-wait!” Dipper stuttered. “But we haven’t even decided on a course of action!”

“Course of action?” Bill peered at him curiously, twirling his cane around a finger.

“Yeah, like figuring out what’s up with Thorne! And that snake-thing! And whatever was up with these disturbing drawings in the art room – well, more disturbing than usual, anyway.” He amended. “Anyway, we need a plan!” As he spoke, there was a noise like cracking glass. He glanced towards its source, startled. There was a crack in the night sky, which was rapidly splintering and spreading like a spider’s web.

Bill, for his part, didn’t look particularly concerned. “Jeez, kid, RELAX! You need to take things step by step! Rome wasn’t built by an advanced alien civilisation in a day, y’know! It took them at least a WEEK to get things up and running!”

“So what’s the first step?” Dipper nervously backed away from the swiftly encroaching cracks in his mindscape.

“Well, the FIRST thing we should do-” Bill began, but was interrupted by the world around them falling apart.

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“-is pay someone a visit!” Dipper opened his eyes to see Bill in exactly the same spot he’d been in before he woke up. He blinked, disconcerted.

He pushed himself up to a sitting position, wincing in pain. At least all these aches hadn’t filtered through to his dreams. “Where are we going?” he managed. His throat was in a better condition than it had been the previous night, but he still had to strain to talk.

“C’mon, kid. You should’ve figured it out by now!” Bill hovered in front of him, lively and substantial and so real Dipper had to refrain from reaching out to check. “We’ve got a lead right now, thanks to your new friend!”

The demon leaned in, his voice lowering confidentially. “Looks like we’ll have to make another visit to a certain HOUSE OF LIES, Pine Tree.”

Chapter End Notes

No Billdip conversations for ten whole chapters? NO PROBLEM, HERE HAVE 6000+ WORDS OF PURE DIALOGUE.

Also, capable-of-calling-Bill-out-on-his-bullshit!Dipper is my favourite Dipper.
Dipper dodged a series of puddles as he made his way to the small cottage adjoining Chapelwick Cathedral. Despite the inclement weather, the cottage looked like a peaceful, if somewhat antiquated haven of tranquillity. Roses curled up the lattice, shielded from the worst of the rain by overarching willow trees. Raindrops gathered and dripped from the wooden lace which lined the rooftop. He shook his umbrella off under the refuge of the veranda, which was tastefully decorated with stone miniatures of angels.

He opened his bag to shove his umbrella inside. Bill glared up at him, visibly displeased about being forced to share space with the damp fabric. It seemed he was rather less inclined to speak outside the mindscape, although his capacity to do so had clearly been demonstrated earlier that morning. With a complete lack of sympathy, Dipper zipped his bag back up, leaving Bill to his own devices.

Hesitantly, Dipper reached out to press the doorbell. He could hear it ring inside, the melodic clang of the Westminster chimes. The sound of approaching footsteps was audible. There was a metallic clink which was probably a bolt being slid open, before the knob turned.

The moment Seraph opened the door to find Dipper standing on her front porch, she slammed it back shut.

Dipper blinked, uncomprehending. It took him a moment to realise she’d just closed the door in his face.

A little annoyed, he rang the doorbell again. Westminster chimes, no response. He rang it again. And again. On the fourth ring, Seraph wrenched the door back open. With her height and her long black coat and skirt, she looked rather like a pillar. A very irritated pillar.

“What do you want.” She demanded, crossing her arms.

Wow, Dipper had actually forgotten how much of an abrasive misanthrope she was. “Actually, I’m not here to see you. I’m here to see Virtue.”

“She’s out.” Seraph flatly informed him.

A silence descended upon them. Seraph’s dark eyes bore down on him, as though she was attempting to drive him off by sheer force of will. In any case, Dipper decided, some of that old Gravity Falls stubbornness returning to the surface, she wasn’t going to succeed.

That temporary burst of courage was enough to spur him into speech. “Well?” He asked. “Aren’t you going to let me in?”

Seraph gave him a look caught between vague amusement and antipathy. Her gaze flickered towards the door, evidently debating the merits of slamming the door back in his face. “Suppose I might as well.” She eventually said, standing aside to let him in.

“And take off your shoes.” Seraph commanded, before he could take a step into the hallway. “You’ll track mud everywhere.”

“Wow, thanks, it’s nice to see you too.” Dipper muttered under his breath, slipping his sneakers off.
“Forget bees, looks like Stoneface’s got an entire hornet’s nest in that bonnet of hers! Geez, you’d think that fighting those gnome-ripoffs would’ve done SOMETHING for your relationship.” Bill’s voice echoed in his mind, and at that moment Dipper was rather grateful to have someone in his corner, no matter how psychotic or triangular they might be.

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The room Seraph led him into was cozy, bright and inviting. Dipper took in his surroundings curiously. The walls were papered with a quaint pattern of pastel blossoms. A small fireplace blazed away merrily, warming the room. It was probably a sitting room, an assortment of chairs clustered around a soft rug. A timber bookshelf, its books clearly well-read, ran alongside one end of the room. Dipper sniffed. He could smell something sweet, the scent reminding him of Mabel’s various baking experiments. The results were usually edible.

Seraph jerked her head towards a plush leather couch in the middle of the room. Dipper took the hint, and lowered his backpack to the floor before sitting down. Settling into the couch was like sinking into a warm embrace.

Meanwhile, Seraph sat atop a hard-looking wooden stool. Against the backdrop of domesticity, she stood out like a gravestone in a field of flowers. She pulled out a book from the bookshelf, crossed her legs, and began to read.

As silence continued to reign, Dipper fiddled nervously. Come to think of it, Seraph hadn’t mentioned when Virtue would be back, had she? What if, like, Virtue wasn’t going to come back until the evening? He gave Seraph a suspicious stare. It didn’t seem out of character for her to pull something like that.

“…Soooo, what’re you reading?” he eventually asked.

Seraph gave him a dry look, pointing at the front cover of the book. *Oresteia. Right.*

They lapsed back into silence. The only noise was the occasional distant rumble of a car passing the rain-drenched street.

“Hey! Pine Tree! You should totally take one of those books, tear out the pages and start eating them! I bet THAT’D get a reaction outta Stoneface!”

No, Dipper was not going to do that. He knew exactly how hard Seraph’s punches hit.

“Or maybe you could grab the fire poker and run it through your chest! She probably won’t hurt you if you do it first!”

Actually, she probably would hurt him for leaving bloodstains all over the rug. Anyway, no. Dipper already got maimed enough on a regular basis.

“Hey, how about you-“

The sound of the front door unlocking was quite possibly the most welcome noise to Dipper’s ears right now. Seraph glanced up, bookmarking *Oresteia* and returning it to the shelf. Dipper could hear the rustle of plastic bags – evidently, Virtue had just been out shopping.

“Seraph, darling, who’s the visitor?” A high, creaky, yet not unpleasant voice sounded from the corridor. “Saw a new pair of shoes outside. You prepared some tea, of course?” A figure rounded the corner, entering the room. The voice belonged to a small, white-haired woman, with sparkling blue eyes and a good-humoured smile. Dipper blinked. It was as though someone had distilled the
essence of a thousand grandmas and combined it into a critical mass of hospitality.

The woman’s – presumably Virtue – eyes lit up upon seeing him. “Oh, aren’t you adorable. What’s your name, sweetie?”

“Oh, I’m… uh… Dipper Pines. Nice to meet you.” He held out his hand. Virtue bypassed the proffered greeting to pinch his cheek.

“And so polite too! I’m Virtue Hill, but you can call me Virtue. I don’t hold with all that ‘Ma’am’ or ‘Mrs Hill’ nonsense.” Virtue released his cheek. Dipper fought the urge to rub it. Old lady had a surprisingly strong grip. “I suppose you’re Seraph’s friend? Goodness knows it’s time she made some.”

“Virtue.” Seraph said disapprovingly. She was setting a pot and some cups on the coffee table in the centre of the room, evidently rectifying her earlier omission. “He’s here to talk to you.”

Virtue’s eyes widened, looking immeasurably pleased. “To me? Whatever about?”

“Um. One of my friends told me you knew a lot about mythology and that sorta stuff.” Dipper scratched his head. “And I wanted to ask you some things for. Uh. School things. If you don’t mind?” He nodded in thanks as Seraph set a cup of tea in front of him.

“Heavens, child, ask away!” Virtue sipped at her cup of tea. “It’s been so long since I’ve had a chance to talk about such things.”

“Oh. Well.” Dipper stared down at his reflection in the china cup. It was tinged pink, most likely the same rose tea that Seraph had served to him the night after the Redcap incident. “So I was just wondering if you knew of any mythological creatures that’re like… snakes?”

“Snakes?” Virtue peered curiously at him. “Well, there’s a quite a few. I’m rather more familiar with Judeo-Christian lore, but I can think of some off the top of my head. There’s the Ouroboros, Quetzalcoatl – oh, and there’s Medusa… and of course there’s the serpent of Eden. Though I’m not entirely certain it would qualify as mythological.”

Dipper suddenly felt a sense of satisfaction emanating from the part of his mind he generally associated with a certain ex-dream demon. He decided not to think too hard about the implications.

“Jormungand, Ophion, Nagas…” Virtue continued to count off on her fingers. “There’s quite a lot. You shouldn’t have any problem finding more information on them if you wanted to. You children nowadays love the internet, don’t you? You always see them glued to a screen. I’m rather fond of computers myself, though I’m too attached to my old-fashioned fuddy-duddy ways to give up books altogether.” She gestured self-deprecatingly at the bookshelf.

Yeah, that was going to be a lot to work through. Dipper took a swallow of tea as he weighed options in his head. “Do you know about snakes which might be associated with, say, rain? Or the sea?” He added, recalling the vision which had flashed before his eyes when Thorne had attacked him.

Virtue hummed. “Why, yes. There’re a fair few sea serpents in mythology. I mentioned the Jormungand before, didn’t I? I believe it was a figure of Norse folklore – or was it German? I can’t quite remember. I do recall that it was said to have encircled the Earth and formed the early oceans. Oh, and speaking of creation myths, I seem recall Australia had legends of some rainbow serpent which shaped the Earth and kept the waterholes filled.”

That sounded more like what Dipper was looking for, but it still felt like something was lacking.
“Cherie told me you knew about the local legends. Is there something like that?”

“You’re Cherie’s friend?” Virtue clasped her hands. “How is she? I haven’t talked to her in so long!”

“You talked to her a few weeks ago.” Seraph interrupted, looking bored. “Her family visited after the weeping statue incident.”

“Oh, but that wasn’t a proper conversation! We didn’t even invite them in for tea!”

“Cherie’s doing well.” Dipper interceded awkwardly. Well, he wasn’t technically lying. He had checked his texts earlier that morning, and there was one from Cherie along the lines of ‘questioning reality r/h please tell me I dreamed all that last night’. Dipper had texted back, ‘Nope, sorry.’

“Anyway, she told me you were the person to go to for stories about Chapelwick and… uh… that sort of stuff.”

“Oh, well, I did spend a fair few years as a librarian in Chapelwick Library.” Virtue tucked some hair behind her ears, looking flattered. “As for your question, I can’t think of anything which would fit what you’re looking for. I can’t recall any legends about snakes. Though Chapelwick’s always had such a strong Christian presence, maybe you could turn to that. Hm.” Virtue stroked her chin, lost in thought.

“Seraph,” she finally said, “would you mind fetching my Bible? The King James edition, if you please.”

Seraph complied, procuring a thick, leather bound book from the top shelf of the bookshelf. Virtue retrieved a pair of reading glasses from a nearby drawer and began to flick through the thick tome, muttering phrases like “now, was it Ecclesiastes?” and “no, I was thinking of Proverbs.”

“You don’t need to go to all that effort—“ Dipper attempted lamely, but Virtue cut him off with a raised palm.

“Nonsense, dearie. I’ve always liked testing my theology. Now, where was I? Ah yes, there it is. Book of Job. The Leviathan.”

“Leviathan?” Bill asked, startled.

“Leviathan?” Dipper asked, peering down at the page she was gesturing towards. It was detailing something about defeating some kind of monster – oh no, wait, it was apparently undefeatable. That sounded promising.

“It’s derived from older legends of sea serpents. Of course, as legends are wont to do, tales of the Leviathan split off and there are many, many variations.” Virtue slipped off her spectacles, folding them. “There are some which portray it as half-serpent, half-lion. There are others which associate it with the Hellmouth – the giant mouth within which sinners are swallowed up into hell. However, nowadays, Christians primarily refer to Leviathan as the demon of envy.”

“The… demon of envy?” Dipper repeated. Hadn’t Thorne…?

He then winced as Bill began screeching in his head. “ENVY?! The fucking PRICK! I called dibs, DAMMIT! So that’s what happens when I’m not around, huh? I shudder to think what all these TERMINALLY INCOMPETENT IDIOTS have done to my PRECIOUS BABIES!”

“Why, yes. He’s classified as one of the seven princes of hell…”

“I’M GONNA EVISCERATE THAT WASTE OF EXISTENCE, SAUTÉ HIS INTERNAL ORGANS,
STUFF THE REMAINDER WITH BAT PLACENTA AND FORCE-FEED HIM TO THE REST OF THOSE IMBECILES so they don’t forget who’s REALLY in charge here!” Wow, Bill sounded genuinely distraught about the whole affair. “DAMMIT, the seven deadly sins were MY thing! Scaly bastard wouldn’t know envy if it SHOVED ITS POINTY-TOED SHOES UP HIS ASS!”

 “…Although of course, the classification of demons varies from theologian to theologian. Are you quite alright, child? You seem a little dazed.”

“Oh!” Dipper sat a little straighter. Bill continued to rant, making colourful threats involving particularly sensitive areas of the body and hellfire. “I’m alright. Just a little headache.”

Virtue peered at him in concern. “Oh dear, I do believe I’ve rambled on a little too much. This old woman doesn’t know when to stop, does she?” She chuckled, starting as a ‘ding’ sounded from another room. “My, looks like the oven’s right on cue! Why don’t we take a break from all this heavy learning and have something to eat?”

“Ah, that’s alright.” Dipper attempted to deflect the offer. “I’ve already eaten-“

“Nonsense, you young men always have an appetite.” With slight effort, Virtue pushed herself up off her chair. “Won’t be a moment!”

She hobbled out of the room. Once she was out of earshot, Seraph glanced sharply at Dipper.

“Your question. Did it have anything to do with the mass fish death in Terrace Lake?”

Dipper frowned. “At this point? I’m not too sure, that’s why I’m trying to investigate. Is this an apocalypse thing, or-“

“It’s an apocalypse thing.”

“Eurghhh. Figures.” Dipper buried his head in his hands. “Can’t I have a normal mystery for once? So what does this have to do with the apocalypse?”

“It’s said there’s going to be five plagues before the apocalypse. The weeping statue was only the first sign.”

Dipper waited for her to elaborate. She didn’t. “So… any idea what these plagues are?”

“No.”

“Great.” Dipper massaged his forehead. “Basically you think the fish dying could be, like, a Biblical plague. Well, maybe it’s just because of the rain. Maybe it caused a chemical imbalance or something like that. Just a natural part of nature.” He added hopefully.

“Does that,” Seraph gestured towards the window, where the downpour continued unabated as it had for the past two weeks, “look natural to you.”

At that point, Virtue entered, her hands occupied with an enormous slab of pastry. “Blueberry pie!” She announced happily.

Dipper soon found himself seated before a generous slice of pie. He hesitantly nudged it with his fork. A few stewed blueberries fell out.

“You know what that reminds me of, Pine Tree?” Bill helpfully piped up, seemingly over his all-encompassing rage of a few minutes ago. “FISH EYEBALLS! Ya see, there was one time I-“
“Oh! Virtue! How do you and Cherie know each other?” Dipper asked, desperately trying to drown out Bill’s unappetising monologue.

Virtue opened her mouth and closed it again, taking her time to chew and swallow her mouthful of pie before speaking. “Sorry about that, dearie. Teeth aren’t what they used to be. Anyway, you were asking about Cherie, weren’t you? Bless her soul, she used to be in my youth group back when she was a wee little girl. Goodness, but they grow up so fast.”

“Youth group?” Dipper’s hand paused in the process of levering a cluster of blueberries (don’t think about fish eyes, don’t think about fish eyes) to his mouth. “You mean the one Archie and Angela were part of?”

Seraph stiffened slightly, her eyes narrowing, when he mentioned Angela. Virtue seemed oblivious, chewing through some more pie before responding. “You know them as well? What a coincidence!” Actually, the coincidence was he’d pretty much been flung head-first into an acquaintance with pretty much everyone in their prayer group. “My, that certainly brings back memories! They used to be so adorable in their choir outfits, lining up for church service every Sunday like little ducklings.”

If their choir outfits were anything like the shirt Seraph had loaned him, they’d probably been pretty uncomfortable as well. Dipper tried imagining Archie in one of those frilly choir boy outfits. The saddest part was that it wasn’t all that hard. “So you were like their youth group leader?”

“That I was.” Virtue nodded sagely. “And Seraph here, as the eldest, was my second-in-command. That being said, she wasn’t a very good second-in-command. She always kept sneaking off with Angela. Goodness only knows what those two got up to whenever my back was turned!”

Dipper stifled a snort of laughter. Seraph glared daggers at him, stabbing her fork into her slice of pie, as if to say that could be you. Chastened, Dipper returned his attention to his plate, shovelling some more pastry into his mouth. It was actually pretty good. The crust was thin and crispy, the blueberry filling a tart contrast to its icing sugar encrusted exterior. It practically melted in his mouth.

“Good?” Virtue asked. Dipper could only nod. “That’s nice to hear. Here, have another slice!”

A few bites in later, something occurred to him. “…Wait. I thought Principal Principelle was their youth group leader.”

Virtue blinked. “Oh, right, you’re one of her students. Back in the day, I asked her to help me with the group – after all, just one pair of eyes isn’t enough to keep an entire group of children from trying to climb the belfry when your back is turned!”

Dipper wondered who’d come up with that idea. For some strange reason, his mind kept flicking back to Dominique.

Virtue passed the remainder of the time reminiscing about her youth group, regaling him with tales of their various mishaps. Like a five-year old Archie’s breakdown during the Easter service when he discovered someone had stolen all his chocolate eggs (“Bawled all though the worship, and only stopped once Seraph dragged him out by the ear and gave him hers.”). Or the over-exuberant zest with which Cherie and Angela had decorated the cathedral for Christmas (“They managed to stick tinsel on the ceiling. Which, I might remind you, is twenty metres above the ground.”). Or the nightmares Cherie had for a week after reading the book of Revelations (“Poor dear, she was always so sensitive. Though I did tell her parents it might be heavy reading for an eight-year old.”).

When Dipper finished his allocated slices of pie, Virtue brought out a collection of tarts from the pantry. Dipper’s attempt to refuse was thoroughly steamrolled, and he was left staring balefully at the
neat stack of jam-filled pastries on his plate. So that was where Seraph got her rather forceful style of hospitality from.

“I never liked tarts.” Bill said. “They’re pies which forgot the lid. Which leaves their innards exposed, OOZING jam like an OPEN SORE – actually, never mind! I’ve decided they’re not so bad!”

Conversation then turned to the weeping statue. Virtue lamented the cleaning bill as well as the increasing media attention. “And they weren’t even reputable. All shock publications and yellow journalism, poking their noses in places they weren’t welcome. It got to the point where I had to have Seraph escort a few of them outside. And then some of them had the nerve to threaten to sue us!”

“My great-uncle might be able to help you with that.” Dipper said, forcing down the remainder of a cherry tart.

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Dipper slumped onto the bus seat, lolling about listlessly, already halfway into a food coma. In his arms he cradled a Tupperware container of various baking goods. Quite frankly, he’d be happier if he never had to look at another sweet pastry ever again, but Virtue had insisted, a steely glint in her eye that assured him of the rather substantial role she must have played during Seraph’s formative development.

Anyway. About Thorne. Their little discussion had given him some headway into possible avenues of investigation, the first of which was Leviathan. The demon of envy. Thorne had been weirdly jealous of him, hadn’t he? And he’d been possessed by something supernatural. Was it possible that he’d somehow been possessed by Leviathan?

“Gonna tear out all his eyes and string them together.” Bill said happily. “Hey, kid, how’d you like a necklace?”

…That, of course, presupposed that Leviathan was the one possessing Thorne in the first place. And also assumed that they were capable of defeating him. Hadn’t that Bible verse said something about how he was basically indestructible?

“Psssh. Demons like that LOVE to talk themselves up, but it’s usually just a load of hot air!” Well, Dipper couldn’t argue with that. “I heard that! Anyway, who said anything about DEFEATING him?”

That got Dipper’s attention. If they weren’t meant to defeat Leviathan, what else were they supposed to do? Annoy him? Wait for him to get bored and go away? Well, those ideas weren’t that farfetched. That was basically his standard protocol for dealing with Bill on a daily basis.

“Yeesh, looks like SOMEONE’S growing a backbone! Take care that spine of yours doesn’t go the pufferfish route! Death by neurotoxin ain’t pretty! ‘Sides, if ol’ Slip n’ Slide was actually Leviathan, that’d make things a LOT easier! I got ways of dealing with HIM!” From the gleeful tone of Bill’s voice, they probably weren’t particularly pleasant.

That being said, what if it wasn’t Leviathan? What would they do then? Because from the way Virtue put it, it looked like there were a hell of a lot of other possibilities if this didn’t pan out.

Bill let out an obnoxious sigh. “You really don’t know how this works, do you? See, no matter how powerful we are, most of us mythological creatures are limited by the scope of belief. I told you that we exist in the gaps of the limited human perception of the world around them, right? So if we go
outside our territory, we’re stuck with gaps which don’t fit us properly, which means our power is limited! ‘Course, I’m pretty much EVERY-fucking-WHERE, which is part of what makes me so awesome!”

Alright, Dipper got it. But what did this have to with Leviathan? “Geez, I was getting to that! Don’t get your knickers in a Giordian knot! Most of the ol’ lady’s suggestions? STRICTLY geolimited. I’d like to see Quetzalcoatl try to wriggle his way in HERE! My point is: Leviathan’s got both the power and the cultural connections to be the snake we’re looking for!”

Well, yeah, but was there the possibility of it not being him? Dipper wasn’t taking any chances. “You keep that up, kid, and you’re gonna become more worry than wart! Anyway, it’s possible that there’s some Native American legend ol’ Granny didn’t know about, or maybe some monster from outside found a source of belief strong enough to summon themselves, I don’t know! But YOU need to stop stressing out like this! It’s bad for the complexion!”

Fine, fine. Dipper settled himself against the bus seat, surveying the rain-sodden landscape flash past his window. They were near Chapelwick mall, one stop away from his home.

Dipper blinked as a small black arm shot out of his backpack, stretching to press the ‘STOP’ button. What was Bill doing? Wait, had anyone noticed? He glanced nervously behind him. Thankfully, it seemed that everyone else was preoccupied – wait, no, there was a frail old man who had taken off his glasses and was squinting at him in confusion, muttering something under his breath. Dipper carefully didn’t look at him as he made his way off the bus.

_Dammit, Bill._

Chapter End Notes

Shoutout to Ohpoortobies for the Australian Rainbow Snake theory! Being Australian myself, the Rainbow Serpent occupies a special place in my heart, and I’m actually a little disgruntled I didn’t think of that first.
Bill enacts his plan. Dipper gets a little tied up in the details.

The cashier, a bleary-eyed teenager, plonked two heavy bags of assorted hardware implements into Dipper’s arms. “Have a nice day.” He muttered unenthusiastically.

“Whew, looks like I need to step up my game! Corporate retail’s got me beat in the field of soul-sucking!” Bill’s voice echoed cheerfully as Dipper staggered out the store. “Course, you fleshbags gotta be mindless drones to SOMETHING! If it’s not the arbitrary whims of a vengeful power or the gratuitous cruelty of an indifferent chaos, it might as well be the INVISIBLE HAND of a SELF-INFLICTED CAPITALIST ENTERPRISE!”

Dipper’s bags clanked ominously as he moved down the street, umbrella in hand. Most of the clanking was from several assorted cans of spray paint Bill had directed him to buy. The bags were also stuffed full with a bunch of candles, measuring tape, paintbrushes and what was, in Dipper’s opinion, an alarmingly thick length of rope. Prior experience in Gravity Falls told him this was all likely material for some kind of magic circle. Though that snake-thing had seemed pretty strong – would a sealing spell be enough to defeat it?

Bill let out a dismissive sound. “Weren’t you LISTENING, kid? I already told you, there’s no need to DEFEAT Leviathan! I already got what we need to handle HIM!”

So there was some way of ‘handling’ Leviathan without defeating him? What exactly was it? “Do I have to spell everything out for you? C’mon, you were doing SO well without me leading you everywhere by the hand!”

…Was Bill avoiding the subject? “HAH! Me? Avoid the subject? I was just pointing out that this should be SIMPLE for you to figure out! I mean, you’re not a BABY! And definitely not TIME BABY, who’s an overpowered little irritant and UUGH just thinking about him is giving me alcohol urges!”

Okay, so Bill was definitely avoiding the subject. Wow, shame there wasn’t some sort of connection between them through which Dipper could compel Bill to tell him how he was planning on handling Leviathan.

There was a pause. “…Alright. FINE! YOU WIN!” Dipper waited expectantly for Bill to continue. Which he eventually did, though he sounded rather sour about the whole affair. “We’re going to use the Royal Prerogative. Basically, that NO GOOD SHIT-FOR-BRAINS OF A DEMON has to obey my orders. If I say ‘jump’, he asks ‘how high, sir, and also should I clean your ceiling while I’m at it?’”

A Royal Prerogative? If it was anything like the human version, it could only be used by monarchs. Besides, Virtue had mentioned something about Leviathan being a prince of Hell. So that meant Bill had to be pretty damn high on the demonic hierarchy.

“Of course I am! Never settle for second best, that MY motto!” Of course it was. “Heads up, Pine
Dipper’s head jerked upwards instinctively, alerted by the fact that Bill’s voice seemed to be coming from outside his mind. A triangular shape swiftly darted into his field of vision. Bill had extricated himself from Dipper’s backpack at some point. Dipper glanced around to check if anyone was presently throwing a fit over the sudden appearance of a floating triangle. Fortunately, it seemed the rest of the street was empty.

“You need to RELAX, kid! No one’s visiting the park in THIS weather!” Bill yanked the umbrella out of Dipper’s hand, gesturing towards the park in question. Which happened to be Muirfield Park. Dipper clearly recalled being ravaged like meat under a tenderiser the last time he was here. Which was yesterday night. None of this boded well for his bodily integrity regarding whatever Bill had in mind.

He sighed, stepping into the park. “Let’s just get this over and done with.”

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“Move that candle to the left. No, that’s too far! Right. Right. Just a bit more – nope. LEFT!”

Dipper straightened, rubbing his aching back and glaring at Bill. “Doesn’t someone here have a spare hand he could use to move the candle himself?”

“Sorry, kid!” Bill said, not looking particularly repentant at all. “Umbrella duty’s a full time job!” As if to demonstrate, he spun the umbrella in question on his finger, in the same way one might spin a basketball.

Dipper groaned. “You’re either the worst perfectionist I’ve ever met or actively trying to make my life miserable.”

“Eh. Little of A, a little of B!” Bill hovered a little higher to survey their near-finished work. The magic circle was nearly complete. Well, it was less a magic circle and more one great big circle surrounded by three smaller circles, all predictably arranged like the corners of an equilateral triangle. The centre circle contained a slightly smaller circle within, the border between them etched with alien-looking runes. Meanwhile, the smaller circle had within it a bunch of overlapping triangles – it was these which had eaten up Dipper’s time the most. There were so many of them, neatly spaced and overlapped, that it almost appeared like a solid many-pointed star. And in the middle was a single, staring eye. Surrounding it all was a neatly arranged (well, obviously not neat enough for Bill) circle of candles. Dipper wasn’t entirely sure how they were meant to be lit in this downpour, but it was probably something to do with magic. Every space of the ground was littered with intricate runes and elaborate diagrams, spraypainted into a multitude of colours.

It had been the work of hours of backbreaking labour – at least on Dipper’s part. Bill, the slacker, had just hovered above him, umbrella in hand. Hey, at least he’d learnt how to draw perfect circles using nothing but a ruler. There was something to be said about taking advice from an all-knowing, all-seeing ex-dream demon.

“Hmm, I SUPPOSE that’ll have to do.” Bill finally said, with the tone of someone making a great concession.

“Glad you appreciate it.” Dipper said sarcastically, kneading at a crick in his neck. “Anyway, so what’s the next ste- gah!” The last word was spoken approximately two octaves higher than the rest of his sentence. Bill’s hand (the one which wasn’t holding the umbrella) was stretched over his back, and was he… was he massaging it? Bill’s fingers were rhythmically moving against his back,
manipulating the muscles and smoothing out the knots which had formed while he was engaged in making the circle.

Dipper let out another involuntary noise as Bill moved his hand upwards, hitting a spot which sent his brain blank with what wasn’t entirely pain. Mortified, he slammed his mouth shut. He didn’t trust himself to open it again until a few minutes later, after Bill had completed his impromptu massage, giving his back one last affectionate rub before roughly ruffling his hair.

“The next step,” Bill shrank his arm back to normal size, casually surveying the circle as though absolutely nothing had transpired between them in the past few minutes, “is the most important one of all! It’s an ancient ritual designed to lure creatures like our thorny friend into the jaws of the trap! FIRST THINGS FIRST! Pine Tree, grab the rope.”

It was a few moments before Dipper felt coherent enough to respond. “Oh. Uh. This rope, right?” To give credit where credit was due, he didn’t feel any pain as he stooped to pick the object up. Instead, there was just this vaguely comfortable tingling sensation. “What am I supposed to do with it?”

“Starting from your chest, wind it down to your waist exactly THIRTEEN times!” Puzzled, Dipper did as he was told. Following Bill’s instructions, Dipper ended up weaving the rope into what turned out to be an unusual formation, that wasn’t quite a knot. He poked it. It seemed pretty sturdy. “HEY! Hands off! Remember, curiosity killed the cat! Though in YOUR case, curiosity STABBED THE CAT SEVERAL TIMES BEFORE TEARING OFF ITS HEAD! But you get the idea!” Bill gesticulated wildly, batting at Dipper’s hands until he moved them well away from the tangle of rope at his waist.

“Ow, alright! Fine, fine! Just tell me what you want me to do now!” Dipper said irritably, holding his hands up in a defensive gesture.

“Okay, so move so you’re standing in the middle of the circle! NO, don’t DRAG your feet like that, you’re going to smear the paint! Yeesh, kid, were you raised in a pig sty? No, don’t answer that. Your pet pig has more charm than YOU could ever manage!”

“What are you, a soccer mom?” Dipper complained, though he picked up the pace a little. “Here?” Bill let out a dissatisfied sound, scrunching his eye. “A little back.”

“Jesus Christ.”

“I’m sorry, kid, I don’t think even HE could save you from your gross incompetence! Left a bit.”

It took a few more minutes of shuffling until Bill pronounced himself satisfied. Dipper breathed out a sigh of relief. “Alright. Now what?”

“Now stay very, VERY STILL. Oh, and make sure not to bite your tongue!”

“Bite my tongue?” Dipper asked. “What are you talking about- aaaaaAAAHHHH!” His sentence was cut off by an exceedingly undignified screech as Bill snapped his fingers, sending the loose end of rope winding around an overhead branch of the tree they were sheltering beneath, and Dipper jolting upwards to join it.

Dipper opened his eyes to find himself slung from the tree branch, dangling several feet above the ground. “What the fuck, Bill?!” He yelled, struggling to extricate himself.

Bill, for his part, burst into a cackle which left little doubt of the sheer perverse delight he was taking out of Dipper’s suffering. “Uh-uh-AH! I wouldn’t do that if I were you, kid! That branch isn’t the
strongest out there! Sure, you might not DIE, but you’d mess up the circle! And how would you feel about spending another four hours making a new one?” He dropped the umbrella floating up to hover at approximately eye level with Dipper. “Gotta say though, you don’t look half bad trussed up like this.” He mused, as if to himself.

Dipper determinedly ignored his last sentence. “Bill. Are you using me as bait?”

“Yep!” Bill said brightly, summoning his cane for what seemed like the express purpose of poking Dipper in the face. “And what FINE bait you make!”

“So this was your ‘ancient ritual’?” Dipper snapped, attempting to evade the end of Bill’s cane. It didn’t work, and he almost ended up with the cane up a nostril.

“Well, DUH! Can’t get much more ancient than the BIORHYTHMS of the HUNTER and the HUNTED! Even you useless sacks of flesh managed to wrangle the idea in the end!” Bill tucked his cane under an arm, snapping his finger again. The magic circle beneath them flickered out of sight. “Masking spell.” He explained, pinching out the flame that had flared on the end of his finger. “Don’t want your thorny friend to figure out the plot ahead of time!”

Dipper scowled, staring at the ground. The masking spell was impressively thorough, the muddy soil as unremarkably plain as it had been before. However, if Dipper moved his gaze around quickly enough, he could still catch glimpses of the circle right at the edge of his field of vision, like a mocking spectre. “At least warn me before you pull something like that, asshole!” He finally said, glowering at the ex-dream demon. “You know, you could’ve just asked permission, it’s not like I would’ve said-“

“Shhh!” Bill hushed him, suddenly looking serious. He eyed the bushes some distance away, much like a wary cat. Dipper tensed.

“What is it? Is it Thorne?”

“I’m… hearing something.” Bill said in an undertone, his gaze locked onto the distant vegetation.

“What?” Dipper squinted in that general direction, keeping his ears peeled.


“My name?” Dipper said, startled. “Why’s it saying my name?”

“Dipper… Pines.” Bill recited slowly. “Dipper Pines… you… are… A GULLIBLE IDIOT! AHAHAHA, I CAN’T BELIEVE YOU FELL FOR IT AGAIN!” The ex-dream demon was floating on his back, clutching his sides as he laughed.

“Goddammit, Bill!” Dipper screeched, trying to kick at the incorrigible demon. Given his current position, all he succeeded in doing was making the branch he was tied to creak forebodingly. “The moment I get out of this, I swear I’m going to kill you.”

“HAH, sure thing! While you’re at it, why don’t you try carrying some water in a sieve? I’m sure you’d have MUCH better luck with that!”

“I’m revoking your Dorito privileges.” Dipper snapped.

That got a response out of Bill. The demon’s eye widened as he held a hand to his bowtie in mock-outrage. “Hey, don’t blame ME for the fact that you’re duller than a CHICK TRACT! Fooling you
is like stealing candy from a baby! Well, unless it was Time Baby. Seriously, fuck that kid.”

“For the love of - can’t you take anything seriously?”

“NOPE!” Bill said unrepentantly, twirling his hat around with his cane before tossing it back on his head. “Trust me, life gets a LOT easier once you think of it as a stage play! You’re the one performing, I’M the one tossing tomatoes!”

“Argh! Bill, this is important! Thorne could be the key to figuring out what’s going on with Chapelwick!” Dipper yelled, at the end of his rope both figuratively and literally. “We’re one plague into the apocalypse, and I don’t know about you, but I’d rather not see the world end again-” He let out an undignified squawk as the subject of his tirade suddenly launched himself down his shirt. “Bill! What the hell are you doing?!”

“Shut up, Pine Tree.” Dipper immediately did so, sans a quiet squeak as a small hand reached up to pinch his nipple. “Hey, what’s THIS do? Ooh, a mute button! That’ll come in handy! Anyway, your thorny friend’s here. I’m being serious this time.”

Still reeling from the fact that Bill Cipher: A. was currently pressed up against his chest, and B. had just groped him, Dipper nearly failed to notice a figure emerge from the bushes.

Thorne.

He was wearing that raincoat, the hood flipped up, casting his face in shadow. Although it obscured his features, the familiar grey glow of his eyes confirmed his identity, as well as the fact he was still possessed. From the little Dipper could make out, he seemed even more haggard than the previous night, as though he’d spent the preceding interval completely exposed to the elements.

His steps were torturously slow, like those of a wary animal. Which was fair enough, because the last time he’d seen Dipper, his head had been off and his body, according to Cherie, still moving. And now Dipper was before him, hale and whole, somehow conveniently tied up to a tree. Wouldn’t whatever was possessing Thorne find that a little too convenient? The idea of getting shot through the chest again by the snake-light-thing didn’t particularly appeal.

“Nah, it should be fine!” Bill insinuated his way lower down Dipper’s chest, forcing him to bite his cheek to stifle any inconvenient noises. “Whatever it is, it’s got more brawn than brains! Well, if it’s Leviathan, he’s barely got any brains at ALL! You should be fine, kid.” A pause. “That is, as long as you stop SQUIRMING like that.”

It wasn’t like Dipper could help it! He was ticklish, dammit!

…And also currently tied up with a triangular demon pressed up against his bare skin. One who seemed to be insistent on touching him in sensitive areas-

“Oh.” Bill said. Then, “I see.”

Dipper gritted his teeth, not particularly keen on knowing whatever realisation Bill had come to. At least the demon had finally fallen still, leaving him free to focus on whatever possessed-Thorne was up to.

Which was... backing away? Huh?

A little worried (he was not about to waste all those hours he’d spent tracing that magic circle), Dipper attempted to make himself look as helpless and bait-like as possible. Which wasn’t very much, but it seemed to have worked, because Thorne had ceased backing away. Instead, he’d
crouched down to the ground, like a runner in their starting position.

This significance of this action occurred to Dipper a few seconds later as Thorne sprang to his feet, barrelling forward, using the momentum to spring upwards, grabbing at Dipper—

“NOW!” Bill yelled, and chaos erupted. The magic circle flared into view, flashing brightly in all its full Technicolour glory. The candles surrounding them sparked with blue fire, the flames stretching up towards Thorne like vengeful spirits. The eye in the centre of the circle blinked once, twice, before an impossibly bright ray of light shot out of its iris, making Dipper wince and his eyes water. It seemed to be affecting Thorne more, however, the boy letting out a roar of agony as he blindly lashed out with one hand, the other one still stubbornly clinging on to Dipper’s shoulder.

One thing which became apparent, the longer Thorne grasped on to him, was the fact that whatever was possessing him hadn’t gone away. Dipper twisted, trying to extricate himself. Thorne only clawed at him harder.

“Don’t. If that isn’t Leviathan, we might still be able to capture him.” The voice echoing in his mind sounded a little tight, as though Bill was straining under the pressure of exerting so much magical energy. “I mean, there’s some spare space in your closet! You can stash him there! Ya think anyone’d miss him?”

Probably. Dipper’s lips tightened as he surveyed their situation. The candle flames were beginning to recede, the bright colours of the magic circle beginning to fade. The eye in the centre, however, continued to flare brightly as ever, relentlessly continuing its assault on Thorne’s vision (and Dipper’s, by proxy). It was therefore a miracle that Dipper could make out the swirling mists which began to surround them, although it would’ve been impossible to ignore the sudden gust of wind and the way the rain started hammering down, breaking through the protective shelter of the tree.

“Shit.” Bill said, the uncharacteristic seriousness of his tone enough to alert Dipper to the gravity of the situation. “Change of plans. Let go of him. Now.”

Easier said than done. Thorne’s grip was like steel, and every attempt at wrenching him off only made him cling tighter. Under the unrelenting torrential downpour, one of the candles began to gutter, before extinguishing. One by one, the candles continued to flicker out. The magic circle itself was beginning to get washed away, although the light remained.

Dipper changed his tack, digging his nails into the flesh of Thorne’s arm, drawing blood. Thorne’s grip briefly loosened in response to the unexpected pain, and that was enough of an opportunity for Dipper to shake him off. Unfortunately, Thorne’s flailing hand managed to catch onto the rope holding Dipper aloft. There, he remained dangling, squinting past the slowly waning light.

“Alright, kid. This is the part where I need you to depend on me. I’m going to count to three. When I get to the end, I want you to stay calm. DON’T go flailing around like an upside-down cockroach. Understand?”

Understood. Dipper swallowed, hazarding a glance down. Thorne’s glowing, slitted eyes stared back up at him.

“One.”

A brief flash of vision, of water-flooded fields and hooded skies.

“Two.”

The last candle guttered out. The encroaching mists began to pulse forebodingly with strange silvery
light, completely unlike Bill’s golden rays.

“THREE.”

The eye in the centre of the circle stopped shining. Meanwhile – a snap of Bill’s fingers, and the rope holding Dipper completely gave way. He yelped as it, along with Thorne, plummeted to the ground. It took a few moments to realise he wasn’t falling along with them.

The reason for this became clear once he noticed a distinctly triangular sensation pressed against his abdomen. Bill was somehow holding him aloft, although for how long he couldn’t tell. His sharp corners were digging into the flesh of Dipper’s stomach. It was uncomfortable, but that was presently the least of his worries.

Dipper tensed when he heard Thorne shift beneath him. The boy staggered to his feet, lifting his head to lock gazes with Dipper. Time ticked by for long, agonising moments, as neither of them moved, frozen into place. Finally, finally, Thorne blinked, breaking eye contact. Dipper watched as he began to back away, evidently having decided that attacking the mysteriously-floating boy who could heal from decapitation wasn’t the best of ideas.

It wasn’t until a few minutes after Thorne disappeared that Bill lowered both of them to the ground, rather more roughly than Dipper would’ve liked. He rubbed the indent Bill had left on his stomach as the demon lifted the hem of his shirt, clambering out. He’d probably have a triangle-shaped bruise tomorrow morning. That was, if his healing didn’t kick in first.

“Did it… work?” Dipper finally asked.

“No.” Bill said, and the dissatisfied look in his eye told Dipper all he needed to know about the situation. “Turns out, contrary to our expectations, that WASN’T Leviathan.”

Dipper pressed his lips together, looking away. “Huh. Least I didn’t get maimed.”

“There’s that.” Bill replied, a glint of humour returning to his gaze.

They remained silent and still, huddled beneath the sheltering branches of the tree. The previous downpour had slowed considerably, although trickles of moisture still rolled down Dipper’s neck. It was some time before Dipper could stir himself into action, picking up an unresisting Bill and stowing him into his backpack, which he’d hidden in a thicket of bushes some distance away.

Bill stayed quiet on the way home.
“Wait. So Thorne actually confessed to vandalising the art room?” Dipper asked numbly, forgetting to shake out his umbrella before shoving it into his backpack. Not that it really mattered, because Bill had been in unresponsive-triangle mode since the previous evening. Their failure the previous evening seemed to have hit him surprisingly hard. Dipper was beginning to wonder if he was seriously, unironically, an actual perfectionist.

“Yep!” Mabel squealed, squishing his cheeks before skipping from side to side happily. “Which means you did good, brother! We’ve got until Friday to make the decorations!”

“Hey, Mabel!” A surfer dude passed by, clapping a hand on her shoulder. Seriously, how the hell had he gotten that tan? There hadn’t been any sun in Chapelwick for the past two weeks. “Heard you’re head of decorating duty! Dude, you know what an under-the-sea theme needs? Like, palm trees, dude.”

“Thanks, Trent! I’ll keep that in mind.” Mabel giggled, giving him a high-five.

“I… didn’t do much of anything, actually.” Dipper finally managed, once his urge to splutter incoherently at the walking suntanned stereotype had passed. “I mean, I figured out it was him, but… wait, so is Thorne here?”

“I heard from Dominique that it was actually his parents who told the principal about it. Dunno if he’s here, though. Might’ve been suspended.” Mabel said absently, before pouncing on a bespectacled girl who, judging by the crucifix dangling from her throat, was either a religious kid or a lighter shade of Goth. “Heyyy, Sarah! Wanna come to the dance on Friday? I can give you a diiiiscount!” She waved a set of tickets before her unfortunate victim.

The girl pushed her spectacles up her nose. “Let them praise his name with dancing, making melody to him with tambourine and lyre. Psalm 149:3.”

“Is that a no? I’m not hearing a no.” Mabel leaned forwards, giving her best ‘pretty please’ eyes. Dipper scrubbed his face, looking away in bemusement.

The girl blinked slowly, before reaching for her wallet. “How much?”

“Eight dollars, but I can make it five for my bestest buddy!”

The girl pressed a five dollar note into Mabel’s hand, before accepting the ticket. Dipper stared at her retreating back. “Wasn’t that ticket five dollars in the first place? You’re turning into Grunkle Stan more and more every day. Hey, maybe you should start wearing the hat.”

“Shush!” Mabel nudged him, winking.
“I bet she’s not even your ‘bestest buddy’, is she?” Dipper teased, nudging her back.

“Well, duh. My bestest buddy’s right over here!” Mabel clapped him on the shoulder, before something seemed to occur to her. “Oh! That reminds me! Here, take this.” She handed him two tickets. “For you and a ‘friend’.” She waggled her eyebrows.

“But I didn’t really do anything.” Dipper protested.

“Hey, you pulled an all-nighter for me.” Mabel grinned in response to his surprised expression. “I’m not that unobservant, Dipper! I know things!” Dipper smiled warmly, pocketing the tickets. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome!” Mabel gave him an answering smile before her attention was caught by an entourage of high-heeled fashionistas gathered in the hallway. “Hey there! You gals figured out what you’re gonna wear to the dance?” Dipper watched as she sprinted away to join their group, chattering away happily. The smile slowly slipped from his face.

Man, he really needed to tell Mabel about Bill.

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“So in other words, don’t worry. It’s normal for the hormones to take a while before they really start showing their effects. Just make sure not to take more than the recommended dosage, or your body’ll start converting the testosterone back to oestrogen. And that’d be counterproductive.” Dominique was talking to someone who was either a Goth or one of the occult enthusiasts. Probably the latter, judging by the goat-horned demon printed on the back of their oversized hoodie. “Any more questions?”

Angela was sitting in her usual corner, a book in her hand. At closer observation, Dipper realised it was titled *Prometheus Bound*, the front cover of the book depicting what was presumably the titular character in chains and agony. Archie, meanwhile, was sitting on the other side of the room, quietly conversing with… Cherie? Well, that saved him the trouble of searching for her.

“Alright then, here’s the contact details for a support group in Blackbourne. Unfortunately we don’t have one in Chapelwick, but that’s the closest I could find. Anything else you need? Alright, then. Have a nice day, Louis!”

Louis glanced at Dipper warily as he made his way out of the LGBT society room. A pentagram-shaped earring dangled from his left ear. Bill might’ve had something to say about that, if he’d been in a talking mood.

Catching sight of him, Dominique waved enthusiastically.

“Hey there, Dipper! How you been?”

“Good.” Dipper managed a grin, placing his bag on the floor and settling in the seat Archie pushed towards him. “Looks like you’ve finished the new sign. It’s, uh, got a few more letters than I remember.” He jerked his head towards the door.

“Letters?” Dominique looked a little like a perplexed meerkat, before she brightened in understanding. “Oh, right! I decided to update it a bit just to add some awareness of other possible sexualities. So I’ve added the ‘Q’ – which stands for queer, and the ‘A’, which is for asexuality. And
the plus sign – well, you can probably figure it out. But knowing Chapelwick, I’m pretty sure all I’ve managed to do is confuse the hell out of everyone.” She pouted slightly, crossing her arms.

“I’m sure it’ll be fine.” He tried to give her a reassuring smile. His attention was caught by Archie and Cherie staring straight at him, their gazes serious. “Uh… guys? Did something happen?”

“Thorne didn’t come home last weekend.” Cherie massaged her forehead, her face pinched. “I’ve tried calling his parents. They had no idea where he was. Though they did report to the school about the graffiti. Apparently he said something to them about it before he disappeared.”

“They’re planning on filing a missing persons report if he doesn’t come back by tomorrow.” Archie stared at his hands.

“I.” Dipper began, then stopped. Archie didn’t know, did he? He felt a pang of guilt at keeping the fact he’d seen Thorne the previous night from his obviously distressed friends, but what was he supposed to do? Tell them Thorne was possessed by some creature which also seemed to be out for his blood? “I hope they find him soon.” He finished lamely.

Cherie caught his eye. She mouthed something Dipper couldn’t quite catch. *Sorry?* He mouthed back.

*Did you see him?*

He gave her a minute nod.

Cherie sucked in a pained breath, hunching in on herself.

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Bill flopped stiffly, face-first, onto the wooden surface of Dipper’s desk. Rolling his eyes, Dipper propped him up against the wall, whereupon he simply slid down until he was once again flat against the table. Bill’s eye was still closed. The ex-dream demon had, rather frustratingly, remained in inanimate-triangular-object mode for the entirety of the day.

What *did* capture his attention was the rustle of aluminium foil as Dipper settled a bag of Doritos on his desk. “C’mon. I’m reinstating your Dorito privileges.”

His eye now open, Bill sprouted arms and legs so as to better clamber towards the open bag. Holding the top lip of the packaging upwards, he cocooned himself inside. The result was something like a triangular burrito. A Bill burrito.

Shaking his head in amusement, Dipper turned his attention back to his laptop, getting a start on his homework.

It wasn’t until a few hours later that Bill stirred again, a crunching noise alerting Dipper to his emergence from his Dorito cocoon. Dipper smiled, propping his chin up on a hand. “Feeling better?”

Bill glanced up, brushing cheese crumbs from his triangular personage. There was something wary in his gaze, as though he couldn’t quite understand why Dipper was inquiring after his wellbeing.

…To be fair, Dipper wasn’t quite sure, himself.

“Better.” Bill finally said, flicking a stray chip fragment from his left corner. “Could do with a top-up, though. Burned through a fair bit of energy last night!”
“Right. Yeah, should probably do that.” Dipper grasped Bill in both his hands, the familiar words of the energy transfer spell effortlessly coming to mind, as though etched in his memories. Come to think of it, he wouldn’t put it past Bill to pull something like that. “Vitale Fortuna Domineus.”

“Y’know, kid, it’s just occurred to me just how PITIFUL your MINISCULE magical potential is! I mean, if magic was mountains, you’d be a speck of dirt!”

“If you want, I can just let you starve. Varage Humilie Correstium.”

“Aww, no you wouldn’t! You’re too attached to me! LITERALLY!” Bill batted his eyelashes.

“Don’t tempt me. Anima Harame Ludicurus.” That familiar heat concentrated in the triangular scar at his chest, spreading down his arms towards the thin object grasped in his arms. Bill let out a near inaudible buzzing noise, then a full-body shudder, swooping out of Dipper’s hands. Despite his insults, he seemed quite restored.

Dipper soon found himself with a triangular headpiece as Bill balanced atop his head, legs crossed. Small fingers tugged at the curls of his hair. Humming, he leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms.

“So what had you in a right royal huff today?”

The hands in his hair paused for an imperceptible moment, before they resumed their motions. “Huff? I don’t HUFF, Pine Tree.”

“Silent treatment. Five years. Face it, you’re kind of a drama queen.” Dipper winced as Bill gave his hair a spiteful pull. “Ow! See, you’re not helping your case. Just admit you were upset and get it over and done with.”

“Why should I?” Bill plucked out a few strands of Dipper’s hair spitefully. “You humans have this nauseating obsession with ‘talking out your feelings’ and ‘not keeping things bottled up’. You know what we demons do? STEW IN OUR SUPPRESSED RAGE UNTIL AN OPPORTUNITY ARISES TO EXACT OUR PENT-UP REVENGE. It’s GLORIOUS, I assure you!”

“That doesn’t sound healthy, though.” Dipper picked Bill up off his head, seating him down on the desk. “C’mon, let’s talk.”

“If you’re thinking about ‘PICKING MY BRAINS’ in some futile attempt to ‘UNDERSTAND’ me, I suggest you think again, kid! The ABSTRACT DIMENSIONS OF THOUGHT present in THIS-” here, he tapped his hat- “head would be too much for your puny human mind to comprehend! Plus, I don’t much feel like scraping brain gunk off the walls today!”

Dipper waited patiently, arms folded.

Eventually, the small figure on his table folded, throwing his hands up in exasperation. “Fine. FINE. YOU WIN! I’ll talk! I admit it! I wasn’t happy with how things went with your thorny friend. It reminded me of some things I REALLY didn’t need to be reminded of!”

“Like what?” Dipper asked curiously.

“Kid.” Bill said, and suddenly that hostile glint in his eye wasn’t merely the result of being forced to admit that he actually had emotions other than sadistic glee. “Do you know how EASILY I could’ve handled that five years ago? It would’ve been like shooting dead fish in a barrel! With a nuke! But now I’m pushing myself to my limits with a SINGLE spell. And here I am, playing FRIENDSHIP CIRCLE with the person who brought about my downfall in the first place!”
“Oh.”

“I never even liked circles that much in the first place! Infinite recursions get so BORING after a while! But you get the idea! Do you think I LIKE being stuck like this? I used to be able to see EVERYTHING. But now I can’t even track down your thorny friend thanks to whatever flimsy masking spell he’s using!”

Dipper didn’t respond for a few moments. “You know, I’m not going to apologise.” He began tentatively. Bill scoffed, turning away. “Back then, I did what I had to. But… for what it’s worth… I sympathise.”

“Trust me, kid. What you THINK isn’t worth all that much. The fact remains that you fucked up my plans on a scale I never anticipated. And that was mostly my fault.”

Dipper blinked. Did Bill Cipher just voluntarily admit to messing up? He must have misheard. “Don’t give me that look, Pine Tree! You don’t live as long as I do without picking up a few things. And also losing some other things, such as SANITY and MORALITY, but that’s beside the point! I got careless and overestimated myself. And that’s on me. And yesterday’s fuckup? Also on me.”

“I don’t know.” Dipper said. “I think it was at least partly my fault.”

“No. You did fine. Much better than I was expecting, to be honest! If I hadn’t jumped to conclusions regarding Leviathan, I might’ve come up with a contingency plan which would’ve stopped your thorny friend in his tracks. As it is, he’s on high alert, and the bait tactic won’t work twice.” Bill looked away. “Look. I’ve got high standards, and do you know what I hate more than when others don’t meet them?”

“When you don’t manage to meet them yourself.” Dipper answered, looking Bill in the eye. Their gazes caught, tangled. “Trust me, I know what that’s like.”

“I know you do, Pine Tree.” Bill eventually said, reaching out to tap Dipper on the forehead. Dipper caught his hand before he could do so. It felt a little weird, kind of fuzzy, like static made solid.

“You know, it’s okay if you…” Dipper hesitated. “It’s okay to screw up, sometimes. I mean, even if you mess up, there’s ways to fix it. What doesn’t fix anything is moping about your failures, or being too scared to try again. Gravity Falls taught me that the hard way, but I figured it out eventually.” He smiled self-deprecatingly.

Bill didn’t respond, but his gaze slowly slid from Dipper’s face to their adjoined hands.

Dipper felt his face flush. “Oh. Uh. Right. Sorry.” He tried to let go, but Bill’s small hand remained wrapped around his. And it wasn’t like one could shake Bill Cipher’s hand off. Of course, Dipper’s inability to do so had nothing to do with the confused furl of heat emerging in his chest, like a gently spreading forest fire.

“Um. I kinda need that hand. To…. use my laptop? For work?” He eventually managed awkwardly.

Bill stared at him, considering, before slowly, slowly loosening his grasp. His hand slipped from Dipper’s, leaving a trail of tingling sensation behind. Dipper resisted the urge to rub his hand as Bill crept back into his Dorito cocoon.

That weird warm feeling in his chest didn’t seem to be going away, either.
Thorne’s house was one of an identical line of old-fashioned looking townhouses, with metal gates smothered in ivy and stone columns in terraced rows. Dipper peered curiously at the single unique feature of the house’s exterior: a red diamond-shaped sticker pasted to the otherwise unremarkable classical-style door. There was a single Chinese character done up in dusty gold glitter within the centre.

Beside him, Cherie lifted her hand to knock at the timber frame. It lacked a doorbell, for some undiscernible reason.

“Like, I don’t know if this’ll help you figure anything out, but you know what they say about leaving stones unturned.” She placed a hand on her hip, squinting before knocking on the door once more. “Damn, I’m seriously worried about that idiot. I mean, possession? Seriously?”

Dipper massaged his forehead. “Well. Uh. Maybe whatever’s possessing him… isn’t that bad? Maybe it has good intentions! Can’t judge a book by its cover and all that.”

“Though when its cover is a hideous monster which looks like it wants to kill you, maybe you should be a lil’ more cautious!” Bill piped up helpfully.

The door slid open, and a teenaged girl, probably a few years younger than Dipper, peered out. Her tired eyes brightened once she saw Cherie standing on the front porch. “Oh, Cherie! I’m so glad to see you! Things at home have been… pretty messed up, lately.”

Cherie’s lips thinned. She stepped through the door, toeing her shoes off. Dipper followed her example. The girl, probably Thorne’s little sister, handed them each a pair of brightly-coloured plastic sandals. The cold stone tiles probably rendered them a necessity.

“Thanks, Lisa.” Noticing Lisa’s curious glance at Dipper, Cherie continued, “This is Dipper Pines. He’s a… friend of Thorne.”

“Friend’s ONE word for it!” Bill scoffed.

Dipper held out his hand. “Nice to meet you. Lisa, was it?”

Lisa shook it. “Same here. Sorry the house’s a mess. We’ve been a little… well, y’know.”

The ‘mess’ constituted a few dishes left strewn atop the otherwise spotless kitchen tabletop, and a small pile of laundry piled on a beige sofa in the adjoined sitting room. Honestly, Dipper probably created more of a mess just by existing.

He took in his surroundings with a measure of curiosity. Within a house whose main characteristics were blandness and decorum, the few cultural embellishments which managed to spill into the otherwise reserved furnishings stood out like a sore thumb. Amongst the unimaginative fruit portraits and indifferent potted plants were scattered various trinkets, presumably of Chinese origin. A crimson silk ornament, to which a number of tiny jade animals were attached. A porcelain statue of a fisherman, conical hat perched jauntily atop his head, a black stone fish dangling from his rod. Most conspicuous, however, was a hanging scroll done up in ink, depicting a set of beclawed dragons twisting through the clouds.

Cherie settled a sturdy Tupperware container upon the kitchen bench. “Mom told me to pass this along to you guys. I think it might be lasagne.”

“That’s nice of her.” Lisa said vaguely, rubbing her eyes. She slumped onto the couch. Cherie quickly made her way to sit at her side, placing a comforting hand on her shoulder. After a moment of indecision, Dipper took her other side.
“How’s your family taking it?” Cherie asked quietly.

“They’re not. That’s the problem.” Lisa folded her arms on her lap, hunching her shoulders slightly. “The way they’re acting, you’d think nothing happened. I mean, it’s not like they’re completely unaffected. Mom’s been forgetting things and Dad’s gotten even quieter than usual. But it’s like they’re trying their damn best to pretend Thorne never even existed.”

“What do you mean?” Cherie said, leaning in intently.

“They never talk about him unless they have to. Mom just says she’s sure he’ll come back. She thinks he’s just sulking and ran off because of what happened on Friday. I mean, maybe he did. They’ve been coming down on him really hard lately, trying to pressure him into uni, while he’s still got his eyes set on Blackbourne’s physical education program. The way it was going, something had to give.”

Cherie didn’t say anything, her hand still pressed against Lisa’s shoulder. After a moment, Lisa swallowed, and began to speak again. “They were arguing again on Friday. It was more of the usual, Mom fussing about his marks and him… well, I guess he was trying to defend himself. He was crying. He always does.” Lisa clenched her hands, digging her nails into her knees.

“But it was nothing out of the ordinary. That is, until Mom turned to me and said, “It looks like your brother’s turned out a failure. So from now on, the family’s depending on you.” And... his face. I can’t describe what his expression looked like. And then he just lost it. Started yelling at us, said being here was driving him insane. That was the part where he confessed to the vandalism. And then he turned on his heel and walked out. He didn’t come back. I thought he might’ve gone to stay with you, so I tried calling your phone. But I think the phone lines were down that night, because none of my calls got through.”

“Sorry I didn’t get your messages until Saturday.” Cherie said. “An emergency came up.”

Her voice was tight. Dipper could guess why. On Friday night, Thorne had argued with his family. Later that evening, he’d decapitated Dipper.

“Actually,” Lisa said abruptly, “there was something I wanted to show you. I was looking around Thorne’s room for something, and… well…”

She stood, beckoning them to follow. Dipper and Cherie trailed behind, giving each other curious glances. They made their way to the upstairs hallway, which was about as sparsely decorated as the rest of the house. A miniature statue of the Virgin Mary, much like the one within Chapelwick Cathedral, rested atop the mantelpiece running along the end of the hall. Thankfully, this one didn’t seem to have any tear stains, bloody or otherwise.

Another calligraphic scroll was hanging from the front of Thorne’s door. The characters “望子成龙” were neatly printed upon its surface.

Dipper flinched as Bill suddenly began to laugh. It wasn’t a particularly pleasant laugh, but instead one which verged on the maniac cackle he’d exhibited so often in Gravity Falls.

“Huh.” He said, trying to block out the suddenly-hysterical demon in his head. “Is that his name in Chinese?”

Lisa tilted her head. “I don’t think so. I think it’s a Chinese saying.” She squinted, reading it out loud. “Wàng Zǐ chéng long. The literal translation is ‘hoping one’s son will become a dragon’ – in other words, hoping that he’ll be successful one day. But yeah. Going by our parents’ definition of
success, I doubt he’s about to become a dragon anytime soon.” She smiled bitterly.

Dipper could see his expression of dawning horror perfectly mirrored on Cherie’s face.

Bill was still laughing.

“Do you think…” he began in a low tone as Lisa stepped into Thorne’s bedroom.

“I don’t know.” Cherie hissed under her breath. “But if anyone was going to take a saying like that literally, it’d probably be Thorne.”

“Are you two alright?” Lisa turned, her curiosity piqued by their hushed conversation.

“We’re fine!” Cherie said hurriedly, following her inside.

Thorne’s room, like much of the rest of the house, was unnervingly minimalistic in design. There was a desk. A bed. A chair. The only personal adornments of note were several sports trophies propped up on display atop the bookshelf. Even the gold sheen of the trophies seemed rather greyed, reflecting the oppressive sparseness of the rest of the room.

“I was looking for a book I’d given him before, and I saw a notebook on his table. The thing is, Mom and Dad buy all our notebooks, and they always buy the same brand. So when I saw a different brand of notebook – well, that, and the fact he’d gone storming out of the house the day before, I got curious. So I opened it up, and…” Lisa flicked the notebook open to a random page.

Dipper’s mouth went dry. “The graffiti.” He murmured, reaching out to flip through the pages of the notebook. They were covered with the same angular symbols that had swathed the surfaces of the art room. These were interspersed with lines of gibberish which were probably some kind of code. A Caesar cipher, most likely. He’d seen a lot of codes in his time, and this didn’t seem the most complex he’d encountered.

CYNPR GUR AVARF GB GUR YRSG BS GUR CragntenZ

“Looks like your thorny friend had some help along the line! That’s an outline of a summoning ritual – and if my eye doesn’t deceive me, those are coded instructions!” Bill let out another bark of laughter. “HAH! Rot13! Wow, they weren’t even TRYING! A BRAIN-DAMAGED TODDLER could crack that!”

So Thorne – or whatever had possessed him – was acting under orders?

“They look a lot like what he drew up in the art room.” Cherie observed.

“Yeah, that’s what confused me.” Lisa said. “Thorne planned out his vandalism beforehand. Who the hell does that?”

“But that doesn’t look like his handwriting.” Cherie pointed out, gesturing at the coded words.

QENJ N QENTBA PUNENPGRG RNPU PBEBR BS GUR GNoyrf

“You’re right, it doesn’t.” Lisa fell silent for a while. “Wait, does that mean someone told him to draw that? And he just did it? That’s just weird.”

“So weird.” Cherie agreed.

GVZR GB GNXR GUR Lbhgu Gurl XABJ
GVZR GB GRNE GURQ QBJA ORYBJ
“Yinglong.” Bill said suddenly. “THAT’S who it’s summoning. I recognise her symbol. Shame we couldn’t see your thorny friend’s art for ourselves, else we might’ve been spared a whole lotta trouble!” His voice darkened, echoes intensifying. “Hope you’ve got some recipes for FRIED EEL on hand, Pine Tree, ‘cause I’ve got a bit of SLICING AND DICING to do!”

Chapter End Notes

For the curious, Thorne was born in the year 2000, placing him in the Chinese Zodiac as a dragon. Meanwhile, Dipper was born in 1999, the year of the rabbit. Which seems… oddly fitting.

Furthermore, if we take Dipper’s birthday to be 1999, Conspirathecy should take place in 2016-17. Keep an eye out for apocalypses!
Arc II Part 10: Trust and dependence

Chapter Summary

Dipper argues with Bill, and discovers he’s not as good a person as he thought.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dipper’s fingers flew across the laptop, his eyes rapidly flicking from left to right across the screen as he read. Yinglong. A rain deity and ancient figure of Chinese mythology. His mind brought up the memory of that bright snaking light spiralling through the air. It didn’t quite match up to Dipper’s mental image of dragons as a grandiose, be-clawed beast, but he supposed it made sense. It wasn’t as though any mythological creature worth their salt was about to take on their full form when a smaller one would do just fine, as the triangle reclining to his right could attest.

“‘Sides, from what I’ve seen, there’s some good reasons for Yinglong to lay low!’ Bill announced from his prone position on Dipper’s desk, his sclera continuously cycling through images of Thorne’s notebook. It seemed he was ‘scanning’ them from Dipper’s memories. As Dipper watched, his eye paused on a coded message.

GVZR GB GNXR GUR LBHGU GURL XABJ
GVZR GB GRNE GURZ QBJA ORYBJ

The words shivered, pixelated, before reappearing as English.

TIME TO TAKE THE YOUTH THEY KNOW
TIME TO TEAR THEM DOWN BELOW

Dipper frowned, leaning in. “What’s that? It looks familiar.”

Bill’s eye returned to normal. “NOTHING! NOTHING AT ALL! SO MUCH NOTHINGNESS THAT THE COSMIC VOID GOT JEALOUS, PACKED UP ITS BAGS AND LEFT!”

Dipper hummed sceptically, but returned his attention to the screen. “Anyway, I just wanted to show you this. That picture – doesn’t it look like the one in Thorne’s house?”

“Oh, the nine-dragon scroll.” Bill flew up to peer over Dipper’s shoulder. “Hey, kid! Wanna know a fun fact?”

“Oh yeah, I read something like that. Something about the dragon having nine sons.” Dipper mused.

“Not really.” Dipper said, more out of reflex than anything.

“Too bad, you’re gonna get one anyway!” Bill flicked Dipper in the ear. “ANYWAY, for some reason which I probably once knew but can’t be bothered remembering, the number nine tends to get associated with Chinese dragons a lot!”

“The nines don’t stop there, kid! Did you know the Chinese dragon has NINE attributes and NINE forms? Oh, and its scales are a multiple of NINE! Yeesh, what was their problem with round digits,
anyway?” Bill leaned an elbow on Dipper’s head as though it was an armrest.

“I don’t know, what’s your problem with hexagons?” Dipper retorted, though there was little heat behind his words.


“Guess I shouldn’t try asking you what your problem with squares is.” Dipper mumbled, ignoring Bill’s reply of, “DON’T GET ME STARTED, KID!” He leaned back in his chair, sighing. All his usual haunts – sketchy paranormal forums within which every second link was a scam and web pages probably designed in the 90s, filled with scrolling ads for apocalyptic literature – weren’t turning anything up in regards to Yinglong. He’d probably have more luck trawling Chinese sites with Google Translate. “Do you have any ideas on how we’re going to exorcise it from Thorne?”

“Exorcise HER.” Bill corrected. “And yes, DUH. I’ve got plans for EVERYTHING, and a bit more!”

Dipper crossed his arms. “Mind sharing with the class? Or should I wait until the next time I find myself strung up a tree?”

“Geez, kid, would it KILL you to have a little faith in me?” Bill hovered to face him, eye narrowed in irritation.

“It might.” Dipper replied. He only realised the significance of his words after they’d left his mouth.

Bill, for his part, immediately bristled. “Excuse ME! Who’s the one that’s been rescuing you from SITUATIONS OF DIRE AND GRIEVOUS HARM for the past month? After you WRECKED my plans and DRAGGED ME OUT OF THE MINDSCAPE, nevertheless!”

“I’m – it’s not…!” Dipper raised his hands out defensively. “I mean, would it kill you to tell me what’s going on? Such as the code I just saw! It had something to do with the prophecy, didn’t it?”

Bill briefly broke eye contact, glancing to the side in a manner which seemed almost guilty, before he rallied himself, his glare snapping back to meet Dipper’s. “Look, kid, I’ve got my REASONS. Maybe your WOEFULLY INADEQUATE sense of human foresight is hindering you from understanding why letting the MASTER OF THE MIND work things out for you would be the best choice under these circumstances, but that’s YOUR problem!”

Dipper blinked. It took him a moment to process the long-winded spiel Bill had just hurled at him, but when he did, his hackles rose. “My problem? Your complete inability to communicate is the problem. For fuck’s sake, why don’t you stop dancing around and tell me what you know?”

Bill went very, very still. “Was that a command?” He asked, voice like ice.

Dipper froze. Wait. Right. He could… command Bill now.

The realisation brought with it a not-unpleasant furl of heat in his gut. That was right. He had the ability to compel Bill to do what he wanted. For all his posturing and bravado, the demon didn’t hold the advantage of power here. Dipper did, and that awareness further intensified that heady sense of anticipation pooling in his chest.
A deep, visceral part of him wanted to say yes, that Bill was going to have to deal with the humiliation of being nothing more than a means to an end. After all, wasn’t that how Bill had been treating him all along? It would be nothing more than a taste of his own medicine, to drag him down to Dipper’s level and destroy any illusions the demon was harbouring about having the upper hand here. Dipper straightened his posture, steeling himself.

Bill shifted a little to the side, an involuntary movement that seemed almost uncomfortable. The motion brought Dipper’s gaze with it, which in turn brought him in full view of the three thick tomes lined up on his shelf. The journals.

Memories stirred in Dipper’s mind.

*Gravity Falls burning, all glowing embers and flames. The stench of destruction and ruin. The devastation of all he’d come to care about.*

“No.” He finally managed, feeling that dark, coercive urge loosen its clutches on him, draining away like black oil. The empty space it left behind was quickly filled with shame. He felt nauseous.

Bill’s gaze was even, as though he was completely aware of Dipper’s internal struggles. He probably was.

“Y’know, kid, I don’t much like pulling the cliché ‘we’re not so different’ song and dance, but the situation’s practically SCREAMING for it right now.”

“Don’t.” Dipper dug his fingernails into his palms.

“Well, it’s not like you don’t already KNOW, since you—” Bill said, then paused. “Right. We made a deal not to talk about that.”

Dipper didn’t reply, instead electing to stare at the ground.

“Dipper.” Startled, he glanced up. “Do you trust me?”

Dipper’s gaze returned to the journals. The consequences of trusting Bill Cipher, materialised into physical form. He looked back at Bill.

“I…” his voice was hoarse, so he cleared his throat and tried again. “I can’t.”

*A handshake, a burst of blue flame. ‘Please, call me… a friend.’*

“I thought so.” Bill sounded disappointed, but it was a mild sort of disappointment. As though he’d expected that response, but it still hurt to receive. “Welp, guess there’s no helping it! I mean, I said it myself! We’re WELL beyond trust at this point!”

“Yeah.” Dipper said quietly.

He flinched, nearly toppling backwards as Bill suddenly appeared, scant inches from his face. “Hey, kid. Remember what you said yesterday? About it being okay to fuck up on occasion?”

“Um… yes?” Dipper said, edging back a little. He couldn’t get very far.

“Well, that goes for YOU too!” Bill jabbed a finger into Dipper’s scar. Dipper flinched at the tingling sensation, like responding to like. “Because standards of human decency are just that! STANDARDS. You think you’re not as good a person as you could be. And you’re RIGHT! You’re a hypocritical pain in the ass! But that—“ Bill leaned in further, forcing Dipper to crane his
Bill floated some ways back, much to the relief of Dipper’s spinal column. “I mean, you COULD give up and join me in the CAREFREE JOYS of KITTEN EATING and SEVERED TOE COLLECTING - but I don’t think that’s what you WANT to do. You’re afraid, aren’t you? You’re afraid that you’ll lose something, and you won’t get it back.”

Bill’s gaze was serious, sharp and all too knowing. Dipper squirmed under the attention. “But you don’t need to be. You said it yourself. There’s always second chances.” He drew back further, floating towards his closet. “Well, unless you DIE, but that’s not an issue here, is it?”

Dipper watched numbly as Bill pulled open the closet door, ensconcing himself securely within its confines. A few minutes passed while he stared blankly at the screen of his laptop, running over their conversation in his head. It took him a while to realise that Bill had been reassuring him, in that strange way where he simultaneously tried to freak the hell out of him.

“Uh, Bill?” He said, turning to face his closet. “…Thanks.”

The closet didn’t respond for a while. Dipper shifted uncomfortably, wondering if he’d misinterpreted the situation, before the door creaked open slightly. Bill peered at him through the gap.

“Pine Tree. I’ll-” for the first time, Dipper heard Bill hesitate – “I’ll tell you about the code. You were right – it’s connected to the prophecy. But I can’t tell you today. I’ll explain on… Friday. Definitely.”

“Oh. Uh. Sure.” Dipper awkwardly accepted the metaphorical olive branch, watching as Bill slowly drew the closet door back shut. He swivelled his chair back towards his laptop, feeling something warm - warmer even than that weird power-intoxicated haze which had earlier manifested itself - settling in his chest.

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“Hey, Angela.” Dipper slowed the treadmill to a less punishing pace, glancing over at the girl. Angela was occupied with the weights machine, working on her pulldowns. The persistent rain had rendered the running track so soggy that any attempts to use it posed a real risk of injury. They had been forced into the miniature gym on the outskirts of the campus. The equipment was sparse, but perfectly usable.

Eventually, Angela paused, wiping sweat from her face. “Something wrong?”

“Well… no, nothing. I just wanted to ask you something.”

Angela cocked her head, starting up on the weights again. “Go ahead.”

“Do you think it’s possible to like someone but… uh… not trust them?”

Angela paused mid-lift. Which shouldn’t have been comfortable, since she was tugging at some pretty heavy-looking weights, but she seemed completely unfazed. “Yeah. I mean, I like Dominique, but I’d never trust her with my deepest darkest secrets unless I wanted the entire school to know them too.”

Dipper snorted. “Point taken. But that wasn’t exactly what I meant. Have you ever liked… well… I mean…” Actually, what did he mean?
“Is this—” Angela grunted quietly, letting the bar slide back up – “Is this a Seraph thing?”

“Uh. Not exactly? Unless that was what things were like between you and her?” Dipper said.

“Well, no. We trusted each other – well, I know I trusted her, and I doubt she had any reason not to trust me. It was just everyone else she didn’t trust.”

Trust no one. A memory of Gravity Falls floated to the forefront of Dipper’s mind. The night after he and Mabel had defeated those gnomes. But he’d ultimately decided to trust Mabel, because there were some things which were constant, and his sister’s support was one of them.

He’d tell Mabel about Bill after the Thorne thing, he promised himself. He’d tell her once this was all over.

“Anyway, why were you asking?” Angela asked, after doing a few more pulldowns.

Dipper hesitated. “Well, there’s someone I know. A friend, sort of. It’s just… a little weird, because I know I can depend on him when I’m in trouble, and vice versa, but I can’t… trust him. Does that sound weird to you?”

“Some people might say depending on someone and trusting them are the same thing.” Angela stepped back from the machine, rolling her shoulders. “I think there’s a distinction.”

“A distinction?” Dipper asked. He dialled down the speed of the treadmill a few notches.

“If you depend on someone, you’re relying on them. But only in certain situations, and in a certain context. I think it’s stronger than trust, in a way. Like, you know that if you do A, they’ll definitely do B. It’s more… predictable.” Angela said, beginning her cooldown stretches.

“That sounds a bit manipulative, though.” Dipper said.

“I guess.” Angela shrugged. “And I’d say that too much dependence isn’t a good thing. I mean, we use ‘codependent’ to describe those dysfunctional relationships where someone relies on another too much. Besides, dependence isn’t necessarily a marker of affection, and it really reflects more on your separate personalities than your relationship.”

“Fair enough. What about trust?”

“I’d say it’s… less reliable? In a sense? Because it’s not really based on your knowledge of the other person. It’s more like blind faith, but in a relationship – romantic or not – there’ll be points where you’ll need blind faith.”

“I don’t really get it.” Dipper said, stepping off the treadmill and retrieving his drink bottle.

“Well, I guess it’s more… pervasive. I think a lot of relationships have this undercurrent of trust which stems more from the relationship itself than how well the people involved know each other. Um. It’s hard to explain. It’s like this illogical belief that they’ll act for your sake even if they’re working against their own interests. And on the flipside, that means you’ll be willing to do the same.”

Okay. Yeah. He and Bill definitely didn’t have that.

“You know, I’m actually a little jealous.” Angela commented, beginning to pack up her gear.

“Why?”
“Seraph and I trusted each other, sure, but she never depended on me. I just think it’d be nice to have a relationship where you can depend on each other, even if you don’t really trust one another. I mean, I always felt so useless compared to her.” Angela’s voice held a note of bitterness. “So I guess the moral of it all is that you probably need both for a relationship to last?”

“Huh.” Dipper said.

Angela was about to make her way out of the gym, when she paused. “Dipper. Thorne Lee’s in your grade, right?”

Dipper dropped his drink bottle. It took a few moments of frantic scrambling before he could respond. “Uh. Yeah! What about him?” Smooth, Dipper Pines.

“Dominique told me heard he ran away from home, and that he hasn’t been turning up to school lately. Do you know anything about it?”

“Not much.” Dipper lied.

“Oh.” Angela looked a little crestfallen. “That’s a shame. I’ve been worried, because he used to be a friend of mine. We went to the same church youth group.”

“Oh. Well. I hope he turns up?” Dipper said awkwardly.

“Hopefully.” Angela said, peering outside. “I hope he’s somewhere dry, at least. It’s been raining a lot lately.”

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The rest of the week passed in a tense buzz.

Cherie became an additional fixture of the LGBT(QA+) society room, the other three members grilling her daily for further news about Thorne’s whereabouts. Unfortunately, none was forthcoming. Even Bill Cipher was unable to track him down, due to the masking spell Yinglong was probably using.

“I mean, it wouldn’t be a problem if I was still an OMNIPRESENT BEING OF PURE ENERGY, but them’s the breaks!” he announced cheerfully, nudging Dipper’s nose with a foot as he floated upside-down.

Mabel, meanwhile, seemed to be having the time of her life. Most mornings, she was on her feet and out the door before Dipper even stirred from sleep. He managed to catch glimpses of her around the school, surrounded by fellow members of the dance committee, arms piled high with shiny cellophane, translucent crepe paper and sparkling blue-green fabrics. And glitter. So much glitter. So much glitter that she left a sparkling trail behind her wherever she went, like a craft-obsessed snail.

Of course, that meant Dipper had very few chances to corner her and talk about Bill. Which was fine, because he’d already promised himself he’d tell her after he resolved whatever was going on with Thorne. Definitely.

“Yeesh, and you’ve got the NERVE to wrangle ME about not telling you things!” Bill said smugly, crossing his arms. “What’s keeping you from telling Shooting Star, anyway? It’d be easy! Just go up to her and say, ‘HEY sister! That demon in my closet’s talking to me again! Also I’m immortal, the apocalypse is coming and this would be a GREAT time to invest in gold!’ Even a socially-stunted schmuck like STANFORD could do it!”
“Yeah, maybe if I wanted her to think I’d gone crazy.” Dipper snorted.

“PSSSHT. Implying she doesn’t already!” Bill picked up one of Dipper’s pens, tossing it into the air. He failed to catch it, and it went tumbling to the floor. “My point being: Why haven’t you told her yet?” He picked up a second pen.

“I don’t know.” Dipper said, saving his homework. “I don’t want her to freak out, I guess.”

This time, Bill deliberately flung the pen as far away from himself as possible. It bounced off the opposite wall, rolling beneath Dipper’s bed. “Hah! Her? Freak out? Have you forgotten the LAST FIVE YEARS, Pine Tree? You could stick her in a FEMA camp and she’d probably turn it into a party zone!”

“Yeah, but.” Dipper paused. “I don’t want her to get the wrong idea.”

Bill paused, a third pen held aloft in his hands. “The wrong idea about what?”

“I don’t know!” Dipper said, frustrated. “…I mean, exactly! I kinda sorta get what’s going on – no thanks to you - and I’m freaking out. How do you think Mabel would react?”

“Well, unlike YOU, your sister doesn’t GO TO PIECES every time she doesn’t understand something!” Bill hurled the pen towards the opposite wall with more force than was strictly necessary. “Geez, it’s like Stanford all over again!”

Dipper stared at his laptop screen. “You always call Great-Uncle Ford by his real name.” He finally said, apropos of nothing.

“Whaddya mean? Ol’ Sixer’s got his OWN slew of embarrassing nicknames to contend with, I assure you!”

That didn’t exactly make Dipper feel any better. But he didn’t know why he’d need to feel better in the first place, so instead of dwelling on things, he reached out to nudge Bill’s bow tie. Bill responded by tossing an eraser at his face.

In the meantime, Dipper still had to figure out what to do with that spare ticket Mabel had given him. Dominique, predictably, had already bought a ticket. Angela was part of the set-up crew, which essentially gave her a free pass to lug heavy-looking sound equipment in and out of the school hall during the dance. Even Archie had been wheedled into buying one.

“Louis – you know him? He was the guy talking to Dominique a while back. Yeah, we’re friends. He roped me into going. Said something about how I was going to start sprouting mushrooms if I didn’t get out more.”

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Dipper opened his eyes to find Bill Cipher perched atop his chest. He immediately regretted it, because it was that hour of the morning where it was too early for any reasonable high school student to be awake but too late for him to roll over and get some more sleep.

“What do you want, Bill?” He eventually mumbled, flinging an arm over his eyes.

“Rise and shine, Pine Tree!” Bill’s voice was chipper, grating and all sorts of things which were absolutely unsuitable for five in the morning. “We’ve got a full day ahead of us!” When Dipper’s only response was to groan and cover his face with a pillow, Bill took the initiative to pull the covers off the bed. “Ya know what they say! Early to bed, early to rise, makes a guy SLIGHTLY LESS
“I think you’re lying a little yourself, there.” Despite his protests, Dipper eventually acquiesced to Bill’s constant tugging, stumbling out of bed and towards the coffeemaker.

A few minutes later, a marginally-more-awake Dipper returned to his bedroom, triangular demon in tow. “So,” he finally said, turning to face Bill, “planning on telling me what was up with Thorne’s notebook? It’s Friday, you know.”

“I’m WELL AWARE!” Bill reclined in midair, legs crossed as though lounging on an invisible chair. “And since you’ve OBVIOUSLY been waiting WITH BATED BREATH for answers, I SUPPOSE I can indulge your UNCONSTRUCTIVE HUMAN CURIOSITY just this once! Here’s the thing—” and here, Bill straightened, all traces of humour gone- “I’ve figured out what the next plague is going to be. And WHEW, it’s gonna be a doozy.”

“What do you mean?” Dipper asked, equal amounts of curiosity and dread spurring him on.

“Well, you know that spell your thorny friend painted all over the walls? It wasn’t JUST a summoning spell.” Images of the spell in question rapidly flashed within Bill’s sclera, zoning in on the cluster of circled nines. “You know how the plagues of Egypt saved the best till last? Let’s just say that they’ve gotten a little IMPATIENT.”

“Just tell me what the next plague is.” Dipper demanded impatiently.

“The death of every child under nine years old within Chapelwick.” Bill said.

Bill’s lack of preamble, combined with his completely unexpected statement, threw Dipper for a loop. He remained silent for a few moments as his brain parsed the pronunciation. “I’m sorry, I could’ve sworn you said—”

“Every kid under the age of nine in Chapelwick is scheduled to die on the first full moon of this month. In other words, tonight.” Bill clarified. His eye flashed, switching between two images. The first was Thorne’s notebook: TIME TO TAKE THE YOUTH THEY KNOW TIME TO TEAR THEM DOWN BELOW. The second was a cluster of flames spelling out the line of prophesy: REMIND THE YOUTH THEY BROUGHT SO LOW. “So! That’s your cue to break down and have a panic attack!”

“Fuck.” Dipper said. “Fuck.”

“I thought so!” Bill said. “Sit down, Pine Tree.” He drew a chair up, gently nudging Dipper into the seat. “Don’t want you fainting on me.”

“Fuck. How are they going to…?”

“Die? WELL, if you wanna get into DETAILS, our resident rain deity’s gonna flood the lungs of approximately ONE THOUSAND AND SIX HUNDRED CHILDREN tonight, causing their SLOW SUFFOCATION and EVENTUAL DEATHS. Course, I’m not too clear on the specifics! For instance, what happens if a kid turns nine right at the stroke of midnight? GUESS WE’LL FIND OUT!”

“Fuck.” Dipper said again. His skin itched. “Are you sure?”

“As sure as one can be of anything within the MINDLESS UNPREDICTABLE CHAOS that constitutes existence!” Bill replied.
“But… why?” Dipper said numbly. “Why the hell would anyone…”

“If I had to hazard a guess? They want ATTENTION. They’ve already established a pattern with the weeping statue and the first plague. Now they want EVERYONE to connect the dots and figure out what’s going on. That way, the plagues after this’ll serve as a countdown, ticking down the days until apocalypse, whipping you humans into a panicked frenzy like SHEEP BEFORE THE ABATTOIR! It’s what I’d have done!” Bill spun around in midair, looking immensely pleased with himself.

“People are going to die.” Dipper said, clenching his hands.

“DUH, that’s usually how apocalypses WORK!” Bill replied.

“No, Bill, that’s not – why the hell didn’t you…” Dipper managed to check himself, despite the anxious nausea roiling in his stomach. He didn’t want a repeat of Monday. “Just tell me why you didn’t tell me this earlier.”

“Because I KNEW you’d act like this!” Bill flung his hands out in exasperation. “I’ve been watching you for a long time, Dipper Pines, and I know how you get when you’re faced with a situation beyond your control! You don’t eat, you don’t sleep, you break down at the MOST INCONVENIENT TIMES, you make stupid deals with me – do I have to go on?”

Dipper paused. Asshole had a point. “But still… I could’ve used that time to figure out a solution!”

“RIGHT.” Bill rolled his eye. “Because YOU could figure something out that the ALL-KNOWING, ALL-SEEING, MASTER OF THE MIND can’t! Yeesh, OVERCONFIDENT much?”

“Well, it’s not like you’re omniscient at the moment!” Dipper snapped. “Besides, why tell me today? What makes today any different?”

“Because today’s the day that the spell’s gonna activate, which also means it’s our only chance to track down your THORNY FRIEND and his PET DRAGON!”

“Oh.” Dipper said. Then he swore again. “Fuck. This is… this is a lot of pressure. Every kid under nine. Tonight. Jesus.” He could hear his heartbeat thudding in his ears.

He jumped at the press of Bill’s hand against the scar at his chest. His skin prickled with the usual heat as like responded to like. Strangely enough, the pressure of Bill’s hand seemed to have a grounding effect on Dipper. His heartbeat slowed, and along with it, his breathing. When had he started hyperventilating?

“See, this is EXACTLY why I didn’t want you to know!” Bill said, his tone somehow simultaneously irritated and concerned. “Relax, kid! What did I tell you? I’ve got plans for EVERYTHING!”

Dipper glanced downwards. Bill was rubbing small circles into his chest with his thumb. “Um. Plans?”

“Well, a spell of that magnitude – strong enough to kill more than a thousand children at once – would need some kind of power source to draw from. That’s why the spell was set to activate tonight. The full moon functions as an amplifier, but they still need an actual source of power. Do you know what the most efficient source of energy is around these parts, Pine Tree?” When Dipper shook his head, Bill continued on. “Tsk, don’t know WHAT I was expecting! But fine, I’ll keep spoon-feeding you answers since your already-limited human intellect seems to be faltering under the
weight of all these revelations! It’s HUMAN VITALITY! In particular, the vitality of humans in the PRIME OF THEIR YOUTH! You pick up what I’m getting at yet?"

“The school dance.” Dipper breathed. That had to be it. A whole bunch of people, gathered together within a confined space – “Fuck. Mabel.”

“Oh, for the love of – kid, WHAT did I just say about not stressing out?”

“I can’t not stress out when Mabel’s in danger!” Dipper protested.

“SHEESH! If I had my way, you’d be BLISSFULLY IGNORANT of the SHEER GRAVITY of your actions! We could’ve gone out, ‘HANDLED’ your thorny friend, and you’d come back home none the wiser!” Bill withdrew his hand, but not before flicking Dipper’s chin up. “But instead you’re all KEYED-UP like a CRYPTID IN FRONT OF A CAMERA!”

“Just tell me how we’re going to do this.” Dipper said.

“Fine. Your thorny friend’s definitely going to turn up to the school dance. His masking spell won’t be able to hide the effects of an energy transfer of that magnitude. So WE step in before he can do any permanent damage and MAKE HIM PAY.” The pitch of Bill’s voice lowered menacingly, his sclera flashing black. “But FIRST! We’ll need RESOURCES! So you’d better get a move on, Pine Tree! Suffice to say, you won’t be going to school today!”

Dipper stared at him for a long while, before moving to pick up his backpack. “You know, I’m not exactly comfortable with leaving so much up to you. I mean, there’s a lot more at stake this time than whether or not I get violently dismembered.”

A hand stretched out to shove his shoulder, sending him stumbling forwards. “Cheer up, kid! Have I ever let you down before?”

“You haven’t had that many opportunities to try.” Dipper replied, rubbing the spot where Bill’s palm had made contact.

When he turned, Bill was surveying him, a thoughtful glint in his eye. Dipper frowned warily. “What is it?”

“I’m not that unreliable, am I?” Bill eventually asked.

Dipper was suddenly reminded of his discussion with Angela. I just think it’d be nice to have a relationship where you can depend on each other, even if you don’t really trust one another.

“Well, I guess… you’re kinda dependable? Depending on the circumstances?” He finally answered.

“Such high praise, Pine Tree!” Despite his sarcastic tone, Bill seemed rather pleased, settling himself into Dipper’s backpack. “C’mon, kid, daylight’s burning!”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is kind of the mirror inverse of the previous chapter, wherein instead of Bill being dragged kicking and screaming into acknowledging he shares some traits/insecurities with Dipper, it’s Dipper’s turn to realise that WHOOPS he’s not all that different from the evil triangle.
(Also, Human!Bill next chapter.)
Chapter Summary

Bill gets a body. Dipper contemplates the merits of defenestration.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The building Bill led him to was a ramshackle hovel on the outskirts of the town, situated right at the edge of Terrace Lake. Gravel crunched beneath Dipper’s feet as he surveyed the run-down ruins of what might have once been a fairly charming cottage. It was the only building in the vicinity, as most of Chapelwick’s earlier residents preferred to construct their houses nearer to the town centre, ensconced from the elements. Strong gusts of wind whipped past, blowing Dipper’s hair into his eyes and obscuring his vision.

Although ordinarily a fairly tranquil body of water, the downcast weather had transformed Terrace Lake into a depressingly opaque sheet of grey, rippling under the pouring rain. Terrace Mountain, which divided Chapelwick from its sister township of Blackbourne, was a gloomy observer situated upon the rightward end of the shore. The silhouette of its stepped elevations, from which both mountain and lake derived their names, could be clearly made out despite the downpour.

“So,” Dipper said, stepping over what might have once been a fence, “remind me what we’re doing here again?”

“Getting supplies, of course!” Bill bobbed along beside him, eyeing a collection of crude graffiti scribbled alongside one stone wall with some interest. “Wow, but it’s been so LONG since I’ve been here! Like a blast from the past, I’ll tell ya!”

“You’ve been here before?” Dipper asked. Picking up a stick, he moved to brush away some cobwebs which had accumulated between the stilts of the front porch. The doorknob didn’t twist, but a heavy pull was enough to wrench the door open.

“Whoa there, kid, when they say ‘bring the house down’, they don’t mean LITERALLY!” Bill dodged some flakes of peeling whitewash which had been shaken loose by Dipper’s actions. “Anyhoo, this place dates back to the 1800s! Used to belong to the resident town loony. You know the type! Poor hygiene, bandaged beard, constantly spouting off about the end times! Then again,” Bill said thoughtfully, “he was only a FEW CENTURIES OR SO off the mark!”

“Okay,” Dipper said, stepping over smashed beer bottles left behind by some fellow trespassers, “but what does that have to do with you?”

“WELLLL… it wasn’t like he was ALWAYS that way! Guy might’ve had a promising future, if it wasn’t for all the DISTURBING PROPHETIC VISIONS and HORROR-STREWN NIGHTMARES he was experiencing on a semi-regular basis!”

“Bill,” Dipper said, suspicions beginning to take root, “did you…?”

“Haha, well! Guess you could call him a test run of sorts!” Bill twirled his cane around a finger
nonchalantly. “Lemme tell you, McGucket was a light touch! I keep forgetting how FRAGILE the human psyche is!”

“You’re awful.” Dipper said, and meant it.

He glanced around the dust-strewn room. The stone walls were depressingly drab, coated in the same peeling whitewash as the doorway. The windows were boarded up, though the wind still managed to whistle through gaps in the slat. There were a few items of furniture, most of it too heavy or too run-down to be worth stealing. A shattered lamp on the floor, like a victim splayed across a crime scene. A rotting wooden slat which might have once been a bed. Papers littered across the floor, probably torn out of a book whose hollow cover lay discarded a little ways away. Some creatively-inclined trespasser had taken the liberty of folding a few into whimsical shapes. Dipper reached down to pick up a paper aeroplane. The words on the page were too faded to read.

A small hand tapped his shoulder. “Gimme that, kid.” Bill held the page to the light, squinting slightly, before tossing the page away with a scoff. “The bible. Never would’ve seen THAT one coming!”

Bill drifted further into the cottage, Dipper following behind. They entered a small enclave which had probably once been a kitchen, judging by the stone counter built into the wall. Dipper watched as Bill swooped down to the floor, examining the dusty surface. The demon trailed his hand along the ground, letting out a noise of satisfaction when it met a hollowed-out depression in the floor. Bill dug both hands into the indentation, which was probably the opening to a trapdoor of some kind, curling his fingers into the edge and pulling.

It didn’t budge.

His eye narrowing, Bill tried again, his thin black arms clearly straining with the effort. Dipper kept his expression carefully neutral as he watched the dream demon struggle with the stubborn trapdoor.

It was only when a particularly unfortunate attempt at prying the door open ended with Bill’s hands slipping off the handle, sending the dream demon toppling hat-over-heels through the air, that Dipper decided it would be wiser to intervene.

“Mind if I try?” he offered, kneeling to curl his hands into the edge of the indentation.

“Knock yourself out, Pine Tree.” Bill said sulkily, righting himself.

With a grunt, Dipper began to pull. His straining efforts were rewarded with a metallic screech as, inch by inch, the door began to open. The rusty hinges protested as, with one final wrench, Dipper managed to pull the trapdoor to a near-vertical position. He wiped his hands against his shirt. Score three for training with Angela.

Dipper stood, examining the now-open entrance. His face fell as he saw the line of stairs stretching down into the depths below, disappearing into the shadowy depths like a forbidding omen.

Anyway, the nutter living here built his own apocalypse-proof shelter. AS THEY ALL DO! Honestly, I don’t understand why you humans even bother! I mean, hollowing out a great big hole in
your floor isn’t going to save you from the INEXORABLE MARCH OF MORTALITY! And it certainly didn’t save HIM, ‘cause he’s dead now! Best to just curl up in a corner and rock back and forth as you wait for the sweet embrace of oblivion!”

Dipper barely paid attention to Bill’s ramblings, too preoccupied with trying not to trip and fall down the rubble-strewn stairs. Bill’s blue flames were a barely adequate source of light, although he wisely decided against saying as such. The ex-dream demon’s depowering was already a touchy subject for both of them.

As they reached the foot of the staircase, Dipper walked straight into a wooden slat stretching incongruously from wall to wall. “Ow.”

Stepping back a few paces, he realised it was a door. With the dim glow of Bill’s flame, he could make out a stout brass knob patterned with some kind of overlapping leaf design. The knob, along with the flat wooden planks that constituted the door, struck Dipper as familiar for some reason. Where had he seen that before?

He reached out, half expecting the door to be locked. But it swung open relatively easily, the rusty hinges offering only a minor protest. Which made sense, because it wasn’t like there was a lock—

…Wait. The door in the cathedral.

“Bill?” Dipper said, making his way through the familiar underground corridor. That sense of déjà vu likely had something to do with the fact he’d been in an identical underground corridor not a month ago. “Are you sure there aren’t any Redcaps down here?”

“Even if there were, d’ya think they’d have the guts to cross THIS?” Bill puffed up, jabbing his thumb into his bow tie self-importantly. “What’s got you so paranoid all of a sudden, Pine Tree?”

“The door… and this corridor…” Dipper nibbled the side of his cheek, considering. “They’re like the ones in the cathedral catacombs. Only the door in the cathedral had a lock on it. A modern lock. Who was the guy that lived here, anyway?”

Silence. Dipper glanced sharply at Bill. Bill, for his part, was studiously avoiding his gaze.

“…Bill?”

The triangle floating next to him crossed his arms defensively. “Look, I don’t remember, okay? Your human names are just meaningless in the long term anyway! You all look the same once I turn you inside out, so what’s the point in trying to remember some ARBITRARY IDENTIFIER with no connection to your PHYSICAL ATTRIBUTES, PERSONALITY OR CURRENT LEVEL OF AGONY?”

Dipper failed to suppress an amused snort. “Wait, is that why you keep giving everyone nicknames? Because you’re bad at remembering actual names?”

“Shut it, kid, or I’m feeding you to the gnome-ripoffs.” Bill said testily.

Dipper acquiesced, but the shit-eating grin on his face refused to falter.

Fortunately, the corridor turned out to be far shorter than the spiral labyrinth located beneath the cathedral’s foundations. Less than a minute later, Dipper and Bill arrived at a room Dipper immediately recognised as a laboratory. It looked rather like Ford’s private study. A number of unrecognisable mechanical devices lay scattered among relatively innocuous scientific instruments. Dipper squinted at what was either a gyroscope or a creative device of torture. It, like everything else
in the room, was covered in a thick layer of dust.

Bill, for his part, immediately sprang into action, uprooting drawers and scattering their contents on the ground in search of whatever it was he was looking for. Dipper shook his head at the triangular demon’s antics, continuing to peruse the contents of the room at a sedate pace. “So this guy was a scientist?”

“Alchemist, actually.” Bill corrected him, casually flinging a glass paperweight behind him as he rifled through the contents of a cabinet. Dipper dodged it, and it crashed into the opposite wall, shattering into fragments. Ignoring Dipper’s alarmed yelp, the demon continued to carelessly toss centuries-old relics over his shoulder as he monologued. “Used to be one of the greatest minds of his generation! Hasn’t been an alchemist like him since, specially not after the World Government banned research into gold conversion ‘cause it was messing with their iron grip over the economy! But like the story always goes, he got in too deep.” Bill’s voice darkened, his movements slowing. Dipper took advantage of the lack of flung objects to ensconce himself in a corner of the room, well away from the flight path of anything Bill cared to toss.

“Remember what I said about this town, kid? It doesn’t let go of its secrets that easy. Sucker started to attract the attention of things WAY beyond his mortal ken. That’s where I came in! An old friend of mine wanted me to get him outta the picture! ‘USING ANY MEANS NECESSARY’, they said! So we made a deal, I did my thing, and then… whoo-ti-doo.” Bill made a circular ‘cuckoo’ motion at eye-level with his finger.

Dipper frowned. “So you mentally tortured that poor guy until he… until he…”

“Actually, NO.” Bill said, floating over to another cabinet. “I somehow managed to lose my connection to his mind before I could get to the best part. Really PEEVED me off, I can assure you!”

“You lost your connection to his mind?” The corner of something was jabbing into Dipper’s thigh. He turned, squinting though the dim light of Bill’s flames. It looked like a safe of some kind. “Is that even possible?”

“Turns out it was! My client wasn’t all that happy either! Tried to run me outta FIVE whole dimensions! PSHHT, like THAT’D stop me.” Bill scoffed. “Though they came around after his dead body popped up in the lake out yonder. Obviously SOMEONE took ‘DROWNING YOUR SORROWS’ a lil’ too literally!”

Dipper paused in his examination of the safe. “Wait. Was that because of you, or…?”

“Seeing as it was SIX YEARS after I stopped bugging him, I could hazard a guess! And that guess is NO. Least it got me back on my client’s good graces! So I didn’t much question what dragged him down to a COLD AND MEANINGLESS DEATH BY SUFFOCATION. Maybe I should’ve!” Bill reflected, hovering over to Dipper’s side. “Whatcha got there, Pine Tree?”

“Please don’t.” Dipper replied, stooping to examine the safe in detail now that Bill, and consequently his flames, were now within an adequate proximity. It wasn’t like any safe he’d seen before. Instead of a combination lock, the safe’s locking mechanism seemed to be managed by a number of metallic switches, lined up in several rows. As he leaned in further to examine, Dipper sucked in a breath. “I
“Thought what?” Bill asked curiously, peering over his shoulder. “Kid, I know your brain’s usually EMPTY AS THE GAPING CHASM BETWEEN EXISTENCE AND NONEXISTENCE, but you gotta give me an idea what kind of MEANINGLESS CONTEMPLATIONS you keep tossing into the void- oh.”

“Yeah.” Dipper said grimly, examining the smudged handprints which had disturbed the thick layer of dust clinging to the safe. “Someone’s been down here recently. Just like the cathedral.”

“They aren’t your fingerprints.” Bill mused, scrutinising the safe. He flicked his fingers, causing several of the buttons to depress and the door to groan open. Before Dipper could react, he let out a noise of triumph, flinging himself into the safe before he re-emerged, holding a small cube-like device aloft like a trophy.

“Is that what you were looking for?” Dipper asked, amused, as Bill started to do a small victory dance. It involved a good deal of hand-waving and pleasantly surreal limb contortions. “What is it?”

“You know how you humans’ solar panels use the sun’s rays – as well as the tireless exertions of HUNDREDS OF IMPRISONED AND ENSLAVED PARTICLE ELVES, but they never put THAT part in the warranty – as a source of energy? Well, it’s like that, but with atmospheric magical energy instead!”

Dipper plucked the cube out of Bill’s hand, examining it closely. It was an opaque black, its sides smooth like volcanic rock. “Like a rechargeable magical battery?”

“Exactly!” Bill unzipped Dipper’s backpack, tossing the cube inside. After some hesitation, he floated off to one of the cabinets, gathering some metallic cylinders in his arms, letting them slide into Dipper’s backpack with considerably more care.

Dipper stooped to examine the remaining contents of the safe. It was near-empty, possibly because whoever had been here before had taken out everything else of value. They probably hadn’t realised what the cube actually was. The only thing remaining in the safe was a small pile of papers, preserved from the elements within the airtight confines of the safe. Dipper picked up one, studying it.

4,37,13 5,50,38. 4,37,13 6,9,9 5,50,38. 8,89,75 3,10,60. 2,72,30. 6,9,9 5,50,38. 3,2,7 10,1,10 11,16,49 2,7,28. 8,1,28 12,50,21 2,1,25. 11,28,1 3,1,71 3,36,11 9,1,17. 12,20,37 2,3,21 1,6,18 6,10,13 8,8,96 10,27,8. 3,2,14

All the other papers contained similar lines of numbers, each arranged in triplets. It seemed like a code of some sort.

“Hey, Bill?” The demon let out a noise of assent, floating to his side. “Can you read these?”

Bill stared at the collection of papers, his sclera rapidly flickering with images of strange symbols. After some moments, he responded with an incongruously cheerful, “Nope!”

“What do you mean, nope?” Dipper responded, confused. “Aren’t codes, like, your thing? What with your name and all?”
“Well, YEAH, but that doesn’t make an impossible cipher any easier to crack!” Bill thwapped Dipper lightly in the face with the piece of paper. “I’m probably missing something! Like the source key or the rest of the code or THE CAPACITY TO COMPREHEND YOU HUMANS’ FUTILE STRUGGLE FOR ANSWERS IN THE FACE OF YOUR ENCROACHING MORTALITY!”

Dipper rolled his eyes, carefully slipping the papers into his bag. “If there’s nothing else you need, let’s hurry up.”

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Dipper rested his chin on his hand, elbow propped up on the bus’s window. The lake’s scenery was largely obscured by the barrier of raindrops rolling down the sides. He could hear the slush of the bus’s wheels as it rolled through the half-flooded road, spraying water as it flew past.

Losing interest in the scenery, he unzipped his backpack. Bill blinked up as he carefully levered the coded papers out, flipping through them with a rustle. Dipper clicked his tongue as his finger slowly traced the numbers. Numbers in groups of three. He could see some of these groups being repeated in various parts of the code. Probably a word-based substitution, then. Well, the guy was careless enough to use actual punctuation, so this probably wasn’t the most complex code out there. So why couldn’t Bill solve it?

“Why’re you obsessed with that old loony, anyway?” Bill groused. “Trust me, kid, once you’ve been around as long as I have, madmen spewing SURPRISINGLY ACCURATE PREDICTIONS about impending doom and destruction start to become par for the course!”

Well, yeah, but Dipper couldn’t shake the feeling that whoever this guy was, he was somehow connected to the recent happenings in Chapelwick. His underground laboratory and its similarities to the cathedral’s crypt, right down to the relatively recent intrusions by some unknown party. It was all too much to be chalked up to mere coincidence.

Dipper sighed, letting Bill nudge the papers out of his hand. The triangular demon re-examined them indifferently before placing them back at the bottom of Dipper’s backpack.

…Seriously, how had Bill managed to forget the guy? Whatever happened to the ‘all-knowing’ part of ‘all-knowing dream demon’? Maybe his ‘client’ might have an idea of who it was.

“Hey! There’s a difference between ‘ALL-KNOWING’ and ‘DUMB ENOUGH TO THINK THAT MEMORISING WORTHLESS TRIVIA IS A VIABLE WAY TO WASTE MY IMMORTAL LIFESPAN!’” Bill snapped. “And as for my client—” a sheepish note entered his tone, “well, I don’t think they’ll be all that much help! See, we had something of a falling out last century, and I miiiight’ve replaced all their bodily fluids with nitroglycerin! So even if they’re ALIVE right now (which I doubt), I don’t think they’d be CHOMPING AT THE BIT to help out!”

Dipper massaged his forehead. “Is that a habit of yours? Creatively torturing everyone you know on a whim?” he said out loud, drawing some odd looks from the other passengers on the bus.

“Hey, that’s how things work in MY world! None of your human AIRY-FAIRY NONSENSE where you SMILE THROUGH GRITTED TEETH at your enemies while pretending you aren’t wondering what’d happen if you took a VEGETABLE PEELER to their limbs! Least I’ve got the decency to ACTUALLY ACT on these fantasies!” Bill flung his arms out, causing the papers beneath him to crunch forebodingly.

Dipper rolled his eyes. The bus rolled to a stop, and he watched as a mother and her toddler ducked in through the doors, eager to get out of the pouring rain. He smiled as the little girl stood on tippy-
toes to pass the driver her ticket, before hopping onto her seat, chatting animatedly with her mother.

The smile slipped off his face as he remembered exactly what was going to happen to that little girl if he messed up tonight.

Dipper buried his head in his bag (ignoring Bill’s telepathic squawk of surprise) and tried his damned best not to hyperventilate.

***

“Feeling better now, Pine Tree?” Bill eyed Dipper dubiously as he switched off the tap, wiping the cold water off his face with a towel.

“’M fine.” Dipper mumbled, striding into his room. “Let’s just get to work.”

Bill narrowed his eye in a manner which suggested that he didn’t find Dipper’s statement convincing in the least. Dipper didn’t bother to defend himself, pulling the cube out of his backpack and settling on his desk. “Right. What’ve you got planned?”

Bill perched on the desk, crossing his legs. “Looks like SOMEONE’S an eager beaver! Anyway, hard as it is for me to admit, I don’t have a SNOWBALL’S CHANCE IN HELL of defeating your thorny friend in THIS state! Even this nifty lil’ battery won’t give me all that much to go on!” Bill casually tossed the cube from hand to hand. “So we’ll have to confront them in a place where we have the advantage! Or rather, where I, MASTER OF THE MIND, have the advantage! Get where I’m going, kid?”

“The mindscape.” Dipper breathed. “We need to figure out a way into Thorne’s mindscape.”

“WAYYY ahead of ya!” Bill reached into his backpack, withdrawing the metallic cylinders he’d retrieved earlier from the cabinet within the laboratory. “These are to sleeping gas what the Black Death was to the common cold! Pretty powerful stuff! What’s-his-face created these once he realised, well, if you can’t BEAT THEM, you should DRAG THEM KICKING AND SCREAMING TO JOIN YOU IN THE DEPTHS OF MADNESS! Shame I never got a chance to see them in action!” Bill held one up to the light, surveying it proudly.

“Yep, TWO HUNDRED years and it’s still as potent! Anyway, it causes something like a group hallucination, creating a bridge linking your mind with your thorny friend’s – and by extension, giving ME access to the most VULNERABLE parts of his psyche.” Bill’s eye glinted malevolently. “Course, breaking his mind’s gonna be a last resort! My target’s Yinglong. Since she doesn’t TECHNICALLY belong to the physical realm, that means she can sustain actual damage in the mindscape! Put her through enough trauma, and, well…”

Dipper swallowed, suddenly uneasy. Sure, he got why Bill’s methods were necessary (every kid under the age of nine, Jesus), but the sheer pragmatism of his plan was starting to remind him of… things… he’d rather not be reminded of.

“I don’t suppose there’s a way we can do this without killing anyone? Or rendering them permanently catatonic, for that matter?” He hunched his shoulders forward, digging his fingers into the seat of his chair.

Bill fell still, his gaze becoming inscrutable. “Pine Tree, Pine Tree, Pine Tree. One day, you’re going to have to learn that you can’t save EVERYONE all the time.” He placed the cube to his side with a light clunk. “Or RELEARN, as it were.”

“We’re not talking about that, remember?” Dipper stared at the ground.
Bill stared at him for a moment, before letting out a frustrated buzzing noise. “Alright, FINE. I wasn’t about to tell you this, because I didn’t want to get your hopes up, but since you’ve decided to MOPE ABOUT like Time Baby without his pacifier…“ Bill flicked Dipper’s chin up in an impatient motion, “There’s the possibility that Yinglong chooses to voluntarily break off the contract. Not a big possibility, mind you, since dragons are DISGUSTINGLY FUSSY about contract fidelity, but it’s there! Now would you stop looking at me like I just SLICED YOUR PIG UP INTO BACON AND ATE HIM IN FRONT OF YOU?”

Dipper’s eyes widened, before his lips twitched upwards. “What makes you think I’d look like that?”

“There’s an infinite number of parallel universes, kid.” Bill said irascibly. “I can think up seven off the top of my head where I tried pulling that on you. And one where I thought it’d be a good idea to pull it on your SISTER. It wasn’t a good idea.”

Dipper snorted. “Yeah, I can see that backfiring.” His attention fell on the cube sitting next to Bill. “So what’s that for, then?”

Bill glanced at the cube, picking it back up. “Good question, kid! See, I might not be an ALL-POWERFUL BEING OF PURE ENERGY anymore, but I’ve still got a fairly distinctive energy signature! A being like Yinglong’d DEFINITELY be able to pick it up on it, and the last thing we want is to have her running off before we can confront her. So what I need is a different body, one which doesn’t release the same level of energy.” Bill’s sclera flashed black. “A HUMAN body, to be precise.”

“…Well, I’m not letting you use mine.” Was Dipper’s first response, once his mind managed to race through all possible implications of Bill’s statement, raising panic signals as appropriate.

Bill let out a long, obnoxious sigh. “Yeesh, kid, why so paranoid? Five years and you STILL haven’t gotten over it?”

“Having your body possessed by demon whose idea of a good time is slamming his hand repeatedly into the cutlery drawer isn’t something you just ‘get over’.“ Dipper crossed his arms defensively.

Bill rolled his eye. “AAANYWAY, since possession seems to be too much for your DELICATE HUMAN SENSIBILITIES, looks like I’ll have to MAKE my own body! And that’s where THIS-” the cube shuddered and began to float into the air – “comes in! A power source to activate the requisite spells, since getting magical energy out of YOU is like trying to wring WATER OUT OF A STONE!”

Dipper blinked. “Wait, wasn’t the whole deal with the puppets because you couldn’t make your own body?”

“Tsk, tsk, Pine Tree.” Bill looked distinctly unimpressed. “I know your human memory’s RIDICULOUSLY LIMITED, but you’re really pushing it right now! And by IT, I mean my capacity to withstand your SUSTAINED BARRAGE OF IDIOCY without my MULTIDIMENSIONAL THINKSPONGE MELTING INTO SOME KIND OF PRIMEVAL OOZE AND LEAKING OUT MY ORIFICES. I didn’t have a physical form back then, remember? Trying to construct a body out of some mindscape-level thought projections would be like trying to drag Plato out of his cave! In other words, it can’t be done!”

“Okay. Insult heard loud and clear.” Dipper picked up the cube from where it was floating in mid-air. “How’re we going to do this then? A spell?”

He yelped as a red pen was lobbed directly at his head. Bill floated in front of him, his eye narrowed
challengingly. “I’m gonna need you to draw a magic circle, Pine Tree. Think you can handle that?”

Dipper pinched his forehead and groaned.

***

All things considered, it wasn’t so bad. Sure, there was a small mountain of crumpled papers accumulating atop his desk which Bill had deemed ‘inadequate’, but the fact that the magic circle in this case was a great deal smaller meant Dipper had less chances to mess up.

And there was also the fact that somewhere around his fifteenth attempt, Bill had made an exasperated noise from his perch on Dipper’s right shoulder. Dipper had flinched as two small hands extended to wrap around his own, guiding his motions as the triangular demon mumbled things like “no, kid, that’s meant to be a COMPLETELY different system of runes” and “yeesh, you call THAT a star?”

He’d swallowed, keeping his mind carefully blank, his grip on the pen tightening. Bill didn’t seem to notice, too preoccupied with criticising Dipper’s marked lack of artistic attributes. Why was he so nervous, anyway? It wasn’t like this was the first time Bill had helped him out. Actually, he’d been pretty helpful as of late. Like, ridiculously helpful. What with the saving-him-from-supernatural-creatures-out-for-his-blood thing and the helping-him-solve-mysteries thing, they’d entered this weird comfortable thing which was starting to look alarmingly like friendship.

And sure, there’d been times when Bill had been concealing some pretty important information, but that was usually because he knew that Dipper would get all worked up about it. The same reason why Dipper sometimes kept things from Mabel, because he cared-

He didn’t realise his hand had fallen still until Bill appeared, hovering before his face, eye fixed upon him curiously. “Pine Tree? You in there? Or has your soul finally transcended its THREE-DIMENSIONAL CAGE and drifted off into the metasphere?”

He blinked, ears turning red. “…Sorry. Zoned out for a bit.”

Bill squinted at him, before something like fondness crept into his gaze. “Yeesh, kid, and I thought it’d be impossible to get lost in that empty head of yours!” he said cheerfully, ruffling Dipper’s head until he pitched forwards.

Dipper silently weighed the pros and cons of screaming and flinging himself out the window.

Eventually he decided that the cons probably outweighed the pros, what with the fact that he was currently immortal and he’d probably have to explain to Bill at some point why he thought self-imposed defenestration was a good idea. As well as the fact that Bill was currently surveying his (their) magic circle and making various satisfied noises which indicated that he found this particular attempt adequate.

“Well, YEAH, except for the part where I’m not GOING UP IN FLAMES at the end of the night!” Bill said matter-of-factly.
“...Something tells me human and demon fairytales are very different.” Dipper finally managed.

“Whaddya mean?” Bill looked sceptical. “CINDERella, right? Why else would she be called that?”

Dipper suppressed a pained smile. “I’ll explain later. Let’s just get this over and done with.” He moved to stand at the spot Bill had pointed out, closing his eyes as he began to chant. “Sortis Corpus Triangulum. Sortis Corpus Triangulum.”

“Sortis Corpus Triangulum.”

The moment the last chant left his mouth, the cube in Bill’s lap lit up and began to spin, throwing glimmers of light against the wall like a crystal ornament. Bill himself rose up, his eye closed and triangular body limp as it glowed so brightly that Dipper was tempted to shade his eyes with a hand. As the speed of the rotating cube reached a peak, Bill’s limbs shrank into his body, which hovered up and down as blood vessels and veins began to sprout, wrapping themselves around him like a particularly grotesque Ivy trellis.

Dipper watched in morbid fascination as Bill’s body began to form, tissues emerging and joining to form what were probably organs, bones manifesting and snapping together before their joints were encased by tendons, and flesh sliding over them like viscous liquid, enclosing everything with a sickening squelch. Skin began to materialise, expanding in spots and blotches like bacterial colonies upon an agar plate. Hair sprouted, emerging in golden waves, a thick fringe fluttering forwards to cover Bill’s right eye. Finally, a jingling sound, and a bow and top hat emerged in a glimmer of golden light to complete the ensemble, the hat propping itself jauntily atop Bill’s head.

The first thought which popped into Dipper’s head was, ‘whoa, is that really Bill?’

Dipper had expected the triangular demon’s human form to be a little more… well… angular. Something lanky, maybe. Tall, possibly. But instead, Bill’s body was… unexpectedly well-built. Like if someone had willed life into a Greek sculpture. Or like if one of the protagonists of Mabel’s trashier romance novels had stepped right out of the book. His features were weirdly regal, a certain dignity to the shape of his face and the line of his chin that belied everything Dipper had expected from the raucous ex-dream demon. Blonde eyelashes fluttered against bronze skin as Bill stirred, opening his eye to reveal a golden pupil.

The second thought which popped into Dipper’s head was ‘FUCK FUCK FUCK WHY IS HE NAKED I DIDN’T THINK THIS THROUGH.’

He let out an incoherent screech of mortification, clapping his hands over his eyes before he could glimpse more of the ex-dream demon than he’d signed up for.

“Well, WELL, WELL! Looks like I’ve got my own BAG OF BONES to wreak havoc with this time!” Bill’s grating tone was at complete odds with his dignified (if unclothed) appearance. He took a few unsteady steps, before his inability to calculate forward momentum caught up with him, and he went sprawling across Dipper’s desk, knocking his hip hard against the edge in the process.

“HAHAHAHA! PAIN! Wow, it’s sure been a while since I’ve experienced YOU!”

“Oh my god.” Dipper mumbled through the hands covering his face. “Oh my god.”

“Oh my god.” Dipper mumbled through the hands covering his face. “Oh my god.”

“WHAT’S wrong, Pine Tree?” Bill righted himself, rubbing his hip where it had bumped into the desk. “Oooh! Lemme guess! Are you so OVERWHELMED by my GLORIOUS VISAGE that you can’t even look at it directly? Haha, what am I saying? OF COURSE you are!” Dipper squawked as an arm snaked around his waist and he was forced to contend with bare skin touching him pretty much everywhere.
“…Why are you naked.” Dipper finally managed, finally daring to look Bill in the face. At least that was safe. Relatively little chance of scarring him for life, although that was never a guarantee whenever Bill was around.

Bill leaned in closer, arching his eyebrow curiously. “Whaddya mean, kid? I’m wearing my hat, aren’t I? And my bow tie!”

“That doesn’t help! They make you look like a Chippendales dancer!” Pitching himself out the window was starting to look like an increasingly attractive option.

“A what now?”

They froze as a knock sounded on Dipper’s door. “Dipper, dear? Aren’t you supposed to be at school?”

Fuck.

Dipper’s eyes widened. He leapt into action, grabbing Bill by the arm and shoving the bewildered demon into the closet, catching a glimpse of some unusual markings visible on Bill’s back as he did so. He didn’t have the opportunity to get a better look, as not two seconds later, Dipper’s mother entered the room, laundry piled up in her arms. “Dipper?”

“Oh. Uh. Haha. Hi, mom.” Dipper waved sheepishly, leaning against the closet door in a manner he hoped he could pass off as casual. “Just. Had a free period, and Mabel wanted me to come back to collect some stuff for the school dance tonight.”

His mother stared at him sceptically for a moment, before shrugging. It probably helped that Dipper wasn’t the sort of person to skip classes. “Well, tell Mabel she needs to be more careful from now on. I’ve been vacuuming the glitter spot on her carpet for an hour, and it’s still not going away. Anyway, what were you making such a ruckus for?” she asked, starting to fold his clothes. Sheer habit compelled Dipper to join her, picking up a pair of pants and folding them neatly.

“Oh. I was just… practicing. For a performance. Mabel’s putting it up.” Nice move, Dipper Pines. Just pin everything on your sister.

“Honestly, you can’t say no to your sister, can you?” his mother said fondly, as they finished up with the rest of Dipper’s laundry. She moved to place them in his closet, and Dipper’s blood ran cold as he remembered exactly who was in there.

“W-wait! Don’t-”

His mother paused at his panicked tone, her hand on the handle of the closet. “What’s wrong, honey?”

There’s a naked guy in my closet is what’s wrong, Dipper didn’t say. “I-I think I can do that myself! Don’t want to put you through all that trouble!”

“Eh? It’s not all that much trouble-” Dipper’s mother blinked as he snatched the laundry out of her hands.

“Mom, seriously! I’m not a kid anymore! I can do my own laundry.” He said pointedly, ignoring the niggling feeling of guilt eating away at his insides.

His mother stared at him, before she started to chuckle. “Oh, Dipper. Sometimes I forget that you’re all grown up already.” She kissed him on the cheek, which Dipper bore with an adolescent grumble, before making her way out of the room. “Make sure you get to school before your next class starts, okay? Need me to drive you?”
“No, I can walk. Thanks, mom.” Dipper watched as she shut the door behind her, adrenaline still pumping through his veins.

“Uh, Pine Tree?” Bill’s voice emerged, muffled by the wood of the closet. “Can I come out now?”

“Yeah.” Dipper finally exhaled. “Okay.”

The closet door opened, and Dipper winced as Bill flopped face-first onto the floor like a domino. “WHOO! Talk about a disaster in the making! Least THIS one was only PARTIALLY my fault!”

“Mhm.” Dipper strode towards the closet in question, rifling through it for clothes which might happen to fit Bill. The demon’s human body was rather… larger than his. In more than one respect. Suppressing his urge to bury his face in his winter coats and scream, Dipper sorted through his clothes, eventually emerging with an oversized white dress shirt gifted to him some years ago by one of his more visually challenged aunts, a mustard formal-style vest from a family friend’s wedding which they’d bought in the hopes he’d ‘grow into it’, and a pair of black slacks he was fairly certain actually belonged to his father and had ended up misplaced at some point during the laundry cycle.

He tossed it all onto the dream demon’s prone body. “Here. You know how to put clothes on, right?”

Bill made a noise of assent, dragging himself up off the floor. It took a little bit of stumbling around like a puppet on strings before he righted himself, turning his back to Dipper while he clothed himself. Which, coincidentally, gave Dipper a good view of the markings on his back. Scars. Six of them, arranged in three rows down his back. There was something almost clinical about the way they’d been made. Six straight, precise slashes, the pale pink markings a stark contrast to Bill’s dark skin.

Dipper frowned, looking away as he arranged his laundry.

Some minutes later, he decided that Bill was probably clothed enough that looking at him was a pretty safe bet. As he turned to face the dream demon, his mouth went dry.

“How, if what they say is true and CLOTHES REALLY DO MAKE THE MAN, I don’t think I’d mind being a polyester-wool blend for the rest of my foreseeable existence!” The dress shirt, which had been ridiculously oversized on Dipper, was only slightly too large on Bill, causing the demon to roll his sleeves up to his forearms. The vest, on the other hand, was a perfect fit, accentuating his waist and dipping in all the right places. “Shit’s comfortable! So, how do I look?”

Not a good time, teenage hormones. “Your shirt’s buttoned up wrong.” Dipper finally managed, his voice a little hoarse.

“No, not your vest, your shirt – wait, the button goes over there – no, up, not down… you’re just making it worse at this point.” Finally, Dipper threw his hands up with an exasperated sigh and marched over to Bill, determinedly refusing to think about what he was doing as he unbuttoned and rebuttoned the demon’s shirt. “There.” He said, giving Bill’s vest a none-too-gentle pat-down. “Done.”

Bill didn’t move. Dipper glanced up. That was a mistake.

At this proximity, Bill’s appearance was, if possible, even more mesmerising. Dipper swallowed. He could feel Bill’s warm breath on his face as his eyes met the demon’s single one. His gaze traced the demon’s fine features, moving from the line of his jaw to the curve of his lips. Bill was smiling, he
eventually realised. Not the insane grin or calculating smirk he’d been constantly wearing that time he’d possessed Dipper’s body. Just. A smile.

He counted it as a triumph when he finally stepped back, managing a strangled, “You need to ditch the top hat.”

Bill’s smile fell. “What?! Kid, you can’t just ask me to ditch the top hat! I have STANDARDS, you know! How would YOU feel if I asked you to DITCH YOUR LEFT FOOT?”

“Right, because you totally walk with your hat.” Dipper rolled his eyes, although he was somewhat relieved by the return of the banter. The atmosphere had been getting weird. “C’mon, it’s way too noticeable. And it doesn’t really go with your outfit.”

“I use my hat to express myself!” Bill protested, though he did take the offending accessory off his head.

“You’ve got a face to do that now.” Dipper said, surveying the rest of the dream demon. “Yeah, the bow tie’s gotta go too.”

Bill looked horrified. “Kid, you don’t understand. Without my bow tie, I’d just be a TRIANGLE.”

“You’re not even a triangle right now!”

“That’s even WORSE!” Bill crossed his arms, his face twisting into a stubborn pout. “Look, Pine Tree, you might’ve humiliated me and dragged me out of the mindscape, but I’ve still got my PRIDE!”

“Bill, if Mabel recognises you-”

“RIIIIGHT. Because your sister is going to look at THIS-“ here, he gestured at his human body, “and the first thought that pops into her head is gonna be ‘Hey, that guy’s wearing a bow tie! I can’t think of ANY feasible reason why anyone would wear a bow tie, so he must be BILL CIPHER!’” Bill said the last part in a completely awful falsetto.

“Bill. Seriously.”

“Welp, I suppose we’ll have to agree we can’t see eye to eye on this. Which makes sense, because you’ve got two eyes, I’ve got one - I’d have to stare at only ONE of your eyes, and that’d just be awkward!”

Dipper glared at him, before letting out a sigh of resignation. “Alright. Fine. But if anyone finds out, you’re doing the explaining.”

“Well, I’M looking forward to telling your sister exactly what the GAPING HOLES in your body looked like after those gnome-ripoffs were done with you!” Bill said absently, striding over to the mirror over at the corner of Dipper’s room to take a better look at himself. “Not to mention the time you managed to LITERALLY lose your head-” the demon suddenly cut himself off, falling silent.

Dipper blinked, his attention piqued by Bill’s uncharacteristic lack of noise. Bill was standing in front of the mirror, his expression unusually solemn. Slowly, his hand reached up to brush some hair from his face.

“This body, huh?” he murmured, a bitter smile gracing his features.

His hand slowly dropped back to his side, and Dipper watched as he moved away, brushing past him
towards the door.

“C’mon, Pine Tree. We’ve got an entire colony of human larvae to save.” He said, his tone subdued.

Dipper’s lips tightened at the reminder of exactly how much was at stake here. After Bill successfully fumbled his way out of the room, his gaze sharpened, and he turned his attention to the journals on his shelf. Mentally apologising to Ford, he pulled the first journal from his bookshelf, tucking it into the inside pocket of his coat.

A low thud made him flinch, and he hurried out of the room, catching sight of a face-down demon who’d evidently just attempted to fall his way down the stairs.

“…How do these things work again?” Bill asked, as sheer gravity sent him slipping down another step.

Dipper cradled his head in his hands and sighed.

Chapter End Notes

whoop i changed the summary

Hint regarding the code: Do you think it’s a difficult looking code? Well, it’s difficult enough that it’s (currently) impossible for Bill to solve it. That being said, it’s also easy enough that any one of you could solve it, if you really wanted to.

(I actually hope that someone tries their hand at solving it. I spent far longer than necessary writing it out.)
Arc II Part 12: The Dance

Chapter Summary

Dipper accidentally unleashes his totally-not-demon definitely-not-boyfriend upon the unsuspecting public.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“And don’t drink anything. I saw what you did with that Pitt Cola.”

“FIVE YEARS AGO, Pine Tree. Look, I know I put the ‘DEMON’ in ‘PANDEMONIUM’ back then, but a bunch of that was just me screwing with you! You know how I sometimes swap people’s heads with goat livers? It was something like that!”

“…Says the guy who couldn’t remember how stairs work.”

Bill huffed, blowing his fringe out of his eye and giving the umbrella in his hand a spiteful twirl. “Fine. Any OTHER prohibitions you want to impose? Maybe you want me to stop BLINKING! Or RESPIRATING! Or RUNNING LITTLE OLD LADIES OVER WITH MY SWEET RIMS!”

Dipper blinked. “Yeah, don’t do that last one.”

Getting Bill out of the house without attracting the attention of his mother had been a task easier said than done. It had included several complicated manoeuvres, one of which had involved shoving Bill under the couch while praying that she didn’t notice how the article of furniture seemed to be hovering an inch or so higher than usual. But they’d gotten out in the end without arousing her suspicion, which Dipper counted as a triumph.

They were currently heading towards the mall, with the intention of purchasing what was, in Bill’s words, enough red string to choke on. And possibly choke a dragon with. Dipper, meanwhile, was fretting over how he was going to introduce Bill to polite society with minimal mishaps. Maybe he should make a list. He should probably make a list, and at least twenty contingency plans to go along with it.

Preoccupied with his thoughts, Dipper barely noticed that Bill had stopped in his tracks until the rain started to roll down his neck. He turned to see the demon staring at a nearby rose bush, contemplative.

“Uh… what-“

“Flowers! I’m gonna take one BECAUSE YOU NEVER TOLD ME I Couldn’T.”

“Bill, those could hurt you-“

His warning came too late. Bill had already grabbed several rose bush branches, the age-sharpened thorns sinking into his skin as he grappled with the vegetation, eventually emerging triumphantly, a somewhat-bloodied rose in hand.
“Oh, for fuck’s sake.” Dipper rushed to his side, extricating him from the shrubbery. He snatched up Bill’s hand, examining his injuries. There were several deep scratches, as well as one particularly nasty gash where a thorn had sunk right into the flesh. Sucking in a breath, Dipper pulled one hand back to unzip his backpack and rummage through it for the bandages he always had on hold. “Okay, that doesn’t look good. I should have something for that—”

“Pine Tree—“

“Hold still, I’m trying to help you!”

“Dammit, kid, stop hopping around like I just turned your legs into bedsprings and WATCH.” Bill planted a hand on his shoulder, spinning him around and thrusting his bloodied hand into Dipper’s face. Dipper squinted, trying to figure out what Bill was making him look at. After a few moments, his eyes widened in understanding. The holes in Bill’s hand were shifting, closing in on themselves like blinking eyes.

He felt his cheeks flush, feeling rather like an idiot. Of course Bill would have the same healing ability as him. What was he expecting, really?

Bill glanced at his embarrassed expression, then back at his hand, his face inscrutable. “Kid, you don’t need to worry. I LIKE pain.”

“Yeah, well, you know what I like? Not seeing you get hurt, that’s one thing.” The words were out of his mouth before he could register the soft look of surprise on Bill’s face.

He’d seen a similar look in Bill’s eye before. The time he’d panicked when Bill had poured coffee over himself. But this time there was a facial expression to go with that look, and something about the quizzical quirk of Bill’s mouth was starting to make Dipper’s stomach turn in ways which didn’t quite qualify as nausea. He pulled away, quickening his stride down the sidewalk.

Bill trailed along behind him, looking inexplicably and irritatingly pleased with himself.

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Passers-by gave Dipper odd looks as he finished tying a thick length of rope around Bill’s arm, before looping the other end of the rope around the bench of the chair. Bill crossed his legs sulkily, looking for all the world like a petulant little kid who’d just been scolded for disobedience. “Is this really necessary, Pine Tree? Do I look like some kind of PLACID-MINDED DOMESTICATED MAMMAL READY TO BE ESCORTED TO THE SLAUGHTER?” He scuffed his shoes against the floor for emphasis.

Dipper completed the constrictor knot, tightening it and testing its durability. “Look, it’s not that I don’t trust you—“

Bill let out a short bark of laughter. “HAH! When did you replace your larynx with a BULLSHIT GENERATOR? Because that’s a whole lotta crap that exited your mouth just then!”

“…Okay, fine, I don’t trust you. But this—“ here, Dipper punctuated his words by tightening the knot further, “has less to do with whether or not I trust you and more to do with the fact you walked straight into the sliding door on our way in, knocked over a greeting card stand not five seconds into the building and then tried to play it off by telling everyone that the greeting card industry is actually a conspiracy by the Brotherhood of Smiles to turn us all into compliant proselytisers of the Way of the Hallmark Holiday while scamming us out of our money.”

“Was I WRONG though?” Bill mumbled, petulantly swinging his legs back and forth. “I mean, did
you SEE those prices? Total ripoff.”

“And after that, you squashed the cakes on display in the bakery, struck up a conversation with a fashion mannequin and… well… I don’t really want to know exactly what you said to that old lady over there.” Dipper jerked his head towards his left, where an old lady was screeching incoherently and brandishing her walker at her panicked-looking family like a weapon while multiple security guards attempted to restrain her. Come to think of it, that was probably why he and Bill hadn’t been kicked out yet. Along with the fact that for all his outlandish behaviour, Bill’s human form looked surprisingly respectable. Guess appearances really were everything.

“Psht, I just reminded her about the REALITIES of LEGAL INHERITANCE SCHEMES and the CORRELATING LIKELIHOOD of finding ARSENIC in your tea!”

Dipper sighed. “Bill.”

“What?! Least I’m keeping my chaos restricted to THREE DIMENSIONS this time!”

“Bill, please. This is serious.” Dipper stooped down slightly, so he could look the demon in the eye. “I really don’t want anyone to die. Not this time.”

Bill’s eye widened, his expression briefly tightening in a manner which could almost be described as guilt. “If you’re so serious about it, why didn’t you just order me to do what you wanted?”

“You know why.”

Bill’s face scrunched up, and it was fascinating to realise that the demon’s inexperience with having a human body meant he couldn’t really hide anything, not in the way he could when he was just a floating triangle with an eye. Dipper could clearly read his emotions as they crossed his face: understanding, reluctance, resignation. “I could just untie this, y’know.” The dream demon finally mumbled, glowering at the ground.

“No, you couldn’t.” Dipper replied firmly. “You couldn’t even figure out shoelaces.”

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When Dipper returned some minutes later, he almost dropped the large bags of thread he had cradled in his arms. Bill was sitting on the bench, exactly where he had let him, so that wasn’t a concern. What was, however, was the growing crowd of small children currently crowded around the demon. With rapidly increasing consternation, Dipper watched as Bill withdrew his hand from his pocket, slowly unfurling his hand to release a shower of blue sparks. This was met with excited cheers and applause from his gathered audience, which was beginning to include some curious adults.

“I guess you could say that really SPARKED your interest, didn’t it?” Bill grinned at his own awful pun, tossing his head back with a flourish. “Alright, so listen up all you IMMATURE PRODUCTS OF PROCREATION, for my next trick, I’m gonna need someone to lend me a prop! Preferably something which you won’t miss if it SELF-IMMOLATES or VANISHES INTO THE GAPING VOID!”

This should probably have been the point where Dipper stepped in. In fact, half an hour ago was probably the point where Dipper should’ve stepped in. It was clearly an unwise idea to stand, watching, as Bill performed, his voice ringing through the crowded mall, his gestures animated and exaggerated and somehow still graceful.

…Seriously, Bill hadn’t even figured out basic hand-eye coordination yet. How was he performing magic tricks?
Then again, Dipper mused, as a little kid eagerly handed Bill what appeared to be an eraser, the demon had always displayed a propensity for the dramatic. Showmanship was pretty much Bill’s entire sh*tick, although he usually demonstrated it through terrifying feats of abstraction involving dismembered body parts rather than stage magic. But whether he was pulling rabbits or unspeakable eldritch horrors out of hats, the demon tended to exude an attention-grabbing confidence which drew all eyes to him, the flame to their metaphorical moths. So it made sense that Bill took to magic acts like a particularly hammy duck to water.

It also helped that Bill seemed to be using actual magic.

“Alright, so can any of you ANKLEBITERS tell me what this is?” A high-pitched chorus of “it’s an eraser!” followed, to which Bill rolled his eye, closing the palm of his hand and tilting it downwards. “Really? Well, guess I’ll have to trust your judgement! I mean, you’ve all got at LEAST one eye more than I do—” this statement prompted laughter from the children as well as some uncomfortable chuckles from the older members of the crowd, “so lemme just take another look at it!”

Bill opened his hand again. The eraser was nowhere to be seen.

“WHOA-HO! Now where did that go?” Bill clapped his hand to his face in feigned surprise.

“Your other hand!” A girl, who looked to be about five, called out.

“My other hand?” Bill shifted to examine his other hand, which happened to be clenched in a fist.

“Are you SURE? Welp, guess there’s no harm in trying!”

He opened his other hand. A shower of blue sparks flew out, bright enough that most of the crowd, Dipper included, was forced to look away. When they looked back, Bill had his cane in hand, examining it with glee. “I was wondering where that’d gotten to! But it looks like you’ve all got the SHORT END OF THE WALKING STICK—” here, he twirled his cane for emphasis, “seeing as that’s not what YOU’RE looking for!”

He sat back, shrugging casually. “Looks like your eraser’s managed to ERASE itself out of existence!” In response to the protests and groans of his audience, Bill grinned. “Well, you know what they say! Existence is overrated anyway! WHICH IS A GOOD THING BECAUSE THERE’S A TWENTY-THREE PERCENT CHANCE YOU’LL ALL CEASE TO EXIST TONIGHT!”

Aaand that was Dipper’s cue to intervene. Excusing himself past the cluster of onlookers, he managed to nudge his way to the front of the audience. He didn’t miss how Bill suddenly sat up a little straighter when he noticed Dipper, his eye brightening. Dipper was reminded of those dogs he’d seen tied up outside the mall, and how they always seemed to perk up, tails wagging, at their owner’s approach. Although those usually had the decency not to conduct magic shows in their owner’s absence.

Dipper yelped as Bill suddenly grabbed him by the waist, pulling him so that he stumbled his way to the demon’s side.

“Bill, just what do you think you’re doing?” he hissed, but his companion ignored him.

“So! I’d like you all to meet my LOVELY assistant (or jailkeeper, depending on how you look at it), who might be able to help us find where that PESKY ERASER has vanished off to! Say, Pine Tree,” and here Bill leaned in, and okay wow Dipper’s capacity to form coherent thoughts seemed to inversely correlate with his proximity, “you wouldn’t happen to be keeping a SMALL ROUNDED SYNTHETIC POLYMER in your pocket, would you?”
Any possible responses (as well as all of Dipper’s remaining thought processes) were cut off as Bill’s hand dove into his back pocket. He let out a squeak as Bill made a show of thoroughly rooting around in his pocket in search of the elusive eraser. After a few seconds of groping, Bill withdrew his hand, pulling some red thread along with it. “What’s this? I hope you’re not just STRINGING me along, kid!” He pulled further on the thread, dragging the length of string further out. The children laughed at Bill’s perplexed expression as he continued to tug on the string, producing more and more thread, which pooled on the floor in a tangle of red.

Eventually, Bill let out a defeated sigh, releasing the string. “Doesn’t look like this’ll get us anywhere! Welp, least the next time someone asks you how long a piece of string is, you’ll have an answer! The string is ETERNAL and INESCAPABLE and IMMENSELY INCONVENIENT!”

“What about his other pocket?” A freckled little boy asked.

Bill snapped his fingers. “Great idea, kiddo! Now, Pine Tree, if you don’t mind-“ this time, Dipper was marginally more prepared for Bill’s intrusion of his personal space, but he still flushed red as Bill’s hand dug into his other back pocket, emerging with his mobile phone. And his keys. And his wallet. And his lock-picking set.

“I’ve heard of deep pockets, but this is RIDICULOUS!” Bill announced, as he pulled out a packet of tissues. The audience tittered as the pile of Dipper’s personal belongings continued to grow. They quietened when Bill lifted his hand, a focused expression on his face. “Wait. I’ve got a good feeling about this one.”

The demon paused, and Dipper knew it was for dramatic tension. But it also left his hand buried in Dipper’s back pocket, and that was –

Bill’s hand moved, one deliberate motion, and okay whoa wait did he just cop a feel? But Dipper barely had the chance to react before the demon pulled out the eraser, to the cheers of the gathered audience. Bill held up a finger, lowering the applause to a buzz of anticipation.

“There’s just ONE last thing I want to check.” Bill said, cracking a grin and fluttering his eyelashes in a way which might have been a wink if he had two eyes. “Sorry, Pine Tree, but it looks like I’ll need your services one more time!” He reached into Dipper’s pocket, and retrieved a small ruffled pinkish-red object. It was the rose, which he presented to the audience with a flourish.

“Aand it looks like we’ll have to finish up here!” The gathered crowd let out various noises of protest, which Bill deflected with a cocky grin. “Whew, looks like SOMEONE’S popular! Sorry about that, folks, but if you REALLY want to see me again, try drawing a triangle with an eye inside it on a flat surface with a good vantage point! Maybe sacrifice a few small animals to make it REALLY convincing! You can use their blood to write a personalised message! Something along the lines of ‘I SWEAR ETERNAL FEALTY TO BILL CIPH-’” Bill’s sentence was cut off by a pained hiss as Dipper deliberately trod on his foot.

“SO! ANYWAY! You’ve all been a GREAT audience! I’ll be sure to sacrifice you LAST to the perpetually-ravenous maw of the Great Shibboleth!” Bill grinned through his wince of pain, waving as the gathered children began to file off with their parents. “What? No, I don’t charge. Not in MONEY, anyway.”

“You know,” Dipper said, as the last of the audience drifted off, “I’m pretty sure I told you to sit down and behave yourself, not start up a magic show.”

“No, you told me to stay here. Which I did!” Bill tugged on the rope, which was still looped around his arm, for emphasis. It was fortunate that the audience hadn’t paid much attention to the de facto
leash, although Dipper wasn’t sure whether it was because they assumed it was part of the magic act or whether to chalk it up to the fact that Bill’s existence was fairly distracting in itself. “So, didya like the show?”

“It was a bit… how do I put this… kinda cliché.” Dipper pulled open his lockpicking kit, forcing a pick between the turns of the knot. Constrictor knots were finicky to untie at the best of times, and since he hadn’t brought anything to cut the rope, he wasn’t about to run the risk of leaving Bill stuck to the chair.

Bill held a hand to his chest in an exaggerated expression of offense. “UNBELIEVABLE, Pine Tree. I try to cater to your DELICATE SENSIBILITIES by leaving out the best parts of my act – seriously, the part where I summon a garland of appendices always nets the BEST audience reactions – and THIS is the reaction I get? CLIČHE?”

“Anyway,” Dipper continued, working one end of the rope out, “what prompted this whole thing? Don’t tell me you just grabbed a random kid walking past and asked them whether they wanted to see a magic act.”

“Pretty much!”

Dipper groaned. “How have you not been arrested yet?”

“Hey, I’ve DONE MY TIME in the Infinetentiary! Not that the Time Police could hold me for long, of course.” Bill shook the rope off as Dipper loosened it. “Anyway, I had two reasons for pulling this! First, I wanted to test what powers are available to me in physical form!”

“So what powers do you have?”

Bill looked away, his smile twisting into a bitter grin. “Spontaneous combustion, teleportation of small objects and the creation of portals over short distances. Well, that, and some of the basic spells which don’t need much energy to cast.” he muttered, fiddling with the flower still held in his hand. “Not exactly impressive, considering what I USED to be capable of.”

“I… see.” Dipper said awkwardly. He technically didn’t have any reason to apologise, so he decided not to. “What was the other reason?”

“Ah, well. I wanted to understand what was so special about your human juveniles. I mean, the moment I told you about the plague, it was like you’d lost all your remaining marbles! I mean, for most species, MASS DIE-OFF of their young’s just par for the course!”

“And did you? Understand, I mean.”

Bill shrugged, placing the rose on Dipper’s head. He didn’t tuck it behind his ear or anything, just balanced it atop his head, where it slowly rolled back off and onto the ground. “They’re cute, I guess. In the way masses of organs can be cute if you jam them into smaller bags of skin. Plus, they’re enthusiastic! Haven’t had such a rapt audience since that one time I possessed Gerald Ratner! But I think…” and here, Bill hesitated, “I think I was mostly trying to understand YOU.”

Dipper blinked as Bill stood, placing one large hand on his shoulder for leverage. “Me? What so hard to understand about me? I mean, you pretty much live in my head.”

Bill ruffled his hair, though his gaze seemed distant. “Well,” he eventually said, “it’s more about reconciling who you ARE with who you COULD BE. You care a lot about others, Dipper. Maybe too much.”
Dipper clenched his fists, looking away. His chest felt tight.

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It was almost 7 pm, and Bill and Dipper had finished laying red thread around the entire circumference of the school. Well, Dipper had been laying the thread. Bill had just trailed along behind him, umbrella in hand, yammering away about nothing in particular. They’d had to duck into the hardware store halfway through once the string ran out. But now they were done, the two ends of thread connected like a happy resolution. Dipper exhaled, sagging a little in exhaustion. As if in automatic response, Bill’s arm reached out, his hand grasping Dipper’s elbow and steadying him.

Dipper glanced up at the demon, before leaning a little further. Because he was exhausted, and Bill was currently the most convenient supporting structure in the vicinity. “Don’t tell me we have to draw another magic circle now.”

Bill didn’t respond, and simply ruffled his hair again. That was enough of an answer for Dipper, who closed his eyes and groaned. “C’mon. You’ve got a human body now. What’s stopping you from doing it?”

“Hey, far be it from me to rob you of the CRITICAL LIFE SKILL that is learning to accurately and precisely draw SYMBOLS OF THE ARCANE AND ANCIENT PERSUASION!” Bill chirped.

Dipper let out another protesting noise, bumping his head into Bill’s shoulder. Bill briefly stiffened, but the reaction was less displeasure and more ‘what am I meant to do with these limbs?’, so Dipper did it again. Knowing that he wasn’t the only one uncertain how to handle Bill’s human form was weirdly reassuring.

In the end, it wasn’t as bad as he’d expected. Whether it was because his occult-drawing skills had actually improved, or because the demon wasn’t screwing around with him this time, it only took two attempts before Bill gave his chalk outline a once-over and a nod of approval. It was his turn to take the umbrella as Bill stooped, placing his hand on the circle and murmuring some words under his breath. The magic circle wavered like a desert mirage, before disappearing.

“There. That should be enough of a barrier to restrain Yinglong if she tries to take a single step here. It’s temporary, but it’ll last long enough for me to activate the sleeping gas. And then, well,” Bill’s expression warped into a genuinely unpleasant grin, “we’ll see JUST HOW BAD A DRAGON’S DREAMS CAN GET.”

Dipper took an involuntary step back, a little chilled. “Let’s just try not to do any permanent damage if we can avoid it, okay?”

“Pine Tree,” Bill said sharply, turning to face him, “tonight, you might be faced with the NOT-UNLIKELY SCENARIO of choosing between the lives of your thorny friend and his dragon, or the lives of HUNDREDS, if not THOUSANDS of innocent children. We both know what you’re going to choose. Heck, you know you’d DO THE ACT YOURSELF, if it came down to it.”

Dipper flinched. Bill glanced at his stricken face, his expression gentling as he eased the umbrella out of Dipper’s hand. “Listen, kid. I don’t want you to go into this with high expectations. Fact of the matter is, I can’t guarantee everyone’s going to come out of this alive.” He said, not unkindly. “But you know what? It doesn’t matter how many people die tonight. NONE of it would be your fault. I know you’d take responsibility for the INEVITABLE HEAT DEATH OF THE UNIVERSE if you could, but in the end, you can only struggle so much against the INEXORABLE CURRENTS OF FATE! I mean, look at me! I used to be an all-knowing, all-powerful being, and that didn’t stop YOU from- well, you get the idea!”
For all that he was an insane, world-destroying, usually-triangular demon, Bill could make some surprisingly good points. Dipper watched as Bill fiddled with the sleeves of his shirt, clearly waiting for a reaction. “Yeah.” He eventually said. “I get it. But still, if there’s the slightest chance we can pull this off without killing anyone—”

“YEAH, YEAH, I get it, no gruesome murder-happy times if we can help it.” Bill rolled his eye. He reached out, pulling Dipper by the arm and dragging him in the direction of the school. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I think we have a dance we should be getting to.”

“W-wait. We’re going to the dance?” Dipper spluttered, too surprised to resist the demon’s manhandling.

“Well, DUH. Isn’t that on tonight? Or is there another reason why a whole bunch of humans would decide to congregate in a confined space in order to SQUIRM ABOUT IN A REPETITIVE AND RHYTHMIC FASHION?”

“Well, uh—” Dipper tried not to panic, “don’t we have to keep a lookout for Thorne?”

“What, with your RIDICULOUSLY LIMITED HUMAN VISION? I’d have better luck CONVINCING THE FLYING SPAGHETTI MONSTER TO LAY OFF THE MEATBALLS! Anyway, I’ll be able to FEEL their presence heaps sooner than I could SEE them! Magical energy signature, remember?”

“Or what if someone broke the thread?”

“Trust me, I’d KNOW.” Bill said, still dragging him in the general direction of the school hall.

“And what about Mabel? If she sees you—”

“I’ll come up with something.” Bill said dismissively. “C’mon, kid. If I leave you out here, you’re just going to work yourself up into a DISPROPORTIONATELY STRESSED MESS OF NERVES, and that’s gonna help PRECISELY NO ONE! Sides, I’ve been looking forward to meeting your friends!”

Dipper stared at the ground morosely. It looked like there was going to be at least one casualty tonight, and that was going to be his social reputation.

***

As they neared the entrance of the school hall, the music, which had initially been audible only as a reverberating bass beat, became more recognisable. It was a disco-pop song, some bubbly cheesy number which had Mabel written all over it. Speaking of his sister, Dipper had hoped to avoid her by ducking into a side entrance, and had been nervously handing the tickets to some bored art kid supervising admittance, when a familiar yell made him flinch.

“DIPPPERRRR!!!!!!” Oh no. Oh no oh no oh no. Dipper yelped as he was caught and trapped in a Mabel-glomp™, his sister’s full-force tackle knocking him back a few steps. He gave her a shaky grin as she noogied him affectionately. “Wow, Dipper, I was so worried you might not come! But you did! And now this is gonna be the best night ever!”

“I’m sure it’ll be great.” Dipper wheezed through her impromptu chokehold. “Nice outfit, by the way. It’s very… shiny.”

Mabel, thankfully, let go of him, giving an enthusiastic twirl. She was wearing a beaded top with a rainbow teddy bear arrangement (which she’d probably sewn herself) as well as a froofy pink jacket
enveloped in the customary dusting of glitter. Her jeans were covered in sequins, and the entire ensemble would’ve looked ostentatious on anyone but Mabel. That being said, her outfit was so reflective that Dipper suspected she could’ve replaced the disco ball in the middle of the dance floor.

Dipper didn’t say that part out loud. He didn’t want his sister getting ideas.

“Haha, this? I strategically formulated this outfit for maximum hottie-grabbing potential!” Mabel slapped a hand on her chest proudly. “See, if I meet an attractive person, I’ll reflect their attractiveness back at them, and then I’ll be twice as attractive! Speaking of attractive people…” Mabel craned her neck to peer behind Dipper, her eyebrows rising. Dipper’s heart sank.

Dipper turned to follow the direction of her gaze. Which, predictably, was levelled directly at Bill. “Oh. Um.” He tensed.

Mabel looked at him. And then back at Bill. And then back at him. Her eyes narrowed. “Waaaaait. Wait wait wait.”

Bill’s expression stayed carefully still.

Dipper tried not to panic. “Look, Mabel, I can explain-“

Mabel let out a single, high-pitched screech. Dipper couldn’t tell if it was a ‘help, there’s a psychopathic dream demon standing in front of me’ sort of noise, so he just stood there. “Um. Mabel?”

“Dipper… is he…” Dipper felt his heart drop even further. “Is he… your date?”

Dipper’s heart, which had previously been plummeting in freefall, found itself abruptly and unceremoniously strung up for analysis by the logical processes of a romance-addled teen girl. “… Uh.”

He shot Bill a ‘this is not how I expected this conversation to go, what am I meant to do?’ sort of look. The demon just shrugged. Unhelpful asshole.

Mabel saw the small interaction and completely misinterpreted it. “Ohmigosh he is, isn’t he? Congrats on landing a 10, bro-bro!” Mabel nudged Dipper with her elbow. “Where did you even find him? I mean, I’d definitely remember if I’d seen him before!” She waggled her eyebrows.

“Well… he’s from… Blackbourne?” Dipper offered. “His name’s… um…”

Thankfully, Bill chose this moment to step in. “Nice to meet you!” he said, holding out a hand. “Name’s William.”

Dipper was suddenly seized by the urge to grab Bill, drag him to the nearest rooftop in the vicinity and push him off. There were an innumerable number of names at his disposal, and Bill had to choose the one that was the longer version of his actual name?!

Bill’s gaze briefly flickered to him. “Look, I’m not good at names, okay?” His irate tone echoed through their mental connection. “Sides, it’s not like it’s UNCOMMON.”

Fortunately, Mabel didn’t seem to catch on. Instead, she seemed to be… feeling up Bill’s arms? Bill just stood there passively, withstanding the contact with a measure of bemusement.

Eventually, Dipper dared to speak up. “Mabel? What are you doing?”
Mabel looked up at him, her eyes sparkling. “Biceps.” She whispered, a dreamy expression on her face.

“Uh… isn’t it considered bad manners to grope someone else’s date?” His voice squeaked on the last word. Dammit.

Fortunately, sense seemed to return to Mabel, who immediately released Bill’s arm muscles. “Whoops! Haha, my bad! It’s just that you look almost exactly like the main character from my favourite novel, and I always wondered what it’d be like to touch a dreamy hunk of man-flesh like him!” She propped her chin on her hands, sighing ecstatically, before shaking herself out of her daze. “Anyway! Blackbourne, huh? What brings you to Chapelwick?”

Bill hesitated. Dipper attempted some quick thinking. “Tell her you came for the free food.”

“I... came here to liberate the various foodstuffs from their paper plate prisons?”

“No, no, for the free food, not to free the food!”

A baffled look briefly crossed Mabel’s face, before she began to laugh. “I like you!” She announced, punching him on the shoulder. “I think you’re funny!”

“Thanks, I think I’m funny too!” Bill replied, giving Dipper a smug look.

Mabel grabbed the two of them by the arms, pulling them into the hall. “By the way, did I mention I was in charge of the decorating committee? Because I was! Sooo…” she spun around to face them, making a sweeping gesture with her arms. “What do you think? I bet you think it’s awesomesauce.”

“I’m impressed.” Bill said, sounding a little surprised by his own sincerity. Looking around the hall, Dipper had to agree. The walls of the hall were draped in gauzy fabric in shades ranging from pale turquoise to dark blue. Glittery fish ornaments dangled here and there, catching the scattered lights and reflecting them like sunlight over ripples. The stage was covered in dark green crepe paper, evidently a representation of sea kelp, placed strategically so they were caught in the breeze created by the nearby fans. The tables were covered in a light blue fabric, their edges befrilled with pearlescent organza, giving the impression of sea foam.

“It’s pretty awesomesauce.” He agreed.

Mabel beamed, clasping her hands together. “Ooh, and you should try the food! I made the jello, you know!”

Dipper looked the table up and down. Was it just him, or did the jello seem a little sparklier than it was supposed to be? “Uh, Mabel? Did you put glitter in the jelly again?”

“It’s edible glitter, Dipdop!”

“Yeah, but you think all glitter is edible.” Dipper said.

“Psst.” Mabel stuck out her tongue, blowing a raspberry. “Since when did you become the fun police?”

“Around the time you decided to expose half the school to food poisoning.” Dipper replied dryly. “Maybe I should start holding a sign. No fun allowed.”
Mabel flicked him on the forehead, her expression turning fond. “Seriously, though.” Her voice lowered. “How did you meet that guy? Is that why you’ve always been out lately?”

“Um… well…” Dipper hesitated, frantically trying to think up a probable answer. “You know how you gave me two tickets to the dance? Well, I couldn’t find anyone to give them to, so I just grabbed a random guy and… yeah.”

Mabel placed her hands on her hips, letting out an impressed whistle. “Wow, really? So you just up and asked some hot guy out? That’s pretty gutsy! Have my philandering ways finally rubbed off on you?” She sidled up to him, winking and nudging.

“Well, I wanted to try being spontaneous for once.” Dipper shrugged, trying to ignore the niggling sense of guilt. “Is that a bad thing?”

Mabel’s eyes went wide. “No, no, no, that’s a great thing! I mean, it’s totally something that I would do, so it looks like we’ve still got that ol’ twin connection! And this might be really good for you! I mean, you’ve seemed a bit happier lately.”

“Happier? What do you mean?”

Mabel shifted a little, her voice quieting. “Well, remember when we were kids? You used to be so enthusiastic about stuff like mysteries and the supernatural. I remember you and Grunkle Ford nerding out about that stuff, and the way you always used to follow him around like a puppy. But at some point… you just got so cynical. I pretty much had to drag you out the door to check out that bleeding statue.”

“Huh? I’m still interested in the supernatural, you know. I mean, what about the last few summers we spent in Gravity Falls?” Not to mention all the stabbings he’d endured lately in his pursuit of Chapelwick’s mysteries.

“Yeah, but you used to get so excited and high-pitched and squeaky about it! And now you just act all snarky and bored, like we aren’t uncovering some of the world’s greatest mysteries.” Mabel hummed, fiddling with one of the ornaments on the wall. “Come to think of it, I think you changed after that first summer at Gravity Falls. After we defeated Bill Cipher, remember? You randomly decided not to stay with Grunkle Ford, even though that was, like, your ultimate dream!”

“Well, maybe I decided that some things were more important than cooping myself up in some old laboratory for the rest of my life.” Dipper shrugged, attempting to look casual. “Besides, I wasn’t about to leave you alone.”

Mabel smiled, though it looked a little sad. “I dunno, I guess I was just worried? Because it sounds a lot like you decided to give up your dreams for me.”

“That wasn’t it.” Dipper said firmly. “It’s just that what happened with Bill put things in perspective. It… was like a reminder of the important things in life.” In the sort of way a nuclear explosion was like a chemical reaction.

“Nothing like a little Armageddon to really shake things up, eh?” Mabel grinned, slapping him on the back.

Dipper nodded, closing his eyes briefly.

*Gravity Falls burning, all glowing embers and flames.*

“Welp, guess I should leave you to have fun!” Mabel said, shoving him in the general direction of
the dance floor. “Go hang out with your date! Uh… wherever he is?”

Dipper glanced around. Bill was nowhere to be seen. This was a bad thing. This was a really, really bad thing. There was currently an insane ex-dream demon with no understanding of social niceties or basic bodily functions on the loose, and Mabel knew him as his date. He tried communicating through their mental link. No response. He scanned the hall frantically. There was no sign of Bill anywhere, which was alarming because the demon’s human form would’ve been impossible to miss had he been anywhere in the vicinity. Which meant he wasn’t in the vicinity. Worst-case scenarios began to play out in his head, escalating in potential destruction and mortification.

A loud shriek pulled him out of his fevered imaginings. It hadn’t come from Mabel. Dipper turned to see Dominique standing behind them, hands clasped to her cheeks. She was, he vaguely realised, wearing the exact same jacket as Mabel.

“OHMIGOSH!” she squealed, hopping from foot to foot in excitement.

“OHMIGOSH!” Mabel echoed.

“TWINSIES!” They exclaimed at the same time.

Dipper watched with some bemusement as they proceeded to engage each other in rapid-fire conversation (“I love your jacket!” “Haha, thanks, I love your jacket too!”). A hand tapped his shoulder, and Dipper turned to see Angela standing behind him, some heavy-looking equipment tucked under her arm. “Hey.”

“Hi.” Dipper replied. “Helping out with the dance?”

“Yeah.” Angela shifted a little, arranging the equipment so she was supporting it with both arms. “Need any help?”

“I’m fine, thanks.” Angela gave a small wave in the direction of Mabel and Dominique, who waved back. Actually, the weirdest thing just happened. I was just in the sound booth out back, and there was this guy wandering around who I’d never seen before. He saw me, and just started talking to me, like we already knew each other. Kept asking all kinds of questions about the hall, like how old the place was and what all the switches on the sound board did. Stuff like that. I probably shouldn’t have talked to him, but he was…” she frowned, “Strangely engaging. Could’ve done without him calling me ‘Freckles’, though.”

Dipper resisted the urge to bang his head against the wall. Bill. “I see.” He eventually said.

“I mean, if he wanted to know stuff about the hall, he couldn’t have found a better person. I’ve been helping out here for a while. Hell, I once found out that there’s a certain combination of switches in the fuse-box could burn this place down if someone was stupid enough to activate them.”

“What?”

“There’s a loose wire near the radiator on the ceiling.” Angela explained vaguely. “It sparks sometimes.”

“That sounds… pretty dangerous. Have you told anyone about it?”

“I told the janitors. I’m not too sure they understood me, though. It’s hard to tell though the mask.” Angela shrugged. “Anyway. Just wanted to warn you that there might be a suspicious person hanging around.”
Dipper shuffled side to side, staring at his shoes. “Actually, he’s-“

“DIPPER HAS A DATE?!” Dominque screeched, startling him. Beside her, Mabel made various movements which could be interpreted as celebratory gestures.

Angela arched an eyebrow. “You have a date?”

“-and he is like, a complete babe. You should have seen him! Total trophy husband material.” Mabel swooned, still conversing with Dominique in tones too loud for Dipper’s comfort.

“Him, huh?” Angela mumbled underneath her breath. “Wonder how Archie’ll react.”

“He’s not my date.” Dipper said, a little sharper than he intended. “Mabel just jumped to conclusions. So we don’t need to worry about Archie’s feelings.”

“You know, then?” Angela asked.

“Yeah, well, I’m not blind.” Dipper’s own experiences with awkward crushes had primed him to recognise the same sort of behaviour in other people. Archie had been perfectly respectful of his boundaries, but there had been certain… lingering glances and bashful gestures which had clued him in to the boy’s feelings. But it didn’t seem to have impacted their friendship, and Dipper had so many things to worry about without adding teenage romance into the mix, so he’d just decided to let things go with the flow. It’d be fine as long as he didn’t lead anyone on, right?

He suddenly felt a stab of sympathy for Wendy.

Angela stared at him for a moment, before shrugging. “Eh. Archie can handle himself. Speaking of which, where is he? I swear I saw him and Louis a moment ago.”

Dipper looked around. He and Angela were currently standing to a side of the school hall, like the wallflowers they were. His gaze roved past a band of cheerleaders cattily comparing outfits, past a creepily realistic mannequin someone had dressed up like a mermaid, past a group of tech geeks clustered around the sound and lighting booth like limpets clinging to a rock, towards the edge of the dance floor. Two familiar figures were standing there, lit only by the occasional flash of the disco lights. They seemed to be engaged in furious discussion.

“Oh, there they are.” Angela walked to join them, Dipper trailing behind.

The moment he spotted them, Archie seemed to grow visibly nervous. Louis glanced at him, before rolling his eyes and shoving him forwards. Angela and Dipper exchanged looks.

“Um. Hello.” Archie said awkwardly, fiddling with his glasses.

“Hi.” Dipper offered him a small smile.

“Your… outfit looks nice?” Archie offered. Behind him, Louis looked like he wanted to crumple to the floor in an exasperated heap.

“Uh. Thanks? You too?” C’mon, Dipper was capable of holding a proper conversation with Archie. They’d talked just yesterday. There was no reason for things to suddenly become awkward now. Even if Archie seemed to be working himself up to something significant and potentially mortifying for the both of them.

“Oh, haha. Thanks.” Archie scratched the back of his head. “So. Nice dance, huh?”
“Um. Yeah?” Get a hold of yourself Dipper Pines this is a perfectly normal conversation.

“I can’t watch this.” Angela muttered, sotto voce.

Archie hesitated, before a well-timed kick from Louis and a hissed ‘just ask him!’ spurred him into action. “So… anyway… I was wondering if you wanted to-“

He cut himself off, wide-eyed, as Dipper felt a familiar arm loop around his shoulders. “YEESH, kid, do you just REALLY LIKE GEOMETRIC SHAPES? I leave you alone for FIVE MINUTES and suddenly you’re SURROUNDED BY SQUARES!”

Upon getting a better look at Bill, Archie did a rather comedic double take, his mouth wide open and face paling. Angela frowned, her eyes glinting in recognition. Louis just looked plain confused. Bill, for his part, drew Dipper closer to him in a gesture which would have been casual, were it not for the way his teeth were bared into something too sharp to be a grin, or the way his previous statement seemed to be almost but not quite directed at Archie.

Plausible deniability seemed to be the order of the day.

Dipper glared at the demon. “Bill, what the hell. Where were you?”

“Investigating, of course! This place was starting to feel like arachnids crawling up my veins! Don’t know why I never felt it before, but maybe it had something to do with the fact that triangles DON’T HAVE VEINS!”

Dipper furrowed his eyebrows. “What do you mean? Investigating what?”

“I’ll explain later, Pine Tree.” Bill gave him a whole-body nudge. “Ooh! Wait! Are THOSE your friends? You should introduce us! Actually, lemme guess!” He propped his chin atop Dipper’s head, pointing at their stunned audience one by one. “YOU’RE the nerdy one, YOU’RE the buff one, and YOU – hey, I like your hoodie!”

“Uh.” Louis started, glancing down at his jacket (which was embroidered with a goat skull surrounded by the words ‘HAIL SATAN’) before glancing up again. “Thanks?”

“I think we’ve met.” Angela said. “Though I don’t think I caught your name?”

“This is… William.” Dipper said, reluctantly accommodating Bill’s abysmal choice in names.

“Whoa! Dipper!” Dominique chose that opportune moment to make her reappearance. “Is that your date?”

“Date?” Archie squeaked, and Dipper couldn’t help but feel a little sorry for him.

“Not exactly.” He said, in the same breath that Bill replied “YEP!”

“Oh man. Oh maaaaaa. Mabel wasn’t kidding.” Dominique stared at Bill in the same way a small child might stare at a candy shop. “I am now obligated to ask if it hurt when you fell from heaven.”

“Yes.” Bill replied flatly.

“Didn’t know you went in for arm candy.” Angela murmured, prompting Dipper to choke and flush to his ears. “How long have you two known each other, anyway?”

Bill leaned forwards, his grin widening. “That’s a complicated question! Are you talking LINEARLY, or should I take time warps into account? Heck, can any of us say we TRULY know
each other?"

Angela squinted at Bill for some moments, before turning back to Dipper. “His personality doesn’t match the rest of him.”

“I’ll take a note to have it replaced.” Dipper replied, nudging Bill’s arm off his shoulder. The demon pouted, but acquiesced.

“Who cares about personality when you have that?” Dominique gave Bill a blatant once-over. She whistled lowly. “How did you even manage to catch him, Dipper? Tell me your ways.”

“Well… um…”

“This might be a long shot, but do you have any sisters?” Angela asked, in an aside to Bill.

“NOT ANYMORE!” Bill chirped, before steamrolling over Dipper’s conversation with Dominique. “Anyway, were you asking for advice regarding THE ETERNAL HUMAN PURSUIT OF THAT SLIMY AND INSIDUOUS THING YOU CALL “LOVE”? Here’s a tip, sweetcheeks: you gotta go all out! Tell them your feelings! Demonstrate your affection by showing them you care, whether it’s by sending them flowers or MURDERING THEIR ENEMIES ONE BY ONE! Remember, it’s ALL OR NOTHING!”

“Well, yeah, but what if they don’t like me?” Dominique grimaced, crossing her arms.

“Wait, so you’re not going to question the utter insanity that just poured out of his mouth?” Angela interrupted, raising her eyebrow.

“Here’s how I see it, buster!” Bill said. “Maybe they’ll say yes, and you’ll be stuck with them until the oxytocin wears off, after which you either go your own separate ways or learn to suck it up and deal. Maybe they’ll say no! In which case you’ll also have to suck it up and deal! I mean, you could go the route where you try to STRANGLE THEIR BROTHER WITH A MAGICAL ARTIFACT, but that usually ends with you in jail and the world in apocalypse!”

“No one’s going to call William out for being weird?” Angela asked, glancing around. “Okay, guess not.”

“You learn to roll with the punches after a while.” Dipper advised her, although he was staring at Bill with increasing consternation. Was the demon trying to give them away?

“He’s not that much weirder than most of my friends.” Louis shrugged. “I mean, remember that time they tried to summon a demon with ketchup in the cafeteria?”

“He’s hot, so he can’t be that wrong.” Dominique said, which didn’t help matters at all.

“ORRR you could dance around the topic for the rest of your foreseeable existence, which is pretty much the only way to guarantee failure! I mean, if you define failure as FREEDOM FROM THE VOLATILE MESS OF EMOTIONAL BONDS that social animals such as you-OURSelves feel compelled to entrap ourselves within! Personally I don’t think that’s so bad! Think about all that extra time you could use to summon ancient unspeakable powers of evil to do your bidding! Heck, you could amass yourself a band of interdimensional LUNATICS and CRIMINALS to really stir shit up! Can’t do that while you’re tied down.” Bill sighed a little wistfully, ignoring Dipper’s glower.

“Now that sounds like the sort of advice I could use.” Louis said, looking reluctantly impressed.
“Wait, but how did you two get together? Was Dipper the one who confessed?” Dominique asked, twirling a braid around her fingers.

“Oh, now THAT’S an interesting story! Shame I can’t tell you anything about it!”

“Why not?”

“We have an…” Bill’s eye flickered in Dipper’s direction. Dipper looked away. “Understanding. Of sorts.”

“Hey, Archie. Weren’t you about to say something before William interrupted?” Dipper interjected, observing how the curiosity of his gathered friends seemed to have risen to uncomfortably inquisitive levels.

Archie started, and flushed. “Oh. Um.” He cowered under the sudden scrutiny, and Dipper was starting to feel some remorse for throwing him to the wolves. “It’s. It’s nothing, really.”

“Oh, yeah! Archie!” Dominique turned towards him. “You’ve been pretty quiet this whole time! Is something wrong?”

“He was going to ask you to dance.” Louis said, folding his arms. Archie shot him a betrayed look. “As a friend.” He added, unconvincingly.

“A-Anyway, you’ve already got a date!” Archie cut in. “So it’d make sense for you to spend time with him!”

“Ah. Yeah.” Dipper gave Archie a sympathetic smile. “Sorry, but-”

“HEY, you two should TOTALLY DANCE TOGETHER!” Dipper and Archie flinched as Bill planted a hand on each of their shoulders. “Don’t let ME get in the way of a perfectly good FRIENDSHIP! Nothing like two PALS bonding, eh?”

Dipper studied Bill’s guileless expression with no small measure of suspicion. What with the demon’s earlier pseudo-possessive behaviour, he was getting some real conflicting signals here. He wouldn’t put it past Bill to have some ominous Carrie-esque scheme of humiliation up his sleeve. What was he up to?

Bill’s grip on his shoulder tightened slightly. “Geez, kid, stop overthinking and take a chill pill! You need to RELAX and let me do the investigating for once!”

What was Bill investigating, anyway? “Like I said earlier, this place tingles! Maybe because this human form’s more sensitive to its surroundings than what I usually wear! And it’s not a normal tingle either, like ELECTROCUTION or THAT FEELING YOU GET WHEN YOUR LIMBS LOSE ALL CIRCULATION! I’m ninety percent sure there’s magical energy running through this building!”

Magical energy? Could that be Yinglong? “Nah, it’s too subtle, and as we all know, Yinglong has the subtlety of a SLEDGEHAMMER THROUGH THE SKULL. So I’m gonna look around. If anything TROUBLESONE manifests (such as your thorny friend), I’ll give you a heads up!” Bill flicked his forehead, making Dipper wince. “C’mon, Pi-Dipper! I’m sure I can occupy myself for the SCANT FEW MINUTES you’ll be off dancing with your BEST BUD!”

Dipper glanced around their little gathering of friends, before surrendering to his fate with a resigned sigh. “Just – behave, okay?”
“Don’t worry, Pine Tree.” Bill leaned in, his grin turning wicked. “I’ll make sure to behave exactly how you’d expect me to.”

“So,” Dipper overheard Angela say as Bill cheerfully shooed him and Archie towards the general direction of the dance floor, “did anyone else feel like they watched an entire conversation happen without words, or was it just me?”

Chapter End Notes

I have no excuse for this extended pause. Other than that Bill is a really uncooperative character once you shove him in a human body. And also that this chapter is about twice the length as the usual, so it kind of makes up for it?

Also, some of you may know this already, but I have a Tumblr account. Feel free to follow/ask me anything/bug me about updates if the next chapter takes as long as this one did.
**Arc II Part 13: The Dance, continued**

Chapter Summary

Bill accidentally gets himself a cult fanclub.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Attending the school dance hadn’t exactly been on Cherie’s list of priorities, and that was before Thorne had disappeared and left her with the decapitated body of her study buddy. Sure, Dipper had recovered, but her boyfriend was still missing in action and also, apparently, possessed by a dragon. Her willingness to attend a dance under these circumstances was about equivalent to an arachnophobic individual’s inclination to sit in a pit of spiders.

So why, exactly, was she standing in the school hall, letting overly-cheery pop songs and distressingly bright strobe lights assault her senses? Peer pressure, that was why.

Her friends had decided that the perfect panacea for what they deemed a ‘broken heart’ was, naturally, to drown her sorrows through awkward public dancing and subpar party food. Seriously, was that glitter in the jello?

Cherie sighed, resigning herself to her fate. Maybe she could find someone sensible to talk to while her friends satisfied themselves that she wasn’t just holing herself up in her room and moping. Which, in her opinion, was a perfectly valid way to spend her time.

She winced as one half of a dancing couple skirted too close to her, stepping solidly on her toes.

“Hey!” she barked out, but her voice was drowned out by the thumping beat of the music.

…Damn, she missed Thorne. He always understood whenever this sort of stuff got to her. Even after his sporting talents somehow delegated him a place among the popular crowd, he’d never really grown out of his shyness. Which meant they both shared a mutual distaste for social situations such as these. If Thorne was here, he’d probably nudge her into a quieter corner where they could talk.

This time, though, it seemed like it was up to her to steer herself into some secluded alcove and sulk. Maybe she could find someone sensible to talk to in the meantime. Perhaps Dipper had something to report regarding his search for Thorne. Him and his… demon friend.

Her tentative plans for the evening, however, were disrupted with the grace and delicacy of a rampaging herd of elephants. Or, in this case, a rampaging herd of adolescent girls.

“There she is!” A high-pitched cry was her only warning before a pack of cheerleaders descended upon her like a flock of vultures. Cherie yelped as she was dragged into a whirlwind of high heels, perfume and subtly catty gossip.

A well-manicured hand grasped her forearm as its proprietor drew her into the fold. “Cherie! Like, I’m so glad you came! Any news on Thorne yet?”

Cherie managed a weak smile. “Hi, Tiffany. Afraid not.”
Tiffany clicked her tongue, flicking her blonde hair back with one hand while perching the other on her hip. Cherie had always secretly suspected she had never actually been born, just sprung full-fledged one day from a B-grade chick flick to take her rightful place as Queen Bee of Chapelwick High. As head of the cheerleading squad, she reigned supreme over the school’s social hierarchy as some sort of benevolent dictator. Cherie still wasn’t entirely sure why they were friends, but she was nevertheless miles above Chad. “Boys. If my boyfriend tried to pull something like this, he’d find himself minus one girlfriend real quick. I mean, missing in action on the social event of the year? You’re wayyy too nice for Thorne, trust me.”

“It’s not Thorne’s fault.” Cherie said, a little defensively. “His family’s being jerks again.”

“Psssh yeah, but that’s, like, no excuse to take it out on you. Besides, accusing you of cheating? With some guy who’s, like, not even on the social ladder? What was his name again?”

“Dipper, wasn’t it? I think he’s that new kid.” Lilah, a girl who Cherie recognised primarily as one of Tiffany’s loyal followers, interrupted. She had a case of makeup in her hand and was squinting at the compact mirror as though it had personally offended her. “Hey, do you think I should’ve gone with the green eyeshadow instead? I mean, red’s so last season.”

“Sweetie, the red eyeshadow is all you.” Tiffany replied absently. “Anyway, like, yeah. Who in their right mind would accuse you on cheating on Thorne with some social nobody like him?”

“Dipper’s not a social nobody.” Cherie said. “Besides, aren’t you friends with his sister?”

Tiffany considered her words for a few moments, before inclining her head in assent. “Okay, whatever, I guess that takes him up a few notches. Anyway, we were talking about your totally awful boyfriend, and decided-“

Here, she snapped her fingers, and a harried looking brunette hurried to her side. Judging from the fact Cherie couldn’t remember her name, she was probably a newcomer to the upper echelons of the social ladder and okay, Cherie’s life had officially devolved into a direct-to-TV movie special. “Well, um, we were thinking of getting you with a hot guy, yeah? Because, that, um, shows that you aren’t, um, desperate or anything? A-and that you’re not going to let your boyfriend push you around?”

Cherie refrained from asking her whether those were questions or statements of fact. Instead, she turned to Tiffany and said, “That is, like, a terrible idea.”

Tiffany arched one perfectly plucked eyebrow. “So, what? You’re just going to let Thorne walk all over you?”

“No, but I’m not going to give him legitimate reasons to be paranoid.” Cherie retorted.

“Seriously? We’re not, like, asking you to cheat or anything. Honey, your boyfriend’s so far gone he can’t even handle you talking to some random guy. You gotta train him out of it.” Before Cherie could protest that no, Thorne was not some kind of animal (dragon possession aside) and did not need to be trained, Tiffany started talking to the newbie again. “Amy. I had you on scoping duty. Any unattached sixes to eights in the vicinity?”

“Well…” Amy hesitated. “There’s that guy over there. I think he’s an eight?”

As a collective, the gathered group craned their heads to observe the individual she was referring to. After a significant pause, Tiffany pressed a hand to her forehead. “Ohmigosh, Amy, that isn’t an eight. That’s, like, an eleven. There’s no way Cherie’s even in his league.”
“Gee, thanks.” Cherie said dryly, although she could see where Tiffany was coming from. The boy Amy had pointed out was definitely on the eye-catching side. It wasn’t even the peculiar combination of dark skin and blonde hair which made him stand out from the other students congregated in the school hall. He just looked… bright. It was as if he’d absorbed all the sun Chapelwick had been missing for the past month.

He seemed preoccupied, scanning the hall as though in search of something. His one visible eye glinted, the golden iris darting back and forth as he placed his weight on one leg, his finger tapping an arm, as though deep in thought.

Suddenly, he straightened, his head jerking to face the congregated gaggle of girls. A flash of recognition crossed his face, and he sprang into action like a cat having caught sight of its prey. Cherie felt a brief, inexplicable spark of fear shoot through her veins.

“He’s heading this way.” Lilah whispered, smoothing down her hair. “Is my lipstick smudged?”

“Keep dreaming. Like, no way he isn’t already taken.” Tiffany said dismissively, even as she stood at attention, her stilettos clacking against the floor as she shifted.

As the boy moved closer, Cherie’s bizarre sense of fear only grew stronger. The stifling urge to flee blanketed her as they locked gazes. She mentally shook herself, but her instincts refused to be dissuaded. She glanced around. Judging from the rapt staring and occasional giggle of her fellow schoolmates, it seemed like she was the only one who felt that way.

A smile spread across the boy’s face. At first brush, it seemed like the sort of bland, neutral smile one would give to strangers to be polite. But there was something unnatural about the way the corners of his mouth pulled upwards, baring his teeth in a grin that fell uncomfortably on the side of too wide.

Now that Cherie thought of it, the whole way he moved was slightly uncanny. It wasn’t that his gait was ungraceful, but there was something to the way he held himself – a slight stiffness and eerie lack of extraneous movement – which suggested unfamiliarity with these natural, instinctive motions. Like he wasn’t a person at all, but instead some alien being trying to emulate human locomotion.

Okay, that was maybe judging him too much. Obviously hanging around this particular crowd was doing things to her brain.

Amy was the first to greet him, waving shyly. “Hi. Um, I don’t think I’ve met you before. What’s your name?”

“Name’s William! Pleased to meet’cha!” The boy replied, and Cherie’s eyes widened as she recognised that voice.

“Don’t think I’ve had the pleasure of meeting you sweethearts before! Well, not in PERSON, anyway.” His eye flickered towards Cherie as he spoke, confirming her suspicions.

This was the voice on the other end of the phone. Dipper’s demon friend, Bill Cipher.

Well, that explained the instinctive urge to run and hide. Cherie still had nightmares about the phone calls. And the decapitation. And the recapitation.

Bill, meanwhile, continued on smoothly. “I mean, I just KNOW I’d remember faces as pretty as yours!” He waited for the inevitable response of giggles to die down, before speaking again. “I know a guy who used to collect ‘em! Not my kinda thing, but if it was, I bet YOURS’D be the perfect place to start!”

Another chorus of giggles, this time more confused.

“So….” Tiffany drawled, curling a lock of hair around her finger, feigning disinterest. “Like, I
haven’t seen you around before. What brings you here?”

“Oh.” Bill placed his hands in his pockets in a casual gesture. “I’m here with my date!”

Cherie could almost feel the collected group deflate like a popped balloon. “Oh.” Tiffany said, forcing a smile. “Who’s she?”

Bill caught Cherie’s gaze, smirking, and even though Cherie still felt like the allegorical mouse before the lion, she couldn’t help smiling a little at the irony. “His name’s Dipper Pines.”

Tiffany reeled back as though struck a physical blow. “Wait, what?”

Bill cocked his head, looking a little too innocent. “Dipper Pines? You know, skinny nerd, disproportionately large head, wears the exact same outfit every day?”

“Yeah, I know him. Haha, yeah, he’s kind of a nerd, isn’t he?” Tiffany said, her voice a little strained. She ducked away and – okay, was she hyperventilating? A measure of surprise would be understandable, but this seemed an excessive overreaction.

“Hey,” Bill replied mildly, “Pine Tree might be a nerd, but he’s still MY nerd.”

“Uh… Tiff?” Cherie whispered. “You okay? Look, I know this kinda threw a wrench in your plans-“

“You don’t understand!” Tiffany muttered fiercely, her hands shaking like someone coming off a caffeine high. “This is, like, totally outside my projected paradigms!”

“Your what?”

“He keeps books in his clothes sometimes,” Bill said, to no one in particular.

“I’ve got algorithms for extra-academic dating and same-sex relationships, but both? With an eleven?” Tiffany groaned in despair. “I’ll have to restructure the entire popularity matrix! This is, like, worse than the time Nature Urban only stocked their pink denim skirts in a size large!”

“And he chews on his pens!” Bill continued. “There’s teeth marks all over the ends.”

“Okay, that’s disgusting. Also, Tiffany, I think you’re taking this whole ‘popularity’ thing too seriously.” Cherie said stiffly.

“What’s Tiffany freaking out about this time?” An altogether unwelcome voice intruded upon their conversation. “What, did your makeup start running or somethin’?”

As one, Tiffany and Cherie turned their heads to glare at the interloper. Bill inclined his head curiously, but otherwise seemed content to remain the observer.

“Chad.” Tiffany spat, her tone so venom-filled it could have smited small animals. “So glad you could make it. I guess shoving nerds in lockers gets old after a while?”

Chad simply shrugged, a smarmy grin slathered across his face. The cheerleader draped across his arm let out a giggle. He was possibly the only individual within the school immune to Tiffany’s disapproval, and no amount of passive-aggressive (or plain aggressive) jabs was enough to push him away from the dubious honour of being Chapelwick’s jock leader.

Sometimes, Cherie wondered what she’d done to deserve being surrounded by stereotypes.
“’S a lot easier to find time when you don’t spend five hours picking out clothes. What’re you bein’ so bitchy about, anyway? Your boyfriend finally grow a pair and dump you?” It was then that he noticed Bill, and Cherie noted with some amusement how he suddenly seemed a good deal warier in the presence of someone with a build comparable to his. “Who’re you?”

Bill stirred, a glint of recognition flashing across his face. “Hey, you’re the guy who punched-” His expression quickly flattened into that bland, too-wide smile. “Well, well, WELL! I was wondering why it was starting to smell like poor life decisions in here! I’d ask for your name, pal, but I’m pretty sure the NATIONAL SOCIETY FOR CRYPTOZOOLOGY’S already got you on file!”

Chad scowled, although he looked more baffled than insulted. Which made sense, because Cherie doubted he had the requisite brain cells to understand what Bill was getting at. “Who the fuck do you think you are, punk?”

“The all-seeing eye, master of the unconscious and bringer of chaos? What, doesn’t ring a bell? Yeesh, kids these days seriously need to brush up on their mythology!” Bill let out a put-upon sigh, flicking his fringe back casually. Something seemed off about the skin around his right eye, but Cherie only caught a glimpse of it before his bangs sprang back to their original position. “And YOU must be the logical outcome of this world’s RANDOM AND IRRATIONAL EVOLUTIONARY PROCESS! Don’t worry, every gene pool makes its mistakes!”

The gathered pack of girls tittered nervously. Chad flushed, bristling like a bull one red flag away from a rampage. “You mind repeatin’ that?”

Bill raised his eyebrows. “Weird, chronic deafness wasn’t supposed to set in until seventy. Must be worse than I-” His sentence was cut off by Chad grabbing his collar and lifting him slightly off the ground. The gathered group let out gasps of apprehension. The spectacle of a fight was beginning to attract the attention of other students. Bill’s blank grin merely widened.

“Do you know who the fuck I am?” Chad growled, his eyes narrowing. “I’m the quarterback.”

“Oh, you’re a “QUARTERBACK”, are you?” Bill replied gleefully. “Yeesh, guess people’ll call themselves ANYTHING nowadays! A professional mattress slicer! A notebook paper connoisseur! A pile of trash! LANGUAGE IS MEANINGLESS!”

“Now listen here, punk-“

“Speaking of MEANINGLESS WORDS WE USE TO REFER TO OURSELVES, mine’s William!” Bill’s glance flickered down to where Chad’s hand was clenched. “And I’d appreciate it if you let me go. Pine Tree gave me that shirt.”

“Do you want the teachers to kick you out? Let go of him.” Tiffany hissed.

Chad ignored them, electing instead to tighten his grip on Bill’s collar. More and more onlookers were beginning to gather, the air heavy with anticipation. “Listen, I don’t know if you’re crazy or insane or what-“

“Oh, I am!” Bill agreed sunnily.

“But I’m gonna beat the shit out of you if you bad-mouth me one more time.”

“Really? You REALLY think you can do that, big guy.” And maybe it was just Cherie, but something in Bill’s amused tone was sending these cold prickles of terror back up her spine. “Still, I’m curious! Most of the useless animals I deal with on a regular basis are just as useless on the inside! And just as animal, judging by their entrails! And I expected you’d be the same, but-“
Chad’s expression warped into an uglier grimace. “Fuck. You.” He hissed, balling his other hand into a fist.

“BUT THIS ISN’T REALLY YOU, IS IT.”

Cherie wasn’t entirely clear on what happened in the ensuing moments. One moment Chad’s arm was swinging forward – and then Bill’s grin warped into something terrifying and sharp, his eye flashing (she could have sworn his sclera turned black, just for the briefest of moments) – the strobe lights flickered for a scant second, plunging them into shadow. And then Bill was straightening, adjusting his shirt and bow tie. And Chad was staring at him, his expression frozen in revulsion. His eyes looked haunted, as though he’d lived out a thousand nightmares in the mere span of that second.

“See, normally I’d just let you hit me, but Pine Tree’s got this thing about me letting myself get hurt.” Bill said casually, brushing down his vest. “Kid’s already got enough on his plate! No reason to knock him while he’s down, right?”

Chad let out a broken, horrified noise, backing away. He took a few steps back before – for lack of a better word – fleeing the scene. The crowd of gathered onlookers went silent, the kind of collective silence that could only arise from utter confusion.

“Good riddance.” Tiffany eventually huffed, crossing her arms. “He was totally cramping my style.” This prompted some nervous laughter, people beginning to drift away and return to the dance.

Meanwhile, Bill returned to the sidelines, watching Chad’s departure with placid glee. After some hesitation, Cherie walked over to join him. “What you did to Chad wasn’t permanent, was it?”

“Nah, it’ll wear off in a while.” Bill said, before he frowned. “And that’s the problem! It SHOULDN’T. ACUTE EXISTENTIAL DESPAIR with a side helping of PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA isn’t just something you walk off, toots!”

Cherie shivered, before collecting herself. “So, like… what are you doing here?”

“Things!” He replied cheerily and not-at-all-helpfully. “Anyway, I wanted to thank you for help that night! Thanks to you, Pine Tree’s still got his head screwed on right! Well, mostly, anyway. Kid had issues even BEFORE I got to him!”

“Oh, that wasn’t too much trouble.” After some reflection (phone calls, late night, rain, decapitation), she amended herself. “Well, okay, it was, but – anyway, do you have any idea where Thorne is?”

Bill glanced at her sharply. “In a manner of speaking! Though I think it’s something you oughta ask Pine Tree about! He’s the one pulling the strings here!”

“Really?” Cherie asked. “From what Dipper told me, it sounded more like you were the one pulling the strings. Um. Like, not like that’s a bad thing or anything.”

Bill let out a short, bitter bark of laughter. “Lemme guess! He made it sound like I was the BIG BAD VILLAIN and he was the VALIANT HERO who singlehandedly saved the day by sealing me away!”

“Was that… not what happened?”

“It’s more complicated than that.” Bill said, in a tone which brooked no further discussion. Cherie looked away, feeling awkward. “Sooo… where’s Dipper, anyway?”
“Probably off dancing with Foureyes! Archie, I mean.” Bill amended, upon seeing Cherie’s baffled expression. “Whoo, talk about NERD OVERLOAD. It’s true what they say! Nerds of a feather really do BRING DOWN THE ATMOSPHERE IN A ROOM!”

“He’s dancing with Archie? And you’re okay with that?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Bill cocked his head, flicking his hair back slightly. Yeah, there was definitely something going on with his right eye.

“Um. I don’t know? Thorne never liked it when I danced with other guys.”

Bill hummed. “Well, that’s HIS problem, isn’t it?”

Cherie blinked. Crazy demon had a point.

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It soon became apparent to Dipper that neither he nor Archie were good dancers. It became clear to him about the third collision in that they were, in fact, horrific dancers. They shared a mutual moment of self-conscious mortification, before settling in to an awkward side-to-side rhythmic shuffle.

Archie scratched his head, looking away sheepishly as his ears went red. “So. Um.” His sentence ended on a nervous squeak, and Dipper flinched in sympathy. “What’ve you been doing lately?”

“Trying to prevent mass infanticide. Perfecting my skills at arcane magic rituals. Arguing with the demon who lives in my closet. “Not much. You?” And okay, Dipper really wanted to make this easier for Archie, but it wasn’t like the other boy was giving him much to work with. It was like trying to talk to an anxious brick wall. Maybe this was the point he should take initiative. “Hey, didn’t you say something about wanting to join the programming club?”

“Oh. Um. Yeah! Thing is, I got out-nerded yet again.” Archie seemed to relax as they regained equilibrium, reverting to the usual back-and-forth of their conversations. “The club’s filled with tech geeks and – get this – none of them talked at all. They just sat there and stared at their screens the whole time.”

“Weird.” Dipper said, side-stepping a rowdy bunch of surfer dudes who’d grabbed one of the surfboard props and were doing their best to crowd-surf. “So no one told you what to do?”

“Nope. There were some other people there, but we kind of… just left, after a while.”

“Huh.” Dipper said. “Well, I heard that they’re offering software design classes next year. Maybe you could try it out. I mean, even if it’s filled with techies, there’s at least going to be a teacher there.”

Archie brightened. “Hey, yeah! There’s an idea.” As awkward silence began to rear its head once again, he glanced away, before doing a double take. “Wait, is your sister dancing with Rowland Bishop?”

Dipper followed his line of sight. Mabel was enthusiastically shimmying her way across the dance floor, her sequin-spangled outfit catching the light and playing up to Dipper’s image of her as a living disco ball. She was dancing hand-in-hand with an unfamiliar boy who looked like the dictionary definition of nouveau riche given human form. He was dressed to the nines, yet no one batted an eyelid at his absurdly formal tuxedo, nor at his ostentatious bejewelled necktie – seriously, were those diamonds on that thing? His nose was turned up, giving him a perpetually condescending
expression and rounding out that ‘snobby rich kid’ appearance.

Dipper disliked him immediately.

“He’s one of the rich kids.” Archie explained to him, voice muffled under the thrum of the music. “I mean, we’ve got a few, but he’s probably the richest. I’ve heard his family has a net income of over three billion.”

“Chapelwick has rich kids now?” Dipper watched as Rowland spun Mabel around in a twirl. She giggled appreciatively as he bowed to kiss her hand. Oh no. This wasn’t gonna end well.

“Yeah, I think they started popping up last Tuesday.” Archie said.

“Huh.” Dipper said, narrowing his eyes. He’d accumulated enough experience regarding Mabel and her dating habits over the years to figure out when a relationship was going to crash and burn instead of fizzling out harmlessly. And Rowland Bishop was giving off pretty strong ‘bad news’ vibes. He respected his sister’s judgement enough to back off if she didn’t specifically request his help, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t going to keep a close eye on those kinds of suitors. The Gideon incident had taught him better.

Then again, wasn’t he being a little hypocritical? After all, he was living in close quarters with Bill, of all people, and what was one snobby little rich kid capable of compared to Bill freaking Cipher? And besides, Bill could probably wear that suit better; that ridiculous jewelled tie on him would be more an extension of his personality than a gratuitous display of wealth. And come to think of it, Bill’s human form was actually pretty suited to formalwear - maybe something which showed off his broad shoulders and accentuated his waist, with hints of gold to match his eyes and hair –

“Hm, looks like something’s going on over there. Wait, isn’t that… what’s-his-face? William?” At Archie’s words, Dipper tore himself away from his Bill-in-a-suit thoughts so abruptly he could practically hear the sound of ripping Velcro. “And… Chad?”

Dipper turned to follow his gaze. His jaw dropped open. There, in front of the stage, Chadwick Phillips had grabbed Bill by the collar and lifted him up into the air.

He sincerely wished that his first reaction could have been what are you doing you dumb idiot, you’re messing with forces beyond your comprehension. Or maybe oh god Bill what stupid thing did you say this time? Or even, ha, let’s see Bill give him what he deserves.

Instead, Dipper’s initial train of thought went more along the lines of get your fucking hands off him before I tear your throat out. The surge of anger temporarily blindsided him, and he curled his hands as homicidal fury coursed through him like a shot of adrenaline to the bloodstream.

He couldn’t stop. He couldn’t think.

(He couldn’t let himself think.)

His palms closed around empty air, shaking him out of his rage-induced trance. Dipper blinked confusedly at his hands, before the last of his anger drained away and awareness crashed down to fill its place like a breaking wave.

“Oh my god, did he just scare off Chad? Dipper, did you see-“ Archie’s voice faltered as Dipper turned back to face him. “Whoa. You okay?”

“What?” Dipper vaguely registered Chad scurrying out of the hall, tail between his proverbial legs, but was too preoccupied with the all-encompassing question of what the fuck was that to feel
anything more than mild concern.

“Your expression looked kind of scary.”

“Huh?” Dipper reflexively raised a hand to his face, still reeling slightly from the vehemence of his reaction. He’d almost forgotten what it was like to feel that way. It was a little disturbing he still could.

Archie looked at him knowingly, then back at Bill. “He’s your date, isn’t he? I kind of get it – I mean, if Chad was trying to strangle my boyfriend, I’d be pretty pissed off too.”

“He’s not my boyfriend.” Dipper said, a little horrified. Partially because he was still recovering from the disconcerting sense of protectiveness that had possessed him some moments ago, and partly because romance and maniacal dream demon were two entirely incompatible concepts. Just because Bill was weirdly attractive as a human didn’t change the fact that he normally spent his days with three corners and a disturbingly warped worldview. “Mabel gave me an extra ticket, and I didn’t want to waste it.”

“Oh.” Archie said, suddenly looking hopeful. Dipper could have kicked himself for the missed opportunity. “Well, he’s… an interesting person. Anyone who can send Chad running can’t be that bad. And it looks like he’s hanging with the popular kids right now, so… that’s something?”

Indeed, it did look like Bill was mingling with what passed for the upper crust of Chapelwick’s student society. They obviously needed someone to fill the void which Chad had left, because there was currently a crowd of cheerleaders trailing behind him and hanging on to his every word. Absently, Dipper mulled over the fact that unlike Chad’s manhandling, this didn’t seem to inspire any particularly strong feelings in him aside from vague apprehension regarding the future state of his reputation. Which was a relief, since it meant he wasn’t that far gone.

Cherie was there too, and – Cherie. Dipper felt his mind, which had been forcing itself into some semblance of calmness, kick back into overdrive. He had to talk to her. And maybe find out exactly what Bill had done to Chad.

Dipper took a few steps back from Archie. “Actually, I think I’ll grab a drink. It was a nice dance, though.”

“No it wasn’t.” Archie smiled shyly, and Dipper felt a pang of guilt. “But thanks anyway.”

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It had started off so well.

Bill had behaved himself, had acted almost normal. He’d restrained himself from talking about face-collecting or people-blending or whatever it was which demons usually talked about (which were those two things, in her limited experience). Cherie could barely believe this was the same individual who’d scared her half to death in that nightmarish scenario some nights ago. Her friends seemed charmed, although she privately had the feeling their scrutiny didn’t extend very far below the surface. She overheard them chatting about clothes, of all things, Tiffany and Lilah regaling him with tales of wardrobe malfunctions past while Bill informed them of the importance of a properly-tied bow tie.

“NEVER TRUST ANYONE WITH A CLIP-ON TIE!” He’d said. “One moment you let them into your life, the next they’re spewing sulfuric acid over everything you know and love!”

“Sounds like my last boyfriend.” Lilah had commented.
Gradually, their gathered group gravitated towards the snacks table. And that was around the point where things started to fall apart.

Tiffany picked up a cup of punch, sniffing it. “Damn, doesn’t look like anyone’s brought in the good stuff.” She handed it to Bill. “Here. I think Heather’s mom made it. Like, she always makes the best punch.”

“Sorry, but I can’t!” Bill said, smilingly handing the cup back.

“Why not?” Amy piped up.

“Pine Tree told me… ah…” Whatever Bill was about to say, he clearly thought better of it. His eye flicked back and forth, visibly thinking. “I’m… allergic.”

“To what?” Amy asked. “I think there’s fruit in here. What kind of fruit are you allergic to?”

Bill paused. “ALL OF THEM!”

The congregated group of cheerleaders gave him incredulous stares.

“There’s some water here.” Cherie interceded, sensing trouble. “Can you drink that?”

Bill turned to her, his too-wide smile a little strained. “Nope!”

“What, are you allergic to water too?” Lilah asked, picking up a plate of jello. “Ooh, I didn’t know they had a sparkly flavour out.” She mumbled.

“HAH! Shows what you know!” Bill announced, swinging back into stride. “Do you have ANY idea what’s in these things?” He picked up a cup of water, swishing it side to side for emphasis.

“Uh… water?” Tiffany said, raising an eyebrow.

Bill tsk-tdsked. “Yeesh, what happened to educating yourselves? It’s almost like you AREN’T bright young things ready to challenge the DECEITFUL FOUNDATIONS upon which your society’s been built!” He leaned casually against the beverages table, letting the cup of water slip from his hand. Cherie listened with mounting trepidation as he began to talk.

“WELP, looks like it’s my turn to show you POOR MISGUIDED SOULS the light! You see, back in the 1950s, the World Government was at a loss for some convenient brainwashing methods! The general public was starting to wisen up to their old tactics, and there’s NOTHING WORSE for a REPRESSIVE GLOBAL DICTATORSHIP than its citizens thinking for themselves! So some clever individual had the bright idea of introducing SODIUM FLUORIDE into the world’s water supply! Of course, they were later RITUALISTICALLY EXECUTED according to the age-old customs, but not before the World Government started pumping TOXIC GAS into your drinking water!”

“Wait,” Amy frowned, “I thought they added fluoride to strengthen people’s teeth?”

Bill snorted. “PSSSHHT, that’s what they WANT you to think! But with some application of the ol’ noggin—” here, he tapped his head, “it’s pretty easy to figure out! Look, if the World Government cared so much about dental hygiene, why didn’t they pump our water full of TOOTHPASTE instead?”

“That’s… I…” Amy retreated into confused silence.
“EXACTLY! And here’s the thing.” Bill’s voice lowered confidentially, “Do you know exactly what repeated exposure to small amounts of sodium fluoride does?” Upon receiving no response other than a few shaken heads, he continued. “It poisons a very specific part of you — the BRAIN. Given enough time, fluoride poisoning induces the breakdown of an individual’s higher-order thinking processes, like a lobotomy. In other words, it conveniently turns PEOPLE into SHEEPLE. And THAT,” he concluded impressively, “is why I don’t drink water!”

“What do you drink, then?” Tiffany asked, still looking sceptical.

“Well, lemme put it this way! Do you think it’s possible for a World Government to pull the strings on civilisation without stirring up some of the riffraff from time to time? There’s been a LOT of rebel movements, and currently the most revolutionary, the most radical, is the BOTTLED WATER INDUSTRY. Yes, I know!” Bill said, in response to the confused glances he received. “I know what you’re thinking! But THINK SMARTER. Why does a tiny bit of water and plastic cost so much? The ONLY LOGICAL CONCLUSION must be that the World Government is driving prices up because they know the provision of UNADULTERATED, NON-TOXIC WATER presents a threat to their IRON-CLAD GRIP on everyone’s minds!”

The assembled group exchanged glances. Cherie tensed. This was it. The final nail in the coffin. Her friends were finally going to realise that ‘William’ was absolutely, irredeemably insane. After all, there was absolutely no way anyone was going to buy such a ridiculous, farfetched—

“That makes sense.” Tiffany said. Cherie whipped around, staring at her in bewilderment.

“Yeah, I always wondered why bottled water costs so much.” Lilah said, around a bite of glittery jello. “Joke’s on them. I’m, like, never drinking anything from a tap ever again.”

“Papa always said not to trust the government.” Amy volunteered.

Dear god, why were her friends all so gullible? Cherie gave up, burying her head into her hands.

“Man, this World Government sounds like such a jerk.” Lilah said. “Is there, like, some way I can give them my middle fingers?”

“Like, what about tinfoil hats?” Tiffany suggested eagerly. “I read something—“

“NO!” Upon registering the surprised reaction to his outburst, Bill quickly composed himself. “I mean, who thinks TINFOIL HATS are going to do ANYTHING useful? That’s just your typical misinformation propagated by government shills and funded by BIG ALUMINIUM! Plus, they make you look STUPID.” He added spitefully.

“Can’t argue with that.” Tiffany said, after a brief pause, whereupon she had clearly deliberated how well aluminium foil would go with her outfit. “So what should we do?”

“Weeeellll, there IS one thing you can do! Say, have any of you ever heard of the EYE OF PROVIDENCE?”

The group conversed among itself, before Amy, predictably, offered the answer. “Um…it’s the thing on our dollar bill, isn’t it?”

Bill clapped his hands together, before pointing finger guns at her. “CORRECT!” He announced. She giggled. “It’s a symbol of protection! See, the World Government CATEGORICALLY REFUSES to fuck with triangles with eyes after the incident of ’27! So all you gotta do is draw a triangle with an eye on EVERY AVAILABLE SURFACE - preferably out of the blood of your enemies, though ballpoint pen works just fine! And make it handsome!”
Cherie shook her head at Bill’s antics, closing her eyes in despair. She glanced up as a pause in the conversation alerted her to the presence of a newcomer. Dipper approached, snagging a cup from the table. She could feel the group gathered around them collectively tense.

Dipper frowned, glancing from side to side warily, clearly confused by the sudden attention.

"You shouldn’t be drinking that, Pine Tree." Bill interceded hastily.

"Why not?" Dipper raised an eyebrow.

"It has mind control chemicals in it."

Dipper gave Bill a hard stare, before taking a long, pointed swig of the drink in his hand. The assembled crowd let out various noises of horror. Bill’s expression, to his credit, didn't change.

Dipper eventually finished the drink, slamming the cup down on the table and stalking off.

"Well, there's NO HELPING SOME PEOPLE!" Bill shrugged, raising his hands in a 'what can you do' fashion. But Cherie saw something flash in his eyes like the glint of a knife. Something dark, amused and dangerous. Something which made her shudder and the blood in her veins chill.

She shivered, looking back in the direction Dipper had left. He seemed to be… beckoning her? Curious, she spared a glance at Bill, who seemed to be orating at length – something about making periodic blood sacrifices in order to appease the all-seeing eye – before quickly scurrying off to join Dipper.

“What’s he done this time?” Was Dipper’s first greeting. He eyed the gesticulating Bill with wary suspicion. “That’s Bill Cipher, by the way.”

“I know. And… uh… I think he’s just turned the cheerleading team into conspiracy theorists. It’s starting to look a bit cult-like from where I’m standing.”

Dipper let out a half-laugh, half-groan. “Yep, that’s exactly what I needed to deal with. Bill Cipher worshippers.”

“Don’t worry, I don’t think they’d do much harm. They’re not the brightest bulbs in the batch.” Cherie reassured you. “Anyway, was there something you wanted to tell me? Have you found Thorne?”

Dipper sobered, his expression turning grim. “Yeah. There’s something important I need to tell you about him.”

***

Dipper glanced at his watch. It was eight p.m., he’d already finished talking to Cherie, and Bill still hadn’t detected hide nor hair of Yinglong or Thorne. He considered actually talking to the demon, but he seemed preoccupied with that crowd of cheerleaders which had latched on to him like ducklings imprinting on a Lovecraftian creature of the deep. Amused by the mental image, Dipper spent a few moments ruminating over the possible outcomes of a Bill Cipher cult (widespread anarchy, government collapses, giant statues of Bill made of people), before a change in the music caught his attention.

The familiar strains of Disco Girl floated over the speaker, an old-timey contrast to the modern tunes which made up the bulk of Mabel’s music choices. He scanned the dance floor for his sister, who was still dancing with Rowland Bishop. Mabel caught his eye, before winking and flashing him a
discreet thumbs-up. Dipper rolled his eyes fondly.

Dipper hummed the chorus line as he leaned against the wall, watching the dancers shift back and forth like a moving tapestry, the flashing rainbow lights only adding to the pleasant surrealness of the scene. Vaguely, he noticed Bill extricating himself from his newfound followers, a golden blur at the edge of vision growing closer and closer. He only deigned to respond once Bill planted himself directly next to him, close enough that their shoulders bumped.

He glanced up at the demon, who also seemed to be gazing down at him with a measure of amusement. “You are a terrible date. I mean, ditching me for the cheerleaders? Really?”

“Hey, there’s a ton of UNTAPPED POTENTIAL lying dormant in their brains!” Bill proclaimed, flicking Dipper’s forehead for emphasis. “Gotta give props to the TEENAGE MAGAZINE INDUSTRY – now THAT’S conditioning at its finest! All I really gotta do is switch around their objects of worship a little!”

“Oh, don’t start a cult.” Dipper said flatly. “I don’t think I could handle a cult.”

“Hey, it’s not my fault you humans find my ALL-ENCOMPASSING CHARISMA so irresistible! Which begs the question: why aren’t YOU on your knees worshipping me right now?”

“They like you because your human form’s hot, not because you’ve got any charisma to speak of.” Dipper corrected him, fighting down the surge of inconvenient mental images Bill’s statement had generated. “Besides, it’s hard to take someone seriously after seeing them sleep in a bag of Doritos.”

When Bill failed to respond, Dipper looked up warily. The demon was wearing the biggest shit-eating grin he’d ever seen. “You think I’m hot.”

Dipper blinked, suddenly flustered. “Well… uh…”

He yelped as Bill slung his arm around his shoulders, resting his entire weight on Dipper’s significantly less-substantial mass. “Pine Tree, Pine Tree, Pine Tree. If there’s ANYTHING I’ve learnt from sneaking out of your room to examine Shooting Star’s browsing history, it’s that a statement like THAT shouldn’t just be left to FLOUNDER IMPOTENTLY while both occupants of the conversation ignore its existence!”

“You check my sister’s internet history?” Dipper asked blankly. “Isn’t that kind of creepy?”

“Of COURSE I do, and of COURSE it is! Who do you think you’re talking to?” Bill brushed off his concerns with a wave of his hand. “ANYWAY, assuming that you’re referring to ‘hot’ in the colloquial sense and not the traditional – not like that isn’t flattering in its own way - I feel that the ONLY appropriate response should be to ask you to dance!”

“What?” Dipper’s brain attempted to fill in Bill’s jumps of logic, but came up short. “Wait, this wasn’t some convoluted attempt to ask me to dance, was it? Because you could’ve just asked.”

“FIINE!” Dipper was far from oblivious to the fact that Bill’s face was currently very close to his, his breath ghosting over Dipper’s skin with every exhale. “Pine Tree, will you dance with me?”

“Uh.” Dipper hesitated, though for exactly what reasons he wasn’t certain. “What about Thorne?”

“What about him?” Bill asked, somewhat tartly.

They froze as the lights in the hall flickered briefly, the strains of Disco Girl stuttering as the unmistakable growl of thunder rolled over them like a heavy omen. The hairs of the back of Dipper’s
neck prickled as a static energy surged through the room, buzzing with menace. It felt very much like standing in the path of an oncoming thunderstorm, the air thick and humid with suppressed magical power.

“That about him.” Dipper finally managed.

Bill narrowed his eye, growling. Ignoring the crescendo of confused murmurs from those congregated within the hall, he grabbed Dipper’s arm, yanking him in the direction of the door. “See, Pine Tree, I was right. Yinglong ISN’T subtle. Nor does she have any understanding of that SALIENT CONCEPT we refer to as TIMING!”

As he was dragged out the hall, Dipper’s gaze locked onto Cherie’s. They shared a silent moment of understanding before the latter inclined her head slightly, a subtle gesture of assent. It was the last thing he saw before he stumbled outside and was immediately attacked by blasts of cold air and heavy rain. The weather had taken a swift turn for the inclement, and Dipper was willing to bet anything this wasn’t a normal part of the meteorological process. He squinted through the pouring rain, the downpour so heavy it was almost opaque. Bill, meanwhile, seemed entirely unaffected, barely flinching before the angry onslaught. His eye glowed brightly, the same otherworldly shade of gold which made up his usual form.

The demon spared him a glance, before tucking Dipper under his arm. This shielded him from the worst of the elements, with the convenient side-effect of ensuring he wasn’t blown away by any sudden gusts of wind.

“This way!” His voice carried over the low roar of thunder. Dipper found himself half-carted, half-dragged in what he estimated was the general direction of the front gate. “Hey, Pine Tree, know what we call HAREBRAINED creatures like Yinglong WHO DON’T KNOW THEIR PROPER PLACE IN THE GREAT CHAIN OF BEING?”

“What?” Dipper asked absently, noting with some alarm that a vague silver mist was beginning to seep into the surrounds, further obscuring his vision.

“Nothing, ‘cause the great chain of being is BULLSHIT! Though I DO have some nifty nicknames JUUUST on the right side of condescending I’m ITCHING to try out!” Bill’s grin sharpened as his steps slowed, his arm loosening and dropping back to his side. “AS THOUGH THERE WAS A GREATER INSULT THAN YOUR NAME.”

Dipper started, because at some point they had reached the border of the red thread, the rain thinning to the point he could see Thorne standing outside the protective barrier. His expression was grim, as foreboding as the storm clouds looming just outside the circle.

However, what drew Dipper’s attention wasn’t Thorne, but the lofty tangle of a creature towering behind him. It was a grander version of that snakelike light which had terrorised him the past few weeks, its length stretching up into the distance like a skyscraper, its scales shimmering grey, like the tail end of a lightning strike. What stood out most, however, were the pair of wings attached to the beast, its form something out of a classical illustration, princess and knight and all. Every flap of these wings generated another gust of wind, prompting the rain to beat down even harder.

He sucked in an anxious breath, grabbing onto Bill’s sleeve to steady himself. So this was what they were up against.

“晨星。”Yinglong’s voice carried the same pitch and gravity as her thunder, the vibrations rumbling through the ground, sending strange spasms bubbling through Dipper’s veins. The scar on his chest itched, as if in protest.
Bill drew himself up to his full height, his lips twisted into a feral grin, every inch the sadistic dream demon. “Yinglong, my old pal – WELL, I can’t really call you that, seeing as I admittedly NEVER GAVE A FLYING FUCK about you until you decided to give the ol’ genocide wheel a spin! What’s up with that, anyway? I mean, systematically taking out a whole bunch of kiddies in one fell swoop? At least draw out the PAIN and the GRUESOME TORTURE bits a little, c’mon!”

“这不是我的选择。” The response was deafening enough to send the ground shaking, as though the earth itself shuddered before the rain deity’s presence. Bill didn’t seem affected, however, his smile unwavering even as the wind tore at him like a vengeful beast.

“Really? So you didn’t CHOOSE to murder thousands of children? Wow, guess it’s something that just happens then, like TRIPPING or FALLING or WASTING AWAY IN AGONY AS THE DEMON YOU PISSED OFF RELISHES IN YOUR SUFFERING!” Bill clapped a gleeful hand upon Dipper’s shoulder, causing him to flinch. “By the by, this is Pine Tree! Pine Tree, meet Yinglong! I’ll bet you’ve got ABSOLUTELY NO IDEA what the hell she’s on about, because dragons don’t have the first clue about cultural sensitivity! Here’s a hint: IT DOESN’T START WITH GOUGING A HOLE IN SOMEONE’S CHEST.”

Yinglong turned her eyes upon Dipper. He shrank back, fully prepared for some kind of divine punishment stemming from Bill’s inability to keep his big mouth shut. But she only surveyed him for a few seconds before returning her attention to Bill.

“我明白您说的，应该入乡随俗。” At that, her head plunged down so it was hovering only a metre or so off the ground, the remainder of her body suspended in airborne coils. “MY APOLOGIES, PINE CHILD. I WAS MERELY DEFENDING MY HOST’S HONOUR.”

“His… honour?” Dipper narrowed his eyes, confused.

“YOU CHALLENGED HIS BOND TO HIS MATE.” Yinglong’s words – the bits of it Dipper could catch through the low undercurrent of thunder – were tinged with a light accent indicative of her origins. “THUS, I WAS OBLIGED TO ASSERT HIS CLAIM.”

“What? I wasn’t – Cherie isn’t- actually, you know what? That was messed up on so many levels I’m not even gonna try.” Dipper flicked his fringe back, brushing water out of his eyes. His voice sounded very small in comparison to Yinglong’s booming roar. “Why are you trying to kill all these kids, anyway? Because you don’t sound like the kind of… uh… dragon to do that.”

“I MADE AN UNWISE AGREEMENT.” Yinglong shifted so the length of her body wrapped around the barrier, the space between each coil sparking with static electricity. “FEAR NOT. THE CYCLE OF LIFE SHALL REPLENISH THOSE LOST SOON ENOUGH.”

Dipper realised, with some alarm, that the barrier which kept Yinglong at bay was beginning to falter. Although it wasn’t visible to his human eyes, he was alerted to this by how Yinglong’s form continued to encroach on their space, as though she was slowly but surely constricting an invisible wall.

Bill’s eye gleamed. He barely looked human by this point, his face twisted into an expression of pure malevolence which an ordinary person should have been incapable of. “I’m gonna give you ONE CHANCE, fangface. Call it off, and I won’t cut you up into cute lil’ ribbon snakes! Might still give you a nasty burn or two, though!” He flung one hand out casually, his palm lighting up with blue flame.

“YOU HOLD MUCH RESENTMENT TOWARDS ME.” Yinglong raised her head, tilting it to one side curiously. “WHY?”
“Why? Don’t get me started, pal! You walk into MY town, you attack MY Pine Tree and then you’ve got the NERVE to interrupt me while I’m putting on the moves-“

“Uh, Bill?” Dipper said, glancing around nervously. The rain was beginning to slow, the gusts of wind gradually gentling. But a strange tension was beginning to take its place, a stifling, unnatural humidity which curled its fingers around his neck and began tightening. This was the calm before the storm.

“-and now you’re trying to kill off a bunch of kids! Who I happen to like! I mean, it’s not every day you find an audience which appreciates TRUE ART!” Bill continued to rant, his other hand bursting into blue flames. “And AFTER ALL THAT, if you don’t have the MANNERS to call off whatever deal you made like a good little dragon-“

Yinglong raised her head, peering into the sky. “UNFORTUNATELY, I CANNOT.”

Here, the breeze suddenly picked up, the clouds parting to reveal a small gap. Dipper let out a panicked gasp as he realised that the glow of the full moon was visible within that tiny space.

“-and if you try making ONE MOVE which isn’t FLEEING FOR YOUR FUCKING LIFE-“

“FORGIVE ME, MORNING STAR.”

Bill’s sclera flashed black, his flames at his hands flaring. “-you’re gonna HAVE HELL TO PAY.”

Yinglong lunged forwards, jaws agape, a stance Dipper recognised from the fateful pursuit at the park. The barrier resisted for one, two seconds before it shattered with a noise like breaking glass. Dipper’s vision was filled with bright mist as winds howled and lightning cracked and thunder roared and Bill-

Bill stood within the maelstrom, his expression one of a man who was staring down the end of the world and loving every second of it. He tilted his head, revelling in the destruction, and Dipper suddenly remembered what he was, realised, as Bill raised one flame-swathed hand imperiously, that Yinglong didn’t stand a chance, not against the axis mundi of all cosmic evil.

The demon smiled, beautiful and terrible and horrifying.

He snapped his fingers.

Chapter End Notes

Translations

晨星 – Morning Star
这不是我的选择 – This was not my choice.
我明白您说的，应该入乡随俗 – I understand what you mean. When in Rome, we should do as the Romans do. (Note that Yinglong uses the polite form of address (您), suggesting she views Bill with some measure of respect)

Please note that my Chinese is immensely rusty and if anyone with a better grasp of the language can suggest corrections, I would greatly appreciate it!

Also, theannieparadigm made some awesome fanart for Conspirathecy (warnings:
blood, gore, decapitation, yeah it was THAT scene).
Arc II Part 14: The Dance, superstrated

Chapter Summary

Dipper faces off against Thorne, and struggles with his own inner demons. As well as one outer demon.

Chapter Notes

TW: Evisceration

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The mist flooded with red. Dipper gagged, the coppery-sweet taste of blood invading his senses. It stifled his vision, clogging his throat as he struggled ineffectually to extricate himself from its clinging, inexorable clutches.

Bill Cipher was nowhere to be seen. Nor was Yinglong. He was alone.

Dipper lurched forwards. His hands were covered in blood. His feet were covered in blood. Blood coated him like a second skin, clinging to him like a lover’s caress, comforting and familiar and warm.

His mind felt sluggish, as though the very blood within his body had congealed. There was something he was meant to do, somewhere he had to go, someone he had to find. Someone who was safe. Someone he trusted.

(He couldn’t trust Bill, because if he trusted Bill, he’d never start searching again.)

Seconds stretched into minutes. Minutes stretched into hours. Hours stretched into eternity. Dipper lost track of time as he stumbled through the mists, his blurry mind incapable of anything more than that single-minded drive to search. His heavy steps left imprints in the ground has he walked, every footstep sinking into what felt like cold, coagulated viscera. He didn’t dare look back, simply trudged forwards through the blood-red miasma.

His pace slowed. There was something in front of him. His numb stare settled upon a huddled figure lying prone before him. It shook and shuddered, occasionally letting out quiet noises of terror. It was Thorne.

Dipper surveyed the scene before him impassively. What was Thorne doing here? Bill wouldn’t have placed him here without a reason. Hazy questions danced through his mind as he knelt, his hand landing atop the damp, swampy ground. Only there was something there now. His fingers wrapped around cold, heavy steel. His heartbeat thudded through his ears. He pulled the weapon free with a sickening sound. The ground beneath him shifted, as though inhaling in anticipation.

There they were. Lurking just beyond the mist. A thousand eyes watched Dipper as he drew himself to his feet. Thorne lay ahead. Helpless. Powerless. Vulnerable.
He lifted the blade.

“Dipper.” Bill’s breath behind his ear, his body against Dipper’s own. A hand wrapped around Dipper’s wrist, gently pulling it back to his side. The other cupped his cheek, tilting his head so it faced Bill. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Bill didn’t look pleased. Dipper’s eyes scanned his expression, finding slight disappointment, resignation, tiredness, but no traces of triumph. Which didn’t make sense, because hadn’t this been what Bill had wanted all along? He closed his eyes, surrendering to the fog in his head. The spear dropped from his loose grip, sinking back into the ground like a snake. It felt like he’d been searching forever, only to find himself back at the beginning of the maze.

Bill let out a sigh, wrapping his arms around Dipper. “Oh, Pine Tree. And after all that big talk about not letting anyone die.” Dipper leaned into his shoulder, inhaling wood smoke and ozone and unanswerable cosmic questions. “Then again, it wasn’t your fault. I forgot how potent nightmare gas can get, especially when you’ve already got wounds to open.” A hand carded through his hair, tracing the dots which made up his birthmark. It settled over his eyes, shielding him from the rest of the world. Dipper couldn’t feel anything.

“Go to sleep, kid.” Bill was the only thing left, his voice the sole thread tying Dipper to consciousness. “I’ll have something nice waiting for you when you wake up.”

***

Dipper opened his eyes. The ceiling stared back at him accusingly.

He blinked a few times, disoriented. Partly because ceilings didn’t stare, but mostly because he had absolutely no idea how he’d gotten here. He didn’t even remember falling asleep. All he remembered was the party and the storm and Yinglong-

He jerked upwards. Yinglong. She’d attacked and Bill had… well, he wasn’t entirely certain exactly what Bill had done, but if he’d been sticking to the script, he should’ve activated the sleeping gas by now. Which meant that this was probably someone’s mindscape. He absently reached up to check his inside vest pocket. Satisfied that everything was still in place, he finally noticed a heavy pressure on his lap.

A small, grey ball of fur lay curled atop his legs, its sides moving up and down as it breathed. His heart warmed with recognition.

“Hey there.” He murmured, reaching down to pat the puppy. “Haven’t seen you around in a while.”

The puppy’s tail thumped as it stirred to wakefulness, lifting its head to nuzzle Dipper’s hand affectionately, and – yep, its face was still a bloody smear. Dipper found he didn’t mind at all that much, especially since it didn’t seem particularly affected by its tortured state of existence. Probably. Wiping the blood off on his pants, he sat up straighter, examining his surroundings.

He was in a large, echoing space encased by four tall walls. At first brush, it appeared to be a fairly ordinary, if somewhat oversized ballroom, with an arched ceiling and golden chandeliers spaced out evenly across the length of the floor. Dipper’s initial hint that something was amiss was when he took a better look at what he was currently sitting on. He had been resting under an alcove to the side of the hall, atop some kind of knobbly stone chair which was digging into his back something fierce. Turning to study its surface, Dipper was met with the anguished visages of a thousand tiny tentacle creatures frozen in permanent agony.
Staring in horror at the sight (oh god did one of them just twitch), Dipper’s first instinct was to leap off the makeshift throne. Unfortunately, the slightest movement elicited what was likely a noise of protest (or possibly a tormented lament) from the tiny bundle in his lap. On one hand, he was sitting on a bunch of semi-conscious Bill Cipher victims, further adding to whatever indignities they were likely to have suffered under the ex-dream demon’s hand. On the other hand, puppy.

Letting out a sigh of resignation, he leaned back into the tentacle-creature-throne while the faceless puppy in his lap let out contented gurgles. His eyes traced the expanse of marble wall stretching across the room. It seemed relatively innocuous until he tilted his head just slightly, the light shifting and catching unnerving shapes which flickered and vanished once he tried to get a better look. Two gigantic windows rested on each end of the room, framed by sweeping red curtains fringed with Bill’s signature gold. The view beyond these windows was pitch black, although Dipper swore he could see something moving beyond that glass, something great and dark and incomprehensible to the human mind.

The decorative border between wall and ceiling was, in contrast, far less subtle, a looped pattern of intricate wreaths of stone entrails. The glaring ceiling, meanwhile, could be attributed to the pattern of eyes plastered across its surface, the overlay textured in a manner which made it seem like all eyes were following oneself, an optical illusion. The floor was less alarming, a familiar pattern of white and gold triangular marble tiles, so polished he could see his own reflection.

Overall, the entire scheme was very Bill, terrible secrets lurking beneath a thin mask of grandeur, inky horrors overflowing and seeping through the cracks. He shouldn’t have found it comforting, but he’d evidently been exposed to too much weirdness through the years to find this anything more than mildly reassuring.

He tensed as the gigantic oak double doors on the other end of the room – carved with grotesque depictions of too-many-limbed creatures contorted in impossible shapes – began to slowly creak open. Shadowy beings of some sort began to pour into the room, like black oil on water, the sound of ruffled fabrics and liquid slithers accompanying their entrance. They were dressed in something resembling formalwear, and might have passed off as ladies and gentlemen of a bygone era if Dipper could tell where they began and where they ended.

“Up already, Pine Tree?” Dipper empathetically did not jump at the sound of Bill’s voice emanating from behind him. “So, whaddya think? Personally feel it’s a bit stuffy. I’m more about the GIANT PARTY PYRAMIDS DOUBLING AS INSTRUMENTS OF WORLD DOMINATION, but hey, gotta switch things up sometimes!”

Dipper didn’t reply, because Bill had moved within his line of vision, and-

“Uh, Pine Tree? MY EYE’S UP HERE!” Dipper’s gaze promptly snapped up to Bill’s face. His cheeks felt hot. Bill was wearing a suit. Not just any old suit, but the suit which he’d specifically fantasised about Bill wearing, gold cufflinks and ridiculous jewelled tie included. Bill’s confused expression resolved itself as he glanced down at his outfit. “Oh! Right! THIS! Well, I kinda sorta lost track of you after activating the nightmare gas, so I tried poking around in your mindscape for a bit, and picked up some things along the way! Hope you don’t mind my SHATTERING whatever ILLUSIONS OF PRIVACY you might still be belabouring under!”

Dipper’s eyes briefly traced along the lines of the suit again – which fit Bill perfectly, argh – while his mind attempted to comprehend the implications of Bill’s statement. Bill had activated the gas – good, that meant the plan was still in motion. Bill knew of Dipper’s Bill-in-a-suit daydreams – bad. Very bad. Bill possibly knew he’d pretty much lost it over Chad attacking him – terrible. If that was
the case, he’d never hear the end of it.

The faceless puppy in his lap sat up straighter, its head cocking as it surveyed the shadowy creatures which had flooded the ballroom. Dipper steeled his face into neutrality. “So… where are we? And while we’re at it, where’s Yinglong? We managed to stop her before she did anything too bad, right?”

“Whoa, kid, one question at a time! Firstly, we’re in a shared dreamscape created through the MERGING OF OUR MINDS, a fusion of all our DEEPEST AND DARKEST FEARS combined into an UNHOLY CONGLOMERATE OF TRAUMA! I just did a lil’ renovating to add the finishing touches! And as for THOSE TWO, well,” Bill smirked, his voice warping, “LET’S JUST SAY THEY’VE GOT A LOT ON THEIR MINDS RIGHT NOW.”

Parsing the frankly alarming sentence, Dipper frowned, one hand scratching behind the puppy’s ears. It responded by dribbling blood on his shirt. “No one’s dead, right?”

“Course not! Haven’t you heard of party etiquette? You gotta save any maimings and/or irreversible psychological scarring for the MAIN EVENT!” Bill clapped his hands twice, classical music filling the room. The shifting shadows began to writhe to the rhythm. “Since we’ve got some time before everything’s ready, whaddya say to a dance? Since we were so RUDELY INTERRUPTED AND ALL.”

Dipper paused, considering. The puppy shifted against him and whined. “Nah, I think I’ve had enough dancing for one night.” He eventually said. His feet still hurt from where he’d been stabbed by a stray stiletto heel. “Besides, can you actually dance? I’ve seen you trip over air.”

The demon looked disappointed, but shrugged. “Hey, you try living your life UNINHIBITED BY CONVENTIONAL PHYSICS and then shove yourself into some squishy meatsack!” He straightened, brushing down his suit. Dipper’s eyes involuntarily followed the motion. “Here, have some candy! It should keep you occupied until I get back.” Reaching into his pocket, he deposited a number of foil-wrapped bonbons into Dipper’s lap.

“What kind of candy is this?” Dipper asked suspiciously, lifting one up to examine it. The foil wrapping was decorated with tiny doodles of Bill’s triangular form.

“Chocolate!” Bill replied, summoning his cane in a burst of blue flame.

“And what’s in the chocolate?”

“ASSORTED EYEBALLS!” Bill paused. “No, wait. I was supposed to say that AFTER you ate one.”

Dipper slowly lowered the bonbon back onto his lap.

“Geez, there’s no impressing you, huh?” Bill graced him with a disgruntled look. “Welp, guess I’ll go polish up the odds and ends. Don’t go wandering around while I’m gone, Pine Tree! I mean, you COULD, if you wanted to lose yourself in someone’s worst nightmares for all eternity!” With that singularly optimistic remark, Bill gave him a jaunty wave, weaving his way through the dancing shadow-creatures and out the door.

Dipper watched him leave, pretending not to notice the way Bill’s pants clung to his ass quite nicely. The puppy in his lap squirmed, sniffing the bonbons curiously. Dipper absently drew it away. “No, puppy. Chocolate’s bad for dogs.” He glanced down into its pulsing orifice of a face. “…Can you even eat?”
As if in response, the puppy’s face sucked itself inwards, forming a cone-shaped flesh portal to destinations unknown.

“…Guess that answers that, then.”

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It was a while before Bill reappeared. During that time, Dipper had figured out that the music playing was actually the same series of notes, varying only in pitch, speed and intensity, had checked the contents of his inner vest pocket half a dozen times, and had examined all the Bill Cipher doodles on the bonbon wrappers. He hadn’t actually eaten them, for obvious reasons.

Setting a sketch of Bill playing jump rope with intestines down, Dipper let out a sigh. “Maybe I should’ve followed him.” He said, to no one in particular. “He tends to do dumb stuff when no one’s there to stop him.”

The faceless puppy rolled over, its tail wagging as it scratched its belly. Suddenly, it stiffened, rolling back around and bounding out of his lap and into the shadowy crowd. Curious, Dipper lifted himself off the tentacle-creature throne (the agonised groaning sound which ensued was probably just a figment of his imagination), following the puppy into the midst of the shadow-creatures. They parted before him like smoke, offering no resistance, before reforming as he passed through.

He paused at a rope barrier towards one side of the ballroom. That hadn’t been there before. It delineated a separate portion of the room from the dance floor. A table stretched out from one end of the room to the other, covered in a delicate white tablecloth. Dipper grimaced, recalling Bill’s references to ‘sashimi’ and other Yinglong-related foodstuffs. He had a fairly concrete idea of what Bill meant by ‘preparations’ now.

A hush fell over the room, the music stuttering to a halt, and Dipper tensed. The flames flickering atop the chandeliers dimmed, before a swift wind extinguished them. One by one, they relit, casting an eerie blue light. The massive curtains on each end slid shut, before reopening to reveal a stage upon which Bill Cipher stood, the illusionist before his unwitting audience. He lifted a hand, and all lingering noises instantly dissipated.

Well, Bill certainly knew how to put on a show.

“Ladies and gentlemen and those WRITHING CREATURES OF THE ABYSS to whom neither form of address applies! Thank you all for coming tonight! I hope you’ve all danced up a storm – well, no, because that would be BESIDE THE POINT-“ here, the shadowy creatures let out noises of amusement, noises which sounded unnervingly like animals being tortured played in reverse- “and as we all know, the point of tonight is to make sure our wonderful guests get the TREATMENT THEY DESERVE.” His voice deepened, the blue flames on the chandeliers flaring higher. The shadows squirmed in anticipation.

Bill gave a casual spin of his cane, before leaning on it with both hands, tilting his head so he was staring Dipper dead in the eye. “Now, Pine Tree, ready to play your part as my OH-SO-CHARMING assistant? Here’s something to keep in mind: HELP’S just one letter away from HELL!”

“I have absolutely no idea what you mean.” Dipper replied, as the rope barrier unknotted and a staircase leading to the stage unfolded itself in front of him. Nonetheless, he obliged, making his way to Bill’s side. The demon smirked, winding an easy arm around his waist.

“Back to the topic at hand, I think we’ve waited long enough to greet our guests of honour,
HAVEN’T WE?” The crowd let out unsettling noises of agreement. “Don’t worry, I’m sure they’re ready to appear at the drop of a hat - THIS hat, in fact!” Bill tipped the top hat off his head, spinning it around with a finger. “As an aside, Pine Tree, how do you prefer your food to be cooked? Grilled, roasted, fried, flambéed or SCREAMING IN AGONY AS ITS VERY MOLECULES ARE RIPPED APART AT THE SEAMS?”

Dipper’s eyes widened. “Wait, are you-“

“TRICK QUESTION! Particle disintegration is OBVIOUSLY the superior method if you want even heat distribution!” And with that, Bill let his hat drop onto the table below. It exploded in a burst of blue flame, releasing a cloud of smoke which forced Dipper to duck and cover his eyes. When he reopened them, his heart sank to his knees.

Atop the table sat a gigantic spit – a solid rod of metal stretching the length of room. And upon that spit, a certain dragon lay skewered, like a rotisserie chicken ready to be cooked. Dipper watched in horror as Yinglong let out great roars of pain, blood dripping from her body and staining the once-white tablecloth.

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t our favourite OVERSIZED LIZARD! Yinglong, buddy, how’re you doing?” Bill’s eye carried a light Dipper couldn’t recognise as he walked straight off the stage, floating in midair to jab his cane into the dragon’s side. The reaction was instantaneous, Yinglong letting out a howl of agony which shook the foundations of the room and forced Dipper to clap his hands over his ears. Bill seemed entirely unaffected, his exultant expression unfaltering. “Whew, you’re looking a bit UNDER THE WEATHER! HAH! It’s funny because you’re a rain god!”

“Bill!” Dipper yelled, but it appeared to go unnoticed by the demon, who landed to the floor, nudging Yinglong’s head with his cane. The shadows writhed in mounting excitement, eerie sounds of glee emanating from the gathered creatures.

“So, pal, how would YOU like to be cooked? Maybe something NICE AND SLOW AND PAINFUL, the way you deserve it! I mean, who ACCIDENTALLY makes a deal to kill off every kid in town under the age of nine, huh? WELL?” He demanded, his face suddenly losing all humour.

Yinglong’s eyes flicked back and forth frenziedly, and Dipper took an involuntary step back as one fixed on him. “PLEASE… PINE CHILD… SHOW MERCY.” Her voice was pleading, Mercy. Dipper’s heart faltered as he remembered. The Redcaps. And all the ones before them. The scar at his chest itched painfully.

“Leave him out of this.” Bill snapped, his sclera flashing black. “You’ve dug your own grave, and now I FULLY INTEND TO BURY YOU IN IT.” The anger disappeared, replaced by that disconcerting liveliness. “Or maybe CREMATION sounds like a better option! Less cleanup! No need to deal with all that dirt!” And with that, he clicked his fingers, and Yinglong instantly burst into flames.

Dipper watched in horror as the dragon let out cries of distress, struggling as flames licked across its skin. Bill stood there, laughing, but with that something in his eye, a strange expression Dipper couldn’t make heads nor tails of. He bowed his head, thinking of Gravity Falls burning in flames.

He found his voice.

“Bill, stop.” The intent in his tone was clear enough that Bill didn’t even have to ask him if it was a command. The flames vanished, and Bill turned to face him, looking oddly serious. “You promised.
You promised you’d try to find a way to stop Yinglong without killing anyone.”

Bill let out a bitter bark of laughter. “You think I haven’t TRIED, Pine Tree? Thing is, nothing she was willing to offer was ACCEPTABLE!”

“What did she offer? At least tell me that!” Dipper demanded. The shadows shifted in discontent.

“A DUEL.” Yinglong croaked, her voice sounding less like thunder and more like dry, cracked wood. “AN HONOURABLE DUEL BETWEEN YOU AND MY HOST.”

He blinked. Right, dragons were all about that honour thing. “Well, that doesn’t sound too bad—“

“Pine Tree.” Bill interrupted him, scrubbing a hand over his forehead. “Do you know what an “HONOURABLE” duel means? It means she and I have to give you two the same advantages. Or rather, I have to withdraw any advantages which give you the upper hand over him. Advantages such as IMMORTALITY.”

Dipper started. “Wait, so what are the win conditions?”

“SURRENDER.” Yinglong answered. “THE LOSING PARTY HAS TO SURRENDER. DEATH IS OPTIONAL.”

He turned back to Bill. “And you can revoke my immortality? Is that possible?”

“Only if you command it.” Bill said sulkily. “It places a temporary barrier between our connection as bearer and vessel. And there’s about a QUADRILLION safeguards in place to make sure it’s of your own free will. Otherwise YOU BET I’d have taken advantage of it sooner!”

“And if I die? What happens to you?”

Bill looked away, that strange look still in his eye. “It’ll render our deal – the spell – null and void. Which means I’ll be reconnected to the mindscape and regain all my power.”

“I see.” Dipper said. “Do it.”

Bill froze. “I’m sorry, Pine Tree?”


He yelped as Bill suddenly appeared before him, his expression blazing with anger. As with his triangular form, his entire body glowed red while his sclera snapped black. His voice, when he spoke, was pitched the deepest Dipper had ever heard it. “DON’T YOU DARE, DIPPER PINES.”

The shadows throughout the room warped, changing into progressively frightening forms. “I HAVEN’T SPENT ALL THOSE YEARS WATCHING OVER YOU FOR YOU TO THROW IT ALL AWAY.”

Dipper flinched as a hand snaked out to grab his shirt, pulling him closer to the outraged demon. “IF YOU DIE, PINE TREE,” Bill’s hand flared with fire, dangerously close to Dipper’s skin, “I’LL DESTROY YOUR WORLD. I’LL MAKE SURE TO CORRUPT EVERYTHING YOU’VE EVER CARED ABOUT, UNTIL IT COLLAPSES UNDER THE FORCE OF ITS OWN DECAY. ALL YOUR EFFORTS, EVERYTHING YOU’VE STRUGGLED FOR, WILL BE WORTHLESS.”

_Huh_, Dipper thought.
He understood what the look in Bill’s eye was, now. Desperation. The fear of losing the only person left who could understand. He was desperate to protect Dipper, the same way Dipper had felt – still felt – about seeing Bill hurt.

So he said the only thing he could.

“Bill, stop being a drama queen. I’m not going to die.”

Bill stared at him for one long moment, before deflating. His body returned to its usual colours, like a flame being extinguished. “Yes, you ARE. You’re going to die because you’re an IDIOT and then I’ll DESTROY THE WORLD because I want to get there before that other guy does!”

Dipper exhaled, running his fingers through Bill’s hair. Bill closed his eye, his head resting on the crook of Dipper’s shoulder, his hands gripping the fabric on Dipper’s back. He looked tired. “It’s a simple cost-benefit analysis, kid. You’re putting everything at risk just so you can save ONE measly rain deity. I mean, those things are a DIME A DOZEN! And even if you don’t die, the costs of messing up are a lot higher than that.” He lifted his head to peer at Dipper. “Remember when we talked about getting second chances? Because this isn’t the sort of thing you get second chances for, Pine Tree.”

“I know. This is my second chance.” Dipper looked Bill in the eye. "And this time, no one is going to die."

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Dipper let out a shaky exhale, sinking to his knees. Bill watched impassively as he adjusted to the sudden absence of the demon’s protective power which had coursed through his veins the past five years. He felt… vulnerable. The sudden awareness of his own human fragility was overwhelming, and he was briefly tempted to call the whole thing off. The feeling soon passed, however, and he stumbled to his feet, waving off Bill’s proffered hand.

Yinglong stared at him curiously through the soundproofed barrier Bill had set up for the purposes of the ritual. The demon dismissed it with a flick of his hand.

“Sorry about that.” Dipper said, glancing at the rain deity. She was curled up in a corner of the room, having been shrunk to a more manageable size – smaller than the terrifying beast which had destroyed the barrier, but larger than that snakelike light which had chased him through Muirfield Park. She was chained in place with a glowing blue collar, though he had the feeling there was a lot more than just a collar holding her in place. “It’s just that we needed to use our real names for the ritual, and, uh, you know.”

“IT IS ALRIGHT, PINE CHILD.” Yinglong stared at him, unblinking. “I UNDERSTAND. TRUE NAMES ARE POWERFUL THINGS. WHERE THEY ARE MOST POWERFUL, HOWEVER, IS IN THE HANDS OF THOSE WITHOUT MERCY.” Here, she glanced pointedly at Bill. Dipper winced, understanding the implications.

“Did I say you could talk?” Bill snapped. He’d been in a mood ever since Dipper had agreed to fight Thorne. “Or maybe you’d like to experience FIRSTHAND what BARBEUED TONGUE TASTES LIKE!”

“Bill.” Dipper reprimanded him, albeit half-heartedly. “Just… summon Thorne, would you?”

Bill shot him a rebellious glare, but tapped his cane against the ground anyway. A portal opened on the other end of the stage, through which a crumpled body tumbled onto the floor. Dipper caught a
brief glimpse of a hundred screeching mouths and clawing hands before the portal sealed up again.

He glanced at the twitching figure on the floor. “Bill.”

“What? What do you want, Pine Tree? An apology for imprisoning some nobody in an INESCAPABLE FIELD OF NIGHTMARES while FORCING HIM TO RELIVE HIS MOST TRAUMATIC MEMORIES ON REPEAT LOOP in order to send him INTO A DOWNWARD SPIRAL OF HOPELESS STUPEFACTION?”

“I wanted you to fix him.” Dipper said flatly. “But after hearing that, yeah, an apology might be nice too.”

Bill rolled his eye, grumbling. “…first with the DRINKING and then with the NO KILLING ANYONE and now you want me to reverse my IMPECCABLE DEGENERATION of the human mind… haven’t had this much trouble with a human since Rockefeller screwed me over with the deal…”

Nonetheless, he snapped his fingers, and awareness returned to Thorne’s eyes. The boy stirred, blinking, before he froze, his eyes locked onto Dipper. He let out an animalistic growl, hackles raised, lunging towards him. Bill snapped his fingers again, chains appearing out of thin air to wrap around his limbs, abruptly sending him into an undignified sprawl.

Dipper stared at the snarling Thorne with some horror. “Bill, what did you do to him?”

Bill crossed his arms. “Hey, what’s with the BLAME GAME? If we’re pointing fingers, then I’ll be pointing mine at HER!” Here, his index finger lengthened, shooting out in an angular formation to jab at the dragon lying coiled at the corner of the room.

Yinglong bowed her head. “THE MORNING STAR IS CORRECT. I LACK THE SKILL TO CONTAIN MYSELF WITHIN A HUMAN’S MIND WITHOUT IMPACTING THEIR HIGHER BRAIN FUNCTIONS. THE EXTENDED PERIOD OF TIME I HAVE SPENT BONDED TO HIM FURTHER EXACERBATED THESE ISSUES.”

“Wait, so you’re the reason Thorne started going a bit cuckoo towards the end of that week?” Dipper asked, glancing dubiously at the boy, who was struggling against Bill’s chains and letting out various feral noises of aggression. Didn’t look like he was about to respond to reason. “Huh.”

Bill glanced at him sharply. “Well, Pine Tree? Maybe you’re beginning to see the FOLLY of trying to inject sense into your thorny friend’s SCRAMBLED BRAIN!” He poked the end of his cane into Thorne’s side, prompting a snarl and furious thrashing. “Hey, I’ve got an idea! I’ll murder Yinglong, and then we get to keep him as a pet! He can live in my closet! Pretty please? I’ll even remember to feed him!”

Dipper ignored Bill, choosing to address his next statement towards Yinglong. “Is he even possible of… uh… surrendering?”

“All creatures carry the instinct of defeat.” Yinglong replied, which was technically a non-answer.

Dipper swallowed. “Alright. I think I can do this. Release the… um… kraken, I guess?”

“Pine Tree, wait.” Bill placed a hand on his shoulder. “About the ‘HONOURABLE DUEL’ thing…”

“Yes?” Dipper asked, a little warily.
Bill leaned in conspiratorially, a spiral of flame wrapping around his other arm. “Alright, since Yinglong’s stuck to your thorny friend like a RADIO SHOCK JOCK to their PET CONSPIRACY THEORY, it means that she can’t help transferring power to him! Which also means that if you fought him right now, he’d TEAR YOU INTO FLIMSY SCRAPS OF BODY TISSUE! Chalk it up to being a MINDLESS FORCE OF NATURE, I guess!”

“Anyway, that means I’ve got a BIT of leeway in how much of an advantage I can give you. But not that much! So as much as I’d like to REPLACE YOUR HANDS WITH VENOMOUS SCORPIONS TO HELP SPEED THINGS ALONG, that’s kinda outside the spirit of things! BUUUUT, I do have a few more things up my sleeve! Such as THIS!” With a flourish, the spiral of flame converged into a single column, before flickering and dying out, leaving a familiar silvery spear. Part of the tip was encased in gold, a tiny eye etched into the tarnished metal.

The demon examined the spear critically. “How well do you remember this?” Bill asked, his tone a little subdued.

Dipper took an involuntary step back. It felt like the eye followed him as he did so, like the haunting spectre of regrets long buried. “Not… really. But I definitely know I don’t want to use it.” Or touch it. Or even look at it.

It was a seemingly innocuous object, but Dipper swore he could feel some forbidding aura emanating from it, remnants of a bloodstained past. He knew, somehow, that if he reached out to take hold of it, it would fit perfectly in his palm, like a lover’s touch.

Bill rolled the spear from hand to hand. “The Lance of Longinus. We’ve had quite a history together.” He murmured softly, before glancing up. “You sure you don’t want to-?”

“No.” Dipper glared at Bill, who merely shrugged.

“Welp, can’t blame you.” He banished the spear in a burst of flame. Dipper blinked, surprised that he wasn’t pressing the issue. “Course, that’s not the ONLY thing I’m offering! Hows about you just let me into your head a bit-“

“No.” Dipper said.

“-or the killing Yinglong thing’s still up for offer-“

“Definitely not.”

Bill sighed, running a hand through his hair. “Yeesh, are you TRYING to unleash a VENGEFUL DREAM DEMON UPON YOUR UNSUSPECTING WORLD? Because that’s how you unleash a vengeful dream demon upon your unsuspecting world! At least lemme lend you a bit of the ol’ regeneration schtick!”

Dipper blinked. “Actually, that might come in handy. If that’s okay with you?” He glanced at Yinglong. The dragon hesitated, before inclining her head slightly.

“FINALLY!” Bill snapped his fingers, and Dipper felt a little of his power flowing back in. It was miniscule compared to their usual connection, but comforting nonetheless. “No offence, kid, but I’ve got the feeling you’ll need it!”

“Yeah, I probably will.” Dipper admitted. He moved to make for the centre of the stage, but Bill’s hand on his shoulder restrained him. He looked at the hand, then at Bill. “Uh.”

Bill stared at him silently, his expression impenetrable. His mouth opened and closed a few times, as
though he was debating what to say. Eventually, his expression tightened. He gave Dipper’s shoulder a small squeeze before ruffling his hair. “Give ‘em hell, Pine Tree.”

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The lights in the ballroom dimmed as Dipper approached the chained figure upon the floor. The shadows, having remained comparatively tranquil throughout the interim, began to stir like Lovecraftian horrors awakening from their slumber. A ripple of noise flowed through the room, the atmosphere sparking with nervous tension. A single spotlight flooded the centre of the stage, creating the illusion that only he and Thorne existed, the two final players on the board.

Even though he was aware that Bill and Yinglong were floating on opposite ends of the stage, only a small distance away, the inky opaque darkness shielded them from sight. Only the faint hum of Bill’s power thrumming through his veins reminded him that he wasn’t alone. Perhaps it could be considered a battle by proxy – Yinglong’s strength against Bill’s gift of healing.

Their supernatural audience seemed intensely engrossed in the proceedings. Despite being unable to see them, Dipper could hear their communicative sounds coalescing to form a low tribal beat, which gradually began to accelerate with the pulses of his heart. Thorne glared up at him from his prone position upon the ground, his irises still a milky sheen of silver. Dipper forced himself to stay still, to remain calm. He felt like the metaphorical lion tamer to Bill’s circus act – a single mistake and his head was off for good.

“Ready, Pine Tree?” Bill’s voice was simultaneously too close and too far away for his liking. Dipper nodded.

A snapping noise, and the chains restraining Thorne evaporated.

Dipper and Thorne stared at each other.

Dipper raised a tentative hand. “Sup.”

He barely saw Thorne move, a brief blur his only warning before the boy lunged. He narrowly dodged the arm which swiped at him, the motion causing him to lose his balance and fall to the floor. Thorne struck again, but Dipper was prepared, rolling out of the way at the last second as the boy’s hand plunged into the floor, sending splinters flying.

Dipper watched the spectacle with wide eyes. Damn, Bill wasn’t kidding about the ‘tearing him apart’ thing. He took advantage of the brief moment Thorne needed to extricate himself from the floor to act, rolling over and using the momentum to tackle Thorne back onto the ground, slamming his head into the floor. This close, Dipper could tell that the low rumble of sound from Thorne’s throat wasn’t a growl. He was saying something, repeating a near-incomprehensible mantra of fury.

“-fuck you gonna kill you gonna kill you gonna kill you-“

Comforting. Dipper winced and tried to keep his balance as Thorne jerked, attempting to shake him off. “Look, Thorne, I don’t want to fight you-“

“Shut up!” Thorne hissed, lashing out. Before Dipper could react, a hand shot out, wrapping around his throat. Nope nope nope. Even through the oxygen deprivation, Dipper resolved that he was not about to let Muirfield Park repeat itself. Mustering up his strength, he jammed his knee into Thorne’s solar plexus, forcing the boy to release him with a grunt. The shadows let out a cheer. It was fairly clear which one of them was the crowd favourite.
He staggered to his feet, eyeing the huddled Thorne warily. “And not that it really matters, but I’m not interested in Cherie.”

“I don’t fuckin’ care!” Thorne growled, before charging at Dipper again. “This is all your fault!”

Huh, Dipper thought. He dodged the swung fist nimbly, catching it by the wrist. He was prepared for the next punch, and soon he had Thorne by the wrists and was staring the infuriated boy down. Score four for training with Angela.

“I think I get it.” He said calmly, staring Thorne in the eye. “I’m a scapegoat. An imaginary enemy for you to project all your problems onto. But, you know-“

Thorne headbutted him so hard his skull cracked.

Dipper stumbled back, rendered briefly incapable of thought over the chorus of pain pain pain. His ears rang. A trickle of blood slid from his forehead. His short moment of disorientation cost him, as Thorne took the opportunity to strike, pulling his arm back for a punch which Dipper had no chance of dodging-

Dipper sucked in a pained wheeze as he was flung like a ragdoll into the marble wall. He heard more than felt his ribs crack, indescribable agony blossoming from the centre of his chest. His fractured skull hit the wall with an insensate thud, and Dipper had just enough lucidity to know this was a bad thing, a very bad thing. The ringing in his ears intensified, as though his eardrums themselves were screaming in pain, and in the end there would never be anything but the screaming, and maybe there never was.

But he was still alive.

Dipper opened his eyes. His head rang with pain, his vision swam, blurry dots of light dancing before him. Eventually, he managed to focus them enough to lock onto the figure looming some distance away. Thorne was watching him, primed for an attack. But he hadn’t killed him yet, Dipper realised dully. Maybe some part of him still recoiled at the idea of killing. Maybe he just wanted to draw the suffering out for as long as possible. It didn’t matter.

Dipper forced himself to stand on shaky legs, a hand clutched to his chest. His bones were healing, albeit slower than they usually would have. He clenched his jaw, fighting back a whimper of pain as his sternum reconnected. Thorne was still standing there.

He opened his mouth, spitting blood and teeth out before he spoke.

“What part of you thinks that killing me is going to accomplish anything?” Bubbles of blood dribbled from the corner of his mouth while he talked. “Do you think that Cherie would come back to you just because I wasn’t here?”

“Yes.” Thorne snarled, and Dipper felt his lips twitch upwards.

“So that’s how you solve your problems. By murdering them.” Dipper tilted his head upwards, feeling nauseous for more reasons than one. “Well, maybe you can murder your family too, while you’re at it.”

Thorne stared at him for one long, horrified moment, before letting out an incensed roar, charging at him. The attack was clumsy, unprepared, and even injured, it was child’s play for Dipper to elude his attack, grabbing his arm and wrenching it behind his back in a move Great-Uncle Ford had shown him years ago. The immobilised Thorne struggled and bellowed like a bull led to the abattoir.
“Are you going to give up?” Dipper asked quietly, twisting the boy’s arm. Thorne grunted in discomfort, trying to knock him off.

Thorne’s eyes finally met his. “Do your worst, Pines.” he snarled.

“Okay.” Dipper said, and dislocated his shoulder.

Whatever Thorne was expecting, it likely wasn’t that. The boy let out a howl of pain, bucking and twisting while the shadowy crowd let out low drones of excitement. Dipper gritted his teeth, trying to keep his hold.

With one mighty wrench, Thorne twisted his entire body, sweeping Dipper off his feet and sending him tumbling to the floor. Dipper’s eyes widened and, okay, maybe that move wasn’t supposed to work on opponents twice as strong as he was. He barely had time to react before Thorne grabbed him with his uninjured hand and literally threw him off the stage.

He had a split-second impression of being flung through the air, before the viscerally disconcerting feeling of crashing into the marble ground at full force, accompanied by the painful crack of bone, wiped everything else from his mind.

Dammit, those had just finished healing.

Dipper peeled open his eyes, squinting through the spotlight. A hulking figure loomed down upon him like a forbidding omen. In one deliberate motion, Thorne snapped his shoulder back into position.

“You don’t have to do this.” Dipper rasped. The taste of blood flooded his mouth. His lower body felt paralysed, numb, and he was fairly certain he might have snapped his spine. “If you just-“

“SHUT UP!” Thorne roared, seizing Dipper and driving his fist into his abdomen. Perhaps it was the concussion, but Dipper could only watch in vague surprise as Thorne’s hand went right through him, driving a hole – oh, those were his intestines. “SHUT THE FUCK UP! I DON’T CARE WHAT YOU THINK!”

Each exclamation of fury was punctuated by another blow to his body, Thorne pummelling him over and over again as though Dipper was his own personal stress ball. He watched passively as the boy reached in, wrenching his guts out in the same way a child might tear the stuffing out of their toy bear. Maybe it was a good thing that his nervous system had been shot to hell, because he could barely feel the sensation of viscera being torn out of his body.

After an immeasurable period of time, the blows slowed, and Thorne stood, panting heavily, blood dripping from his hands. Dipper blinked up at him hazily. Feeling better now? He wanted to ask, but he didn’t seem to have the strength.

“I RECOMMEND YOU TELL YOUR HOST TO SURRENDER.” The shadowy crowd began to let out murmurs of discontent as Yinglong stretched, her body lighting up with its original luminescence. The lights in the hall rekindled, bathing the room in a dim glow reminiscent of the few moments before the sunrise. “I CANNOT GUARANTEE THAT MINE WILL NOT KILL HIM IF THIS CONTINUES.”

Bill, suddenly very visible in his overwhelming golden radiance, turned his eye upon Dipper’s broken body. And he began to laugh.

The laugh echoed through the hall, echoes upon echoes of laughter until it became a chorus of insanity, and the shadows were laughing too, and the laughter filled Dipper’s ears, becoming more
and more a part of himself, until it felt like there had never been anything but the laughter. Thorne flinched, clapping his hands to his ears.

The peals of laughter gradually petered out, and when Bill spoke again, his voice seemed to emanate from directly behind Dipper. “Really? Surrender? JUMPING THE GUN a little there, aren’t we? After all, Pine Tree hasn’t even PLAYED HIS PART yet!” With great effort, Dipper managed to twitch his toes, sensation travelling up his body until he was hit with unrelenting waves of pain emanating from his stomach area. Downside of not being paralysed, he reasoned. “Go on then, kid. I’m not about to stand in the way of whatever you’ve got planned.”

Dipper grunted, forcing himself into a sitting position, pulling his intestines back into their rightful place. Thorne watched his progress with narrowed eyes, although he made no move to attack him. Maybe Bill had scared him off.

Dipper rose to his feet on shaky legs, arms clasped to his abdomen. “You were right.” he said, swaying slightly. A palm emerged from the shadows to grip his shoulder, steadying him. “What I think doesn’t matter. But you know what does?”

He reached into his inside vest pocket, and pulled Cherie out.

Bill let out a choked noise.

The shadowy onlookers stuttered and withered and crumbled into dust, as though their very existence was unable to withstand the sheer absurdity of the proceedings.

Cherie stumbled forwards a few steps, before toppling to the floor, taking deep gulps of air. Finally, she looked up, glaring at Dipper. “Like, how many books do you keep in there, anyway?!"

Dipper would have held up his hands defensively, but they were currently occupied with keeping his digestive organs in place. “Hey, this was your idea!”

“C’mon, I was pretty concussed back there.” Dipper winced as a stray coil of his lower intestine escaped his grasp. “At least give me some leeway.”

Cherie huffed, crossing her arms.

“And you!” Cherie whirled around, pointing a finger at him. “What the fuck was that? You disembowelled my friend just because I was spending time with him!”


“I am looking!” She gestured eloquently at the massive blood splatter where Dipper once lay. “And you know what I see? That my boyfriend doesn’t even trust me enough to let me study with another guy! Like, you know what? I don’t belong to you, Thorne. You don’t get to choose who I hang out with because you don’t own me.”

“Babe.” Thorne said helplessly. “I do trust you. I just… it’s been really hard for me lately.”
“You don’t trust me.” Cherie replied, unflinching. “You’re dependent on me. You’re depending on me to get you out of this whole mess with your parents, and you’re terrified that I’ll leave you because that means you’ll have no one left.”

Dipper heard Bill let out a sharp inhale. Quietly, he placed a hand atop the one resting on his shoulder.

“That… I…” Thorne’s face changed, crumpled. He began to cry, and, okay, Dipper could see what Cherie had meant about it sounding like a puppy kicked times ten. “I’m sorry, okay! You’re the best thing that ever happened to me and I was just so scared because I can’t handle things the way you can, I just freak out and start cryin’ and then that just makes things worse. Fuck, Mom and Dad were right about me. I am useless.” He let out a shuddering breath, following it up with a few pathetic whimpers as he succumbed to another fit of crying.

Cherie sighed, stooping down to meet his eyes. “You’re not useless, Thorne. Just because you aren’t ridiculously smart like your parents want you to be doesn’t mean you, like, don’t have a future. You’re a hard worker, you care so much about other people and you always notice what I need even before I realise it myself.”

“Cherie.” Thorne wailed, watery-eyed. Cherie smiled wryly, pulling him into a hug, patting his head while he cried a wet spot into her shoulder.

“Here’s the thing, though. Lots of people have parents like yours. Lots of people get cheated on – not that I was cheating on you, but that’s beside the point. And most of them don’t try to kill other people because of that.”

“I, I know.” Thorne hiccupped. “I was an idiot. It was just – they promised that they’d be able to fix it. They promised me I’d win you back.”

Cherie’s hand paused. “Putting aside the whole ‘win me back’ clusterfuck, who’s they?”

“I dunno.” Thorne closed his eyes, his hands clenching on Cherie’s sleeves. “Just – someone left a note in my bag. They said somethin’ about knowin’ how my parents were treating me, and that they could fix it. They left some weird jade dragon in there. Said it was a lucky charm. Didn’t believe it at first, but… I just kept it with me just in case. Dunno if it worked, but it sure made my head all fuzzy.”

Cherie and Dipper exchanged alarmed glances.

“Was that… the person who left you directions for that ritual in the art room?” Dipper ventured.

Thorne looked up. “Yeah. How did you know about that? They said it was a spell that could win back Cherie’s heart or somethin’ like that.”

“EXCUSE ME.” Cherie let out a little jump as she finally noticed the dragon chained up on the other side of the room. “I APOLOGISE FOR INTERRUPTING, BUT IF YOU HAVE FINISHED TALKING, IT MAY BE A SUITABLE TIME TO DISCUSS SURRENDER.”

“Oh. Yeah.” Thorne mumbled, wiping his nose. “Yeah, I surrender. Sorry about, uh, rippin’ your guts out. And I think I might’ve ripped your head off as well? Fuck, sorry isn’t gonna cover that, is it?”

“It’s okay.” Dipper said, forcing a smile even as memories of pain flooded his head. At least the gaping hole in his abdomen seemed to have filled back up. “It wasn’t really you. Well, it wasn’t entirely you.”
“That was the part you should’ve demanded your POUND OF FLESH, Pine Tree.” Bill muttered rebelliously. Dipper deliberately stepped on his foot.

“Thorne.” Cherie said, her voice suddenly serious. She stood, placing both hands on Thorne’s shoulders. “I don’t want to lose what we have. But the fact is that if you keep going this way, if you stay dependent on me, we’re not going to last much longer. I want you to promise to handle things yourself, even if you have to stand up to your parents. I’ll always support you, but I can’t do everything for you.”

Thorne hesitated, before nodding. “I’ll try.” He said.

Bill let out a loud, obnoxious sigh, startling the happy couple. “Now, if we’re all done with the SENTIMENTAL OUTPOURING of the LEAST NECESSARY HUMAN EMOTIONS IN EXISTENCE – which is saying something, because ALL human emotions are COMPLETELY SUPERFLUOUS – I suggest we get the HELL OUTTA DODGE! Nightmare zones like this tend to degrade after a while.” He pointed a thumb at the carved doors for emphasis, which seemed to have sprouted teeth.

“Yeah, there’s an idea.” Thorne said. He turned to the dragon coiled in the corner of the room, raising his voice. “Anyway, uh, Yinglong, was it? I don’t really remember much about you, but I think you were tryin’ to protect me? Well, uh, thanks for tryin’ to help. Even if it messed things up more than it helped.”

“YOU’RE WELCOME.” Yinglong bowed her head. “I APOLOGISE FOR MY EXCESSIVE FERVOUR. I DO NOT QUITE UNDERSTAND HUMAN NORMS.”

“There’s an understatement.” Bill murmured, curling his lip. He snapped his fingers, opening a portal through which Dipper could spy the school grounds. “Well, what’re you waiting for? A written invitation? Because I could do that, y’know! Mine have mouths and NEVER STOP SCREAMING!”

Both Thorne and Cherie gave Bill dubious looks as they filed out into the conscious world. Bill gave Dipper an expectant look. “Well, Pine Tree?”

“Um…” Dipper hesitated. “You go first. I’ll just hang back for a bit.”

Bill’s eye narrowed briefly, before his expression smoothed out to its usual state of incongruous cheer. “Suit yourself, kid! Heads up on the chandelier, though!” He pointed towards the ceiling.

Dipper looked up at the chandelier. Predictably, there were actual disembodied heads dangling from it where crystals used to be.

Dipper waited for a moment after Bill departed, before turning to Yinglong. She had freed herself from her chains in the meantime, and was currently examining the various wounds Bill’s escapades had left on her body. He grimaced.

“Hey.” He said quietly. Yinglong glanced up, before continuing to survey her scars, looping her head around so she could inspect her wings. “Sorry about that. Bill gets… overzealous, sometimes.”

“I UNDERSTAND.” Yinglong replied neutrally. “AS I MENTIONED BEFORE, WE DRAGONS FULLY COMPREHEND THE INSTINCTIVE DRIVE TO PROTECT OUR MATES.”

Dipper flushed. “That’s– I- we’re not–“
“IT IS ABOUT TIME THE MORNING STAR SETTLED DOWN ANYWAY.” Yinglong continued, heedless of Dipper’s intensifying mortification. “HE IS, AS I BELIEVE YOU SAY IN YOUR LANGUAGE, ‘KIND OF A FUCKBOY’.”

“Okay, that-“

“THAT ASIDE, I WISH TO THANK YOU.” Yinglong swooped down, staring at him intensely. “YOU SPARED MY LIFE, DESPITE THE THREAT I POSED.”

“That, uh.” Dipper looked away, guilt pulsing through his chest, “It wasn’t exactly a selfless act.”

“I KNOW.” Yinglong responded unflinchingly.

“You do?”

“YOUR HEART IS KIND, PINE CHILD. BUT THERE IS CRUELTY IN THAT KINDNESS.” Yinglong stared into his eyes, and Dipper had the disconcerting feeling he was being weighted, judged. “IT COULD BE NO OTHER WAY, FOR ONE WHO FLIES SO CLOSE TO THE MORNING STAR. ONE LEARNS TO BURN, IN ORDER NOT TO BE BURNT.”

Dipper furrowed his brows. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“YOU WILL UNDERSTAND, IN TIME.” Yinglong’s eyes were like distant storms, like mists over grassy fields. “NOW, THEN. WHAT WAS IT YOU WANTED FROM ME?”

Dipper hesitated, feeling the ghosts of the past creep along his skin.

He held out a hand.

“I want to offer you a deal.”

Chapter End Notes
Chapter Summary

Dipper struggles with the logistics of bathing with attractive ex-dream demons.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dipper opened his eyes.

His head was resting on something comfortable. Which was in direct contradiction with the rest of his body, which felt like he’d been dragged through the mud for miles and left to rot. A gentle hand was pressed atop his forehead, fingers brushing away damp strands of hair.

“Bill?” he mumbled. The hand paused.

“How do you feel?” Bill eventually asked.

“Not like my intestines’ve been ripped out of me, so that’s a plus.” Dipper replied. “Guess I’m a bit tired.” Which, come to think of it, he was, a deep, bone-aching weariness which seeped into his core like the water which leached through his clothes, chilling his body. At least it seemed the rain had already stopped. He nudged Bill’s hand off his head, struggling upright.

Initially, everything seemed blurry, the particular kind of fuzziness which went hand in hand with falling asleep at times one shouldn’t. Blinking rapidly, he managed to clear his vision enough to make out Cherie and Thorne propped up some distance away. Cherie was kneeling, supporting an obviously-exhausted Thorne. She glanced up as he stood. “Looks like everything worked out.”

“Yeah.” Dipper said, chancing a look at Bill. The demon’s expression was inscrutable. “At least we don’t have to worry about Chapelwick’s kids dying on us now.”

“Fuckin hell.” Thorne mumbled. “Can’t believe I was dumb enough to agree to that. The fuck was I thinking?”

“You weren’t thinking straight.” Dipper replied firmly, before he shivered. The lull of the rain was accompanied by a windless chill which bit into his sodden clothes. The distant sound of music assured him that the dance was still ongoing, despite Yinglong’s disruption. “Don’t worry, you’re not the first person to go a bit nutty after exposure to the supernatural.”

“Trust me, Pine Tree knows what he’s talking about!” Bill said smugly, wrapping an arm around Dipper’s shoulder. Despite the disagreeable chill, he seemed to emanate warmth like a radiator. “Kid’s messed up SIX WAYS TO SUNDAY!”

“You don’t have to sound so happy about it.” Dipper pointed out.

Thorne let out a long exhale. The wind blew through the trees, scattering leaves down the street. “Man. I so don’t wanna deal with Mom and Dad screaming at me for running off like that. But Cherie was right. I can’t keep hidin’ from them like this.”
“I was?” Cherie asked, sounding a little confused.

“You sure you want to do that **tonight**? I mean, no offence, but you look a little tired.” Dipper pointed out quickly.

“Yeah. Like, you should stay with me for tonight. I’ll call your parents and tell them you’ve turned up.” Cherie stood, pulling Thorne to his feet. “We’ll deal with the shitstorm tomorrow.”

“How much harm could a bit of shut-eye do, anyway? It’s not like I’m still out there to ruin it!” Bill proclaimed, tucking his chin atop Dipper’s rain-soaked hair. “Speaking of which: what would YOU prefer to dream about? The INEVITABLE WITHERING AND DECAY OF EVERYTHING YOU LOVE, or CLOWNS WITH SPIDERS INSTEAD OF HANDS? I’m taking suggestions!”

“Stop that.” Dipper said, pushing his hand against Bill’s head in remonstrance. “Thorne, what do you think? Maybe you should wait until you’re more awake to handle your parents.”

Thorne hesitated, before nodding. “Yeah. I’ll need some time to think stuff through, anyway. And take a shower. Think I was eating outta trash cans at one point.”

Cherie wrinkled her nose. “Sure smells like it. C’mon, let’s get you back.”

Thorne took a few stumbling steps, before turning back to face Dipper. “Oh. And, uh… thanks. I dunno exactly what you did, or who he is,” here, he made a vague gesture towards Bill, “but no one’s dead. And that’s… good.”

Bill leaned down, wrapping his other arm around Dipper, forcing him to bear an inequitable share of the demon’s weight. He could practically hear Bill’s disdainful grin. “Is it, now? IS IT?”

“Yeah, it is.” Thorne replied, determination returning to his features. “I dunno if I could live with myself if anyone died because of me. And being possessed like that was… pretty shitty. Glad that’s over with. So… thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” Dipper replied, nudging Bill back until the demon was no longer smothering him. Cherie and Thorne watched the tableaux with some bemusement.

“Are you two, like…?” Cherie asked, making some incomprehensible motion with her hand. “Actually, like, never mind. Thorne’s not the only one who needs sleep.” She rubbed her forehead with one hand, interlacing the other with Thorne’s.

Dipper blinked. “Alright, then. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.” Thorne said, nodding his head so deeply it was almost a bow. “Sorry for all the trouble.”

“Night. And thanks for, like, not murdering my boyfriend.” Cherie gave them a tired smile. Bill’s arms tightened briefly around Dipper.

“Shame we can’t say the same about HIM.” he grumbled, low enough that only Dipper could hear.

“Hey, I got better.” Dipper said absently, watching Cherie and Thorne proceed down the avenue, hands connected like a satisfying conclusion.

The moment they disappeared from sight, Bill picked him up and slung him over his shoulder. “Bill! What do you think you’re doing?”
“What, you want your sister seeing you like THIS?” Bill announced, clapping a jovial hand upon Dipper’s mud-stained back.

He scowled. “I can walk, y’know.” From this vantage point, the only thing of note he could make out was Bill’s backside. Which wasn’t such a bad view, all things considered.

“C’mon, kid! You’ve been working yourself to the bone! Or to the INTESTINES, as it were.” Bill’s statement was accompanied by a pointed jab to Dipper’s abdomen. “Lemme do this for you, why dontcha?”

“Guess I could use a bath.” Dipper stilled himself with a resigned sigh. “But is this going to be a thing now? First Seraph, now you. I’m not some kind of… doll you get to pick up and put down whenever you want.”

“Keep telling yourself that, Pine Tree!” Bill said. They passed a few late-night commuters waiting at the bus stop, who gave them odd looks before stepping well out of the way.

Dipper huffed, ignoring how the small jade charm in his vest pocket dug into his chest like an inexorable pang of reproach.

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As Bill summoned Dipper’s key and proceeded to kick the door open, Dipper reflected on how fortunate he was that their parents made a habit of early bedtimes. It was one which they’d tried to cultivate in their children, but to no avail. You’d have to pry Dipper’s midnight-morning cram sessions out of his cold, sleep-deprived hands. And Mabel’s idea of a sleep schedule was ‘overload on sugar, and conk out on the nearest available surface once said sugar runs out’. Either way, it meant no one was around to see Bill flail his way up the stairs, a quietly screeching Dipper in tow.

“You can put me down now.” Dipper said, as Bill shut the bathroom door behind them and began fiddling with the bath mechanisms. “Like I’ve been telling you for the past ten minutes.”

“I’ll put you down when I’m GOOD AND READY, Pine Tree!” Bill said, shoving his hand into the stream of water experimentally. “Oh, WOW! It BURNS! Baths are GREAT!”

“You’re meant to use the cold tap as well, Bill.” Dipper sighed, keeping his eyes trained on Bill’s ass. He’d take his silver linings where he could.

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“What? Oh.” A pause, and then the sound of a tap being turned. “That makes sense.” Bill said, sounding a little disappointed.

Dipper yelped as he was gracelessly swept off Bill’s shoulder and into the bath. Shaking his sodden bangs out of his eyes, he could just make out Bill clambering into the bath after him, looking much like the cat which caught the canary. The demon ducked into the opposite corner of the bath, surveying Dipper smugly. “So? Whaddya think?”

“It’s okay, I guess.” The water was still on the too-hot side, but at least it wasn’t about to give him third degree burns anytime soon. “Though people usually do this with their clothes off, y’know.”

Bill clapped his hands together. “RIGHT! I KNEW I forgot something!” Before Dipper could react, he snapped his fingers, and their clothes landed in a neat pile by the side of the bathtub.

Of course, if their clothes were over there, that meant-

Dipper let out a high-pitched shriek as he flung his hands over himself in a pitiful attempt to protect
his modesty. Bill eyed him with a measure of bewilderment. “Pine Tree? What’s gotten into you THIS time?”

“I-” He cast his eyes about the room, looking at anything which wasn’t the naked demon in front of him. His cheeks burned in a way which couldn’t be wholly attributed to the too-hot bath. “You-”

“Really, Pine Tree? REALLY?” Bill sank a little further into the water, examining the little islands his kneecaps made with some interest. “All-seeing dream demon, remember? I’ve already seen EVERY INCH of you! As well as EVERY INCH of EVERYONE ELSE! It’s a TRAUMATISING EXISTENCE, I can assure you!”

“Oh.” Dipper felt mildly vindicated, although he still refused to stare directly at Bill. It was a little like staring into the sun, except with a slightly higher chance that his eyeballs were going to disintegrate and his face was going to melt off his skull. Hesitantly, he reached out to pour some of Mabel’s bubble bath into the water. Plausible deniability 101: It’d be a lot easier to pretend no one was naked if he couldn’t see through the foam. “Okay, I get where you’re coming from.”

“Glad you’re finally seeing sense!” Bill examined the bottles resting at the side of the bath absently. “Gotta admit, though! Your inches are MUCH easier on the eye!” And nothing could have prepared Dipper for the lascivious way Bill raked his eye up and down the length of his body.

With a squeak, he dropped the entire bottle of bubble wash into the water. The stifling scent of French lavender and honey flooded the air.

Ears burning, he ignored Bill’s smug expression in favour of setting the now-empty bottle back on the ledge. A silence descended upon them as they sat, Dipper glued to his end of the bathtub.

“So,” Dipper eventually said, once the silence crossed the line from awkward to repressive, “nothing died tonight.” Which was a terrible conversation starter, but he figured it’d be worthwhile throwing it in Bill’s face while he still had the opportunity.

“Well, aside from my CAPACITY TO STOMACH YOUR SICKENING HUMAN EXPRESSIONS OF SENTIMENT! Geez, I thought that was a CRISIS, not one of those shows your great-uncle watches when he thinks no one’s in the house!” Bill made an expression of disgust, stretching his legs out until they jutted into Dipper’s personal space. In response, Dipper flattened himself further against the side of the bath. “Speaking of OBNOXIOUS EYESORES, how’d your talk with ol’ lizardbrain go? Pick up any hints as to who pulled a fast one on your thorny friend?”

“Well… no.” Dipper hesitated. “From what she said, it sounded like the deal had something like a non-disclosure agreement. Either way she made it pretty clear that bad stuff was going to happen if she told me who made the deal with her. But I was thinking-“

“WERE you? THIS should be entertaining!”

“Bill.” Dipper frowned, and the demon reluctantly subsided. “I was thinking – when we had that incident with the Redcaps, there was a bunch of stuff which didn’t make sense. The mechanism under the statue, for one thing. And the modern lock on the door in the catacombs. Someone had to have installed it.”

“Or maybe they just SPROUTED FROM THE GROUND like a couple of RAISED MIDDLE FINGERS TO MOTHER NATURE!” At Dipper’s glare, Bill shrugged. “What? It’s a possibility!”

“And this time we had that person who roped Yinglong into a bad deal, and then gave Thorne those instructions. I was thinking – all the incidents so far – they were connected to the plagues. Which
means whoever was behind the Redcaps was behind Yinglong as well. There’s someone’s out there who’s actively trying to kickstart the apocalypse.”

“Really. Wow, kid. Amazing reasoning.” The demon’s tone was as flat as his expression.

Dipper hunched his back defensively at Bill’s unimpressed look. “Wait, I’m not done yet! You mentioned that dragons get associated with the number nine, right? And the summoning for Yinglong had a whole bunch of nines in circles. They might be connected to the nine circles we learnt about at the cathedral! Which means whoever’s behind this might be planning on triggering the apocalypse by opening the nine circles of Hell!”

Bill gave him a long, incredulous stare, before he threw back his head and laughed. “AHAHAHAHA! REALLY, PINE TREE, REALLY?” He thumped the side of the bath a few times, sending a few unfortunate bottles toppling down into the water. “I CAN’T BELIEVE YOU THINK-“ He broke off into another spasm of incoherent hilarity.

Dipper bristled. “What? It makes sense, doesn’t it?”

It took a long while for Bill’s uncontrollable laughter to subside. “Pine Tree. Oh, Pine Tree, There was a REASON I didn’t bother going back for that BUNCH OF USELESS SACKHEADS while I was ending your world. And that reason was because they’re a bunch of WIMPY SUCKERS WHO COULDN’T FIGHT THEIR WAY OUT OF A WET PAPER BAG!”

“Yes,” Dipper said impatiently, “but they don’t know that.”

The last traces of laughter began to subside, and Bill sounded almost normal as he picked up a bottle of Sweet Princess Sparkle Hair Conditioner and examined it thoughtfully. “They don’t, do they?”

“Well, I wouldn’t call them a MASTERMIND.” Bill interrupted, idly poking at some foam. “Hey, with enough of this I might be able to generate some nifty WEIRDNESS BUBBLES! Or maybe some ultra-sized REGULAR BUBBLES, s’not like I’m picky!”

“Why wouldn’t you? Call them a mastermind, I mean.” Dipper asked.

“Are you kidding me, Pine Tree? You’ve seen their plans, right?” Bill gesticulated impatiently, waving the bottle of conditioner around like a conductor’s baton. “Locking some CANNIBALISTIC GNOME RIFOFFS in a room hoping that they’ll off each other and PAINT THE WALLS RED? Harnessing the VOLATILE POWER of TEENAGE ANGST and REBELLION as fuel for their child-murder? AMATEURS! And don’t get me started on the INSULT that was their attempt at a cipher! I mean, did they WANT to get found out?”

“I think they did.” Dipper said. Bill stared at him. “You said it yourself, didn’t you? They wanted to make an impact, and how better than to show that than proof all those kids dying wasn’t just some freak accident of nature? But they didn’t want to get found out too quickly, either. So they went for a code which was easy to crack, but wouldn’t be obvious if you just picked it up and flipped it open. Well, not obvious to anyone but you, I mean.” He amended hastily.

Bill looked mollified. “Huh. Looks like there’s hope for you after all, kid!” He tossed the bottle from hand to hand, considering. “Guess they weren’t expecting us to track down your thorny friend that
“Yeah, well, I don’t think they were counting on having you around. I mean,” Dipper added hurriedly, before he could be smothered by the weight of the demon’s ego, “there’s still some stuff we’re missing, though. Like the lab!”

“You mean the one belonging to poor ol’ Driftwood?” Bill asked, and paused. “Haha, get it? Because he DROWNED—”

“And he’s not the only person who died at Terrace Lake.” Dipper said softly. “Remember Seraph’s parents?”

“Could be a coincidence!” Bill shrugged. “A lake that big is a GUARANTEE someone’ll drown in it at some point! They’re like nature’s way of WEEDING OUT THE INEFFICIENT!”

“Inefficient how?” Dipper squinted. “Actually, don’t answer that. Anyway, whoever that scientist—

“ALCHEMIST, Pine Tree. There’s a DISTINCTION. How’d you like it if I called you a SHAMBLING APE because that was “CLOSE ENOUGH”?—

—whoever that alchemist was, he might’ve had a connection to the cathedral. That door in the tunnel looked a lot like the one in the catacombs. And there were those fingerprints on the safe, so we know someone was in there recently too! Do you think there might be a connection?”

“Well,” Bill said dryly, “it sounds a lot like you’ve already MADE UP YOUR MIND. Me trying to change it now would be like trying to RIP A GOAT OUT OF A CHUPACABRA’S CLUTCHES! In other words, embarrassing for everyone involved! Though for sure, it’s not a BAD idea. For all we know, your “MASTERMIND” might’ve left them there.”

“Yeah, that’s what I was thinking. And there’s something else we’re missing. The first plague. The fish, remember?” Dipper leaned forwards, his eyes narrowed in concentration. “I asked Yinglong, and she said she didn’t do it.”

“You sure she wasn’t just giving you the OL’ SLIPAROUND?” Bill asked, although even he didn’t sound particularly convinced.

“Nah, dragons’re supposed to be honest, right? And she’s been pretty upfront with everything so far.” Dipper said. “But more importantly, that means there’s still something out there. Something which managed to slip most of the lake’s fish into the school drainage system.”

They fell into grim silence, considering the implications.

A bottle of body wash bumped against Dipper’s foot. He fished it out, squirting a little into his hands. “Does the mastermind need all the plagues to happen to trigger the apocalypse?” He asked, lathering his arms.

Bill watched him with mild curiosity. “Probably! I mean, think about it! YOU need to go to the trouble of drawing a magic circle for some of THE MOST BANAL SPELLS IN EXISTENCE! So unless you’re an ALL-POWERFUL DREAM DEMON, you can’t just snap your fingers and get it over and done with! It’s all in the execution! As well as the BONE-NUMBING FEAR you strike in the hearts of your innocent victims!”

Dipper decided not to mention the fact that Bill wasn’t presently an all-powerful dream demon, focusing instead on scrubbing his neck. Bill stared at him for a moment, before mimicking his motions. Unfortunately, all he had was the bottle of Sweet Princess Sparkle Hair Conditioner, which
meant he didn’t get very far. He was, however, a good deal more glittery for it.

“Uh, Bill?” Dipper finally said, pushing the image of the demon’s glistening biceps to the furthest reaches of his mind. “You’re meant to use that on your hair- no, not like that. You’re actually supposed to use shampoo first.”

Bill cast a betrayed glance at Sweet Princess Sparkle’s innocently smiling visage. “It appears that the PARTICULARS of your CONVOLUTED BATHING RITUALS continue to elude me, Pine Tree.”

Dipper snorted. “Convoluted? C’mon, I’ll help you.” He reached out a hand, and paused, trying to figure out a method of helping Bill which didn’t involve subjecting his dignity to a dire fate. “Actually, you should probably turn around for this.”

Looking a little puzzled, Bill did so. Which happened to give Dipper a stark view of the scars lining his back. Three rows of straight diagonal slashes, a lingering tapestry of a past the demon had never disclosed. Feeling somewhat like he was glimpsing something he shouldn’t, Dipper swallowed, scooting a little closer. Hesitantly, he reached out, curling a hand around Bill’s head.

“Tilt your head back a bit.” He murmured, and Bill immediately obeyed. He brushed Bill’s damp curls backwards, his hands stilling as he glimpsed what lay behind the fringe. A great ugly gash, snaking over the demon’s right eye like a thorny vine. Unlike the neat, almost clinical lines on his back, the scar over Bill’s eye seemed imbued with a deep, festering vindictiveness. To his dismay, Dipper felt another surge of protective rage flood over him.

Bill let out a confused noise as Dipper’s motions paused. Flinching, Dipper hurriedly poured a little shampoo into his hands, rubbing it into the demon’s hair with circular motions. Bill relaxed a little further into the impromptu head massage, his back settling against Dipper’s chest as he let out small sounds of content every time Dipper’s fingernails scraped against his scalp.

He was like a cat, Dipper decided. A great big lump of a cat who demanded attention and was prone to loud yowling noises and/or scratching whenever he didn’t get his way.

“So,” Dipper eventually said, as Bill’s hair built up a substantial lather, “did you find anything out while you were ‘investigating’ the hall? Or were the cheerleaders that distracting?”

“Don’t worry, Pine Tree, you’re still my favourite.” Bill mumbled absently as he leaned further into Dipper’s touch. “And, unfortunately, it seems the mysteries of Chapelwick continue to elude me! Couldn’t make HEADS OR TAILS of that weird crawling feeling! And I’m not used to things escaping my notice like that! Seriously, kid, I’m ONE THWARTED PLAN from BURNING THE WHOLE PLACE DOWN.” The last sentence was filled with enough irritation that Dipper sat up and took notice.

“Hey, we’re not destroying anything.” He tugged lightly at Bill’s hair. “C’mon, I’ll help you investigate, if you want.”

Bill snorted derisively. “With what? You’ve got the magical potential of a ROCK, Pine Tree.” When Dipper faltered slightly, the demon closed his eye, sighing. “Sorry, kid. Shouldn’t take out my frustration on you like that. But the fact remains we’d need a HECK OF A lot more magical resources than we’ve presently got at our disposal if we want a CHANCE IN HELL of figuring out what’s going on!”

“There’s got to be something we can do.” Dipper murmured, rinsing the suds out of Bill’s hair. The demon stiffened near-imperceptibly.
“Well, there IS something.” Bill began, sounding unusually reticent.

“What?” Dipper began rubbing conditioner into his hair. The glitter stuck to his fingers, sneaking under his nails, where it would likely take forever to get out. Seriously, where did Mabel find this stuff?

He was wholly unprepared for the rapid-fire barrage of words the ex-dream demon promptly inflicted upon him. “Well, it’s a COMPLEX RITUAL which generates the MAGICAL EQUIVALENT of an ALTERNATING CURRENT by triggering EXPONENTIALLY MORE POWERFUL REACTIONS in a CYCLE OF REACTIONS which allows for an EFFICIENT TRANSFER OF LATENT MAGICAL ENERGY!”

Dipper blinked. “I can understand every word you’re saying, but not when you put them together like that.”

“LEMME PUT IT THIS WAY, THEN! It’s a ritual where various PROTRUSIONS become INTRUSIONS, causing CORE MATERIALS to be EXPELLED through some OUTLETS and INJECTED into others!”

“I’m sorry, what?” Dipper squinted, not only at the demon’s convoluted explanation but also at the fact Bill seemed to be growing progressively agitated for reasons he couldn’t discern.

“Are you being DELIBERATELY OBTUSE, Pine Tree? Or has the nightmare gas LEFT A FEW HOLES IN YOUR BRAIN?” Bill threw his hands up in the air in consternation. “It’s the THING! The THING where certain vulnerable portions of your human anatomy generate HEAT and FRICTION - and there’s a bunch of REPETITIVE MOVEMENT and then some SPASMING and… you get the idea!”

Dipper froze. If this was going the way he thought it was (and it most likely was), this was most emphatically not a conversation he wanted to be having with Bill while both of them were naked and in close proximity. “I… think I get it.”

“THANK YOU!” Bill crossed his arms, huffing out a breath of exasperation.

They lapsed back into silence. Dipper continued to smooth conditioner through Bill’s hair, his motions slowing. Silently, he wondered why Bill seemed so leery of the topic of sex. It seemed uncharacteristic of him, seeing as he otherwise appeared perfectly willing to flaunt his knowledge (or lack thereof) of just about every other aspect of the human condition. Of course, Dipper realised, as the events of the past few minutes really sank in, it might have something to do with the fact he wasn’t simply talking about sex as an abstract concept.

Bill Cipher, insane ex-dream demon, had just (in the most roundabout and oblique manner possible) talked about the possibility of having sex with Dipper Pines.

Bill Cipher had just talked about having sex with Dipper Pines.

Dipper’s thoughts skidded to a grinding halt, because, okay, he’d just come to terms with finding Bill attractive, but this? This was not something he was prepared for. He wasn’t entirely shocked by the idea of sex as a component of magic – a rummage through some of Ford’s old notes had turned up some exceedingly clinical analysis of the possibilities – but none of it could have prepared him for the fact that Bill had just talked about having sex. With him.

He felt the sudden urge to dunk his head underwater and only resubmerge once the world flipped itself the right way round.
Calm down, Dipper. It was just a possibility. And, Dipper thought, glancing down at the demon halfway in his lap, it was hopefully going to stay that way for a while yet.

Bill glanced up at him, having been preoccupied with the discovery that moving his hands back and forth in the water led to the generation of truly outrageous amounts of foam. “Something wrong, kid?” he asked, a hint of suspicion in his gaze.

“Um…” Dipper stiffened.

C’mon, think of something to say. Anything. “You’ve… uh… got a lot of scars, huh?” NO NOT THAT.

He didn’t miss how Bill tensed against him, his body now completely and forebodingly still. Dipper swallowed, aware that he might’ve just tripped head-first into a conversational landmine. His sole consolation was that the demon wasn’t currently kicking his head into the tiles for his impudence, but that could change.

“Yeah, well,” Bill’s lips eventually twisted into a bitter grin, “that’s what tends to happen when you piss off the angels.”

“Were the ones on your back… your wings?” Dipper ventured.

“Yep. Sliced ‘em off like they were butter! Hurt like a bitch!” Bill’s tone was light, but Dipper could see how his fingers clenched slightly around his knees. “Course, s’not like you NEED wings to fly when GRAVITY ITSELF POSES NO IMPOSITION UPON YOUR EXISTENCE! It was more of a symbolic thing, really!”

Dipper winced. “And the one over your eye?”

Bill let out a low, irritated noise. “Fucking Michael and his HOLIER-THAN-THOU attitude and his fucking FLAMING SWORD. He was always such a suck-up, you could replace him with a BLACK HOLE and no one would be able to tell the difference!”

Letting out a small sound of sympathetic amusement, Dipper lightly traced the scar stretching across Bill’s eye. The demon squinted at him in scrutiny, but didn’t tell him to stop.

“Why did you do it?” Dipper eventually asked, resting his hand atop Bill’s shoulder.


“I don’t think you’ve told me that.” Dipper said. “I actually thought you did it for the power, or something. Was heaven really that bad?”

The demon’s eye flickered towards him, something unreadable in his gaze. “I’ll put it this way, kid! You haven’t seen a desk job until you’ve experienced heaven’s INFINITE BUREAUCRACY! Home of the SUPERTEMPORAL STACKS OF PAPERWORK and SCHRODINGER’S PRINTER, which is SOMEHOW SIMULTANEOUSLY FUNCTIONING AND BROKEN! You can never tell until you try to print out your urgent department audit five minutes before the staff meeting! And instead of breaks, you get to sing the praises of your boss while standing next to Gabriel, who couldn’t manage a hymn on-key to save her life!”

Dipper sucked in a pained breath. “Okay, I kinda see why you wanted out. But did you really have to start a war over it?”

“Well, when I was YOUNG and NAïVE, I mistakenly thought that others might appreciate it if I helped them BROADEN THEIR HORIZONS a little! I was mistaken!” Bill’s voice was brittle, laced with the poisons of betrayal which had festered over innumerable years. “A bit like you
humans, huh? Yeesh, you’d think an ALL-KNOWING DREAM DEMON like me would’ve learnt his lesson the first time around!” Dipper could see his hands clench again, the knuckles turning white.

He swallowed, looking away. It didn’t feel like there was anything appropriate he could say in response.

But something was beginning to resolve itself in his mind. For all Bill hated being predictable, it seemed there was a reoccurring theme to his actions. The demon chafed under any restrictions, constantly seeking out freedom. Which would be fine, if he wasn’t still possessed of whatever quality (Selfishness? Selflessness? Misplaced compassion?) which drove him to drag everyone along with him, whether they were willing to follow or not. And if they weren’t willing to follow, then they were an obstacle in his way, and… well…

Dipper sighed heavily, running a hand through Bill’s hair. The dream demon peered up at him curiously.

“You know,” he said, changing the subject, “that seriously isn’t fair.”

Bill raised an eyebrow. “What isn’t fair?”

“These.” He pointed a finger at Bill’s stomach. “I’ve been working out on a regular basis, and I barely have abs. And what do you do all day? Eat Doritos?” He jabbed his finger into Bill’s abdomen for emphasis.

The demon stiffened, letting out a choked-off noise. Confused, Dipper prodded Bill’s side once more.

The speed with which Bill extricated himself from Dipper’s lap reminded him of an eel slithering out of a rapidly-heating pot of water. Dipper looked at his hand, then back at Bill. And back at his hand again. A grin spread across his face.

“Huh,” he said, with deliberate calmness, “looks like you’re ticklish even when you’re not in my body.”

Bill narrowed his eye, clearly bracing himself. “Don’t you DARE, Dipper Pines-”

His sentence was cut off by an honest-to-god shriek as Dipper sprang forwards, his hands attacking every sensitive part he could reach. “AHAAHAHAHAHAHAHA! PINE – HAHAHA – TREE-“ he convulsed, ineffectually trying to squirm away from Dipper’s reach. “THE MINUTE THESE FUCKING – AHAHAHA – BODY SPASMS STOP, YOU’RE GOING TO FUCKING GET IT!”

Dipper dodged a stray foot as Bill flailed, his eyes glinting mischievously. “Really? And what’re you going to do about it?

“THIS!” And Dipper could only squeak as he found himself tackled backwards, an oversized demon pinning his hands to the side of the bathtub as he straddled Dipper’s thighs. Bill smirked down at him, and Dipper was suddenly, acutely reminded of their proximity. And their lack of clothes. And the conversation they’d had only a few minutes ago. He gulped, feeling the heat rise to his cheeks.

“Well, well, well!” Bill’s gleeful expression was terrifying, but for a very different reason from the Yinglong incident. “How the TABLES HAVE TURNED! So, kid,” and here, he leaned down, his hair tickling Dipper’s cheek, “any last words?”
“Uh,” Dipper said nervously, “you don’t have to do this?”

Instead of responding, Bill leaned in even closer, his grin sharpening. Dipper tensed, but he was barely prepared for the onslaught of tickles inflicted by the demon’s surprisingly deft hands.

“Pffahaha! Bill! Stop that!” he managed through his laughter. He instinctively tried to curl up, but being pinned under Bill’s rather more substantial weight hindered that. He flailed, screeching with laughter as Bill went for the armpits. “Ahaha! Ow! Seriously, Bill! Stop!”

“Dipper, are you okay? I heard yelling.” They froze as Mabel’s voice filtered through the door. Dipper felt ice snake down his back as the doorknob to the bathroom began to turn. The doorknob which Bill hadn’t locked because of course. “Dipper? I’m coming in.”

“Mabel, wait-!”

Mabel opened the door. She stared at Bill and Dipper. Bill, who was half-pinning Dipper to the side of the bath. Dipper, who had his arms pressed against Bill’s chest, trying to push him away.

She slid the door back shut.

Dipper and Bill stared at the closed door in silence.

“Fuck.” Dipper said.

“Fuck.” Bill echoed.

Dipper managed to shove Bill’s head underwater just before the door swung open again with a loud bang. Mabel stood in the doorway, frying pan in hand.

“ALRIGHT, SO WHO’S TOUCHING MY BROTHER WITHOUT HIS CONSENT- hey, where’d he go?” Mabel turned her head left and right, clearly bamboozled.

“Uh… Mabel?” Dipper said, hoping his voice didn’t sound too strained. “What are you doing?”

“Dipper! I thought I heard yelling and I heard you saying ‘stop’ a bunch of times so I came in and I saw what’s-his-face in here but now he’s not and where did he go?!?” The entire sentence was spoken in a single breath, but Dipper was familiar enough with her idiosyncrasies that he had very little difficulty understanding her.

“What’re you talking about?” He mustered the most clueless look in his arsenal, squinting slightly and tilting his head for maximum effect.

“What’s-his-face was in here! And he was trying to touch you! Without your permission!” She glanced around the bathroom again, but thankfully didn’t try to come any closer. Not like she could’ve seen anything if she had; Bill’s head was well-obscured by the foam.

This time, Dipper didn’t need to fake the completely flat expression which crossed his face. “No one was trying to touch me without my permission, Mabel.” Which was technically true. “Are you sure you weren’t seeing things?”

Mabel frowned, before lowering the frying pan, much to Dipper’s relief. “Huh, guess I’ve been hitting the Mabel Juice too hard.”

“Mabel Juice? You’re seriously still drinking that?” Dipper made a face.

Bill let out a quiet gurgle against his thigh.
“Hey, if you’re gonna do something creative like plan a dance, you gotta have a creative drink to go with it! It’s like Event Planning 101!” Mabel placed her hands on her hips, before she yawned. “Speaking of which, I’m pooped. And I’ve got a headache. Man, I couldn’t even attend the afterparty.” She lamented.

“It feels a bit like you’ve been focusing too hard on the dance.” Dipper commented, letting a note of chastisement enter his tone, even as he kept it light-hearted. “Please tell me you slept last night.” Come to think of it, Mabel was looking a little flushed. He furrowed his brows in concern.

Mabel rolled her eyes. “Earlier than you, Mister I-don’t-need-sleep-when-I’ve-got-coffee!”

“Fair enough.” Dipper’s lips twitched upwards. “Still, you should get some sleep. The dance’s over, so you can get back to your regularly scheduled sleep in sessions.”

Mabel yawned again. “Yeah, guess I’ll go do that. Glad the dance went off without a hitch, though. Except for the part in the middle with the storm. Were you there? Rowland said it sounded like the world was ending! The thunder was so loud it actually knocked down a few of the decorations!”

“Uh. Yeah, I was there.” In a manner of speaking. Mabel tapped the frying pan with a finger. “Right! I saw you when I was dancing with Rowland Bishop! Speaking of which, guess who’s riiiiight on the top of my ‘to-date’ list? What did you think of him?”

“Uh.” There were, Dipper supposed, several correct answers to this question. The problem was that correct didn’t necessarily mean honest. “He looked… rich.”

Mabel sighed, starry-eyed. “He was such a gentleman. And I’ve never seen a guy who looked that good in a suit!”

I have, Dipper didn’t say. Bill let out another gurgling noise. “Alright, Mabel. Enough fawning over cute guys. You look dead on your feet.”

Mabel giggled. “Don’t worry! I’ll just rise up out of the grave the next time some hot guy passes! It’ll be like the zombies back in Gravity Falls, but with hotties instead of brains!”

Dipper shook his head fondly. “Good night, Mabel.”

“Night, bro-bro!”

No sooner had Mabel shut the bathroom door behind her than Bill re-emerged, coughing and spluttering. Dipper immediately refocused his attention on him. “Oh my god, Bill, are you okay? I’m so sorry—“

Bill grasped both his shoulders, effectively cutting off any apologies. “Do that again.” He ordered breathlessly. His pupils were blown.

“What? No!” Dipper recoiled.

Bill’s expression turned sulky. “FINE. If you won’t do it, I will!” Dipper could only watch in bemusement as he promptly ducked his head underwater. He resurfaced after about half a minute, looking immensely disappointed. “It’s just not the SAME.” He complained.

Dipper stared at the ex-dream demon for a few more moments. “Done doing dumb stuff yet?”
Bill puffed up in offence. “Excuse ME, Pine Tree! NOTHING I do is dumb! The only reason you fail to understand my actions is because you occupy the INCORRECT TEMPORAL POSITION to fully appreciate them!”

“Oh yeah, that’ll show me.” Dipper snorted.

Bill glared at him. “And what about YOU? Didn’t you say you were going to tell Shooting Star once you sorted everything out with your thorny friend? What happened to THAT, huh?”

“Of course, because the perfect time to tell her is when she’s caught us both naked.” Dipper said sarcastically. “Hey, Mabel, this guy who you thought was my date? He’s actually Bill Cipher. Y’know, the evil triangle who tried to destroy the world? And speaking of Armageddon, we’ve got one coming right up! Also, I keep getting stabbed, but I’m actually immortal, so there’s no need to worry if I rock up one day with my freaking top half severed from the rest of my body!”

“There!” Bill clapped his hands together. “THAT! That was perfect!”

“No it wasn’t! It was terrible!”

“Whaddya mean? It’s EXACTLY what I’d have said!”

“That’s why it’s terrible!”

“Sheesh, you got any BETTER ideas?” Bill flicked his fingers in Dipper’s general direction, sending foam flying. “Think of it like a bandage! You can either GRIT YOUR TEETH and rip it off in a single go or you can leave it there to fester until your VERY FLESH CAVES IN FROM NECROSIS!”

“That’s not how bandages work, Bill.” Dipper said. He reached out to twist the tap, adding some more hot water to the bath.

“Well, that’s how they SHOULD!” The demon crossed his arms stubbornly, his eye idly tracking the rising line of foam.

They fell into brief silence, broken only by the quiet trickle of the tap.

Bill eventually spoke, shifting so his back was pressed against the side of the bath. “Speaking of those emotional dressings you humans rely on to maintain that THIN VENEER OF CIVILITY CONCEALING YOUR VISERAL FEAR OF THE UNKNOWN, isn’t it about time we talked about what you did tonight?”

“What I did tonight?” Dipper asked, running his hand through the water experimentally. It seemed to have warmed enough. “You’re going to have to be more specific.”

“You know! The thing with your thorny friend!”

“What are you talking about?” Dipper asked, keeping his eyes trained on the tap. One, two, three turns. The flow of water thinned.

“You KNOW what I’m talking about, Pine Tree.” Bill’s eye narrowed.

“I really don’t.” Dipper replied. He twisted the knob one more time for good measure. A few drops escaped.

“Don’t play dumb with me, kid. You know exactly what you did.” Bill’s voice was crisp, cool, all
traces of playfulness gone.

Dipper stared at the tap. No water was coming out.

“The nightmare gas caught four sentient beings. No more, no less.” Bill rapped his hand against the side of the bath. “And as the master of the mind, I’d KNOW if some poor chump – such as your friend - happened to stumble into our shared mindscapes. Luckily for our plan, that never happened.”

Dipper continued to stare at the tap.

“Gotta admit, I was pretty worried while you were out there facing off against your thorny friend! Thought he’d grind you into lil’ pine woodchips! Turns out I never had any reason to worry. You handled yourself far, far better than I could’ve ever expected.” It might’ve been a compliment, if it weren’t for the steely glint in Bill’s eye. “So, Pine Tree, why don’t you tell me how it felt to have him dancing on your strings? How it felt to see him fall apart at the hands of an illusion YOU created?”

Dipper didn’t respond.

“Nothing to say, huh? Guess it’s just like old times! But you know,” Bill leaned forwards, his eye glowing brightly, “I think I understand you a little better, Pine Tree. Why you decided to manipulate your thorny friend like that. Why you still won’t tell your sister the truth. Why I’m still the only one you’re willing to depend on.”

His hand slid across Dipper’s side, rising up, up along his chest until it curled around his scar. “Remember when I said you’re just like me? I was wrong. Sure, our methods are the same, but in the end, all I ever wanted was freedom. But you… you want control.”

The demon’s breath ghosted against Dipper’s ear, his words crawling up his spine like spiders. “You’re terrified that I’ll leave you because that means you’ll have no one left.” He quoted. “Couldn’t have come up with a better line myself! In fact, I don’t think I could in the first place! I mean, SURE I invaded people’s minds for a living, but that’s NOTHING compared to you! YOU wait until someone ENTRUSTS YOU WITH THE MOST VULNERABLE ASPECTS OF THEIR PSYCHE, before DIGGING YOUR FINGERS INTO THE WOUND!”

Bill’s voice was like a heavy weight, dragging Dipper’s mind further into the depths of numbness. “Remember what you made that nifty mindscape-illusion of yours say? Something about how your thorny friend seems terminally incapable of trust? A little hypocritical there, aren’t we?”

“I mean, who do you trust? You don’t trust your friends, you don’t trust your family. Heck, you don’t even trust ME! The only reason you’re not ordering me around is because you’re smart enough to realise that pissing off a dream demon is the best way to find yourself shanked in the back! Isn’t that right, Pine Tree?” Bill’s hand, the one which wasn’t tracing his scar, reached out to tilt Dipper’s head upwards. “…Pine Tree?”

Dipper didn’t respond.

“Uh… Pine Tree?”

Dipper still didn’t respond.

“Kid? Is something wrong?”

No response.
“Dipper? Why is your face leaking?” The terrifyingly omniscient dream demon of a few seconds ago had vanished, leaving behind a panicked Bill Cipher. “Is this what happens when we leave humans in water too long?”

Mechanically, Dipper reached out to touch his face. He was crying, he realised vaguely.

“No! Wait! I think I have this figured out! You’re CRYING, aren’t you?” Bill had both of his hands curled around Dipper’s head, and was peering at him with some concern. “GREAT! Don’t know what I’d do if you suddenly sprang a leak! Though that raises the question of WHY you’re crying! I mean, you’re not an INFANT, so that should rule out a solid SEVENTY-FIVE PERCENT OF POSSIBILITIES!”

“Bill.” Dipper finally found his voice. “Just… keep talking.”

“Whaddya mean? I’m talking right now, aren’t I?”

“Keep saying what you said before.” Dipper clarified.

“What I said before? You mean all that about the MINDSCAPE PUPPETS and the MANIPULATION- oh. OH.” Bill’s eye widened. “Is that why-"

“Keep talking. Please.”

Bill’s expression was conflicted. “Look, kid, I know I can get carried away sometimes-"

“Keep talking.” Dipper commanded.

Bill gave him a long, disconsolate look, before letting out an exhale. “…And controlling people’s a lot easier than trusting them, isn’t it? Because trust is UNPREDICTABLE. It’s so much easier to take people apart, see what makes them tick, use them as tools-” Bill faltered as Dipper curled into himself, closing his eyes. “…Nope. Sorry, kid, looks like I’ve used up my daily quota of jackassery for the day. Wow, didn’t even know it had a limit.”

“Please.” Dipper whispered.

“Okay, Pine Tree,” Bill began, lowering his hands so they tightened around Dipper’s shoulders, “you just gotta remember that I’m REALLY GOOD at making people feel REALLY BAD, and also that it’s their own fault they feel so bad! It’s basically my fucking job description! So it’s not like it’s because of what you did… okay, it’s not like it’s COMPLETELY because of what you did-”

He broke off as Dipper curled in even further until he was slumped forwards into the demon’s shoulder. “Shit, wait, what I MEANT to say that it COMPLETELY has nothing to do with what you did… Pine Tree? You okay?”

Dipper stayed silent.

“Great. You broke Pine Tree. Way to FUCK IT UP, Cipher.” He heard Bill mumble to himself, before the demon’s arms hesitantly wrapped around him in something not entirely unlike a hug.

They stayed like that for a while.

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“Huh,” Bill eventually said, “didn’t know EXTENDED PERIODS OF SUBMERSION IN WATER accelerated ageing! Maybe THAT’s why people die when they’re underwater too long!”
Dipper glanced up tiredly. Bill was examining his pruney fingers.

“That’s not how it works.” He eventually said. He didn’t miss how the demon perked up at the sound of his voice. “Our fingers and toes just do that when we’ve been in water for a while. It’ll disappear once they dry.”

Bill’s eye widened in understanding. “Oho, so humans are like the OPPOSITE OF GRAPES! They wrinkle if you get them wet!”

Dipper let out a small snort of amusement. “Something like that.”

He lowered his head back onto Bill’s shoulder. The demon rubbed gentle circles across the back of his neck with his thumb. Normally this proximity would’ve embarrassed Dipper to no end, but he couldn’t seem to muster enough energy to care. He felt drained, both physically and emotionally.

“Y’know,” Bill eventually said, “I didn’t mean any of that.”

“Yes you did.” Dipper said, his voice muffled.

“Well, I don’t mean it NOW.” He sat up a little straighter, pulling Dipper upright by the shoulders. “Look, kid. What you heard just then was a bunch of EMOTIONAL OVERREACTIONS accompanied with ENOUGH PROJECTION TO FILL THE GRAPHICAL PLANE!”

Dipper’s fists clenched. “But you weren’t wrong.”

Bill went quiet.

“Pine Tree,” he finally spoke, a hand carding through Dipper’s hair, “there’s one thing I still don’t know. And that’s YOUR side of the story.”

Dipper glanced up, surprised. “My side?”

“If there’s ONE THING I’ve learnt from watching you, it’s that you never do anything without a DAMN GOOD REASON!” Bill flicked Dipper’s chin upwards. “C’mon, kid! Don’t let the BIG BAD DREAM DEMON push you around! Stand up for yourself!”

“No. You were right, the first time. Manipulating Thorne was just… convenient.” He looked down.

“Mmhm.” Bill’s eyebrow arched briefly, sceptical. “Well, I saw you talking with Cupcake just before your thorny friend decided to BRING THE THUNDER. Why don’t we start from there? What were you two INCOMPETENTS up to?”

Dipper’s gaze briefly flickered towards Bill, before darting away. “I told Cherie what I was planning. And I asked her what she wanted me to say.”

Bill stared at him for one long moment of disbelief, before sinking into the foam like a wrecked ship. “Seriously, Pine Tree? Seriously? And you couldn’t have told me that BEFORE I started DISSECTING YOUR PSYCHE like an OVERRIPE CADAVER?”

“It didn’t change anything.” Dipper said, curling into himself defensively.

“Well, it means you were at least HALF-HONEST! And that’s an entire half more honesty than I usually use!” Bill patted Dipper on the head affectionately. “Yeesh, why’re you so keen on playing the bad guy all of a sudden? S’not like you’ve got anyone to impress! Except me, and you’d have to try a LOT harder to get on my level!”
That thing you said earlier. About trust.” Dipper moved back, tucking his chin on his knees. “If I actually trusted Cherie, I’d have let her speak for herself. But I didn’t.”

“Why’s that?” Bill tucked his legs under his body, peering at Dipper curiously. “Don’t tell me it’s because you thought I wouldn’t let you-”

“That’s not it.” Dipper mumbled. “It’s just- if Cherie saw what Thorne did to me, do you think she’d ever forgive him?”

There was a long pause.

“Shit, kid.” Bill eventually said.

Dipper gave him a humourless smile. “Yeah. Cherie really cares about him, but even she’s got her limits. I had the feeling Thorne was going to try pulling something which would’ve pushed her over the line. And I knew that the only thing that was going to bring him back was some kind of reconciliation with Cherie.” He looked Bill in the eye, feeling the calmness of despair settle over him like a shroud. “That’s why I played both of them like that. And now they’re back together and they have no idea-” he broke off, his throat tight.

“Oh, Dipper.” Bill breathed, gathering him back into his arms. “You have the BIGGEST guilt complex I’ve ever seen, and I knew the guy who invented HAIR IN A CAN.”

Dipper couldn’t suppress a shaky laugh. “That’s… what… why do you care, anyway? About what I did? Shouldn’t manipulation be right up your alley?”

Bill stilled. “Good question, kid.” He paused, and when he spoke again, his voice was muted. “How well do you remember five years ago?”

“It’s… weird. A bit like I’ve got two sets of memories of Weirdmageddon. And I can remember one set really well—like, the part with the zodiac.” A small smirk spread across his face. “Come to think of it, it was actually pretty funny. Especially the part where you were flailing around and swearing up a storm—”

“No it wasn’t.” Bill said stiffly. “It wasn’t funny in the SLIGHTEST.”

“But the other set… I remember bits and pieces. Like… uh… the memory we saw in my mindscape.” Dipper flushed. “And the… part at the end. With the deal. But everything else’s just kind of a blur. Kinda figured it was because it never technically happened. That’s how it works, right?”

Bill hesitated. “That’s… not how it works, kid.”


Bill was silent.

Dipper disentangled himself from Bill, catching the demon’s uncomfortable expression. “What did
you do?"

“I… may have condensed your memories. Slightly.” Bill paused, then amended himself. “Significantly.”

“What?” Dipper yelped. Calm down, he reminded himself. They had to communicate. Miscommunication was what had landed them in this mess in the first place. “Why would you do that?!” Unfortunately, his mouth was experiencing a severe disconnect from his brain.

“I don’t know.” Bill leaned back, his expression tightening.

“You messed with my memories!” Dipper was trying not to panic, he really was, but the demon’s uncharacteristically withdrawn replies were beginning to freak him out. “You can do that?” If that was the case, he’d have a lot more to worry about than a few memories being altered.

“Not usually.”

“What do you mean, ‘not usually’?!” Dipper demanded. “How the hell did you do it?”

Bill finally snapped, sitting up straight to glare at Dipper. “I don’t know, Pine Tree, maybe it had something to do with the fact YOU ORDERED ME TO.”

“I… what?” Dipper faltered. “Why would I-“

“Well, lemme put it this way! The stuff you DO remember – would you call ANY of it NON-MENTALLY SCARRING or SAFE FOR KIDS?”

Dipper hesitated, looking away. “Definitely not.”

“Now, whaddya think about the stuff which you DIDN’T want to remember?” Bill challenged, his eye flaring brightly. “Trust me, I’ve spent ages combing through the PUTREFYING UNDERBELLY of the human mind, and if I’M saying that something’s bad, you’d better well believe me!”

Dipper stared at his knees. He suddenly felt very small.

“Why did you decide to tell me, then?” he asked quietly.

Bill snapped his fingers, his expression brightening. “Great question, Pine Tree! So, once upon a time-“

“Is this really the time to be telling stories?”

Bill clapped a hand over Dipper’s mouth. “Shut up and listen, kid. SO, once upon a time, there was a princess. A princess whose entire family had been TORTURED and MASSACRED by a rival kingdom, because that was what tended to happen in those days! The king of that particular kingdom wanted the princess as his bride, but the princess wasn’t all that keen on the idea - which I don’t really get, ’cause in my experience, SOME PEOPLE don’t have the sense to hold a grudge even after you KILL OFF THEIR FAMILY, FRIENDS AND EXTENDED TOWNSHIP!”

Dipper wrenched himself from the demon’s grasp. “Bill!” he gasped, horrified.

"Hey, gotta WRITE WHAT YOU KNOW and all that! AAAANYWAY, so the king went to visit an old triangular buddy of his to seek his help! And his friend - being the MASTER OF THE MIND and all - found it WELL within his capabilities to wipe certain pesky memories from the princess’s
Still reeling from the demon's candid acknowledgement of Five Years Ago, it was all Dipper could do to manage a weak, “Pretty fucked up.”

"Glad you agree with me, Pine Tree! Side note, though: I lied about the happily ever after thing! So what ACTUALLY happened was that the king skimped out on his payment, so his UNDERSTANDABLY MIFFED acquaintance undid the whole memory wipe, and the next thing he knew, the king was staring down poison in his soup! And that was how I learnt that LIES AND DECEPTIONS are an entirely unsuitable foundation for any long-term association!"

The worst part was that Dipper could understand perfectly well what Bill was angling for. No, actually, the worst part was that Dipper understood perfectly well what Bill was angling for, had been thoughtfully reminded of what the demon was capable of, of all the atrocities he’d already committed, and he still wasn’t running away screaming in the opposite direction.

Bill glanced at him, his forced mirth dissipating, leaving behind nothing but a strange melancholy. And Dipper was suddenly reminded that the demon had already lived a long, long time. Long enough for the lies he’d built up to solidify and become a part of himself. Long enough that, maybe, if Dipper reached out to expose just one part of him, the entire structure would come crumbling down.

And Bill seemed willing to take that risk.

“Still,” he finally ventured, “it’s not like there’s anything I could learn which would make my opinion of you sink any lower.”

“It’s not about what I did.” Bill said, confirming Dipper’s expectations.

They went back to sitting in silence.

“Y’know,” Bill eventually said, “you don’t have to remember. I mean, we aren’t going to get anywhere if you DON’T, but it’s not like we HAVE to, or that you’d even WANT to-

His rambling was cut off when Dipper took his hand, threading their fingers together.

“I want to remember.” He said softly. “But I… I just need some time. To think it over.”

Something soft and vulnerable flashed across Bill’s expression, like a knife to Dipper’s gut. But the demon didn’t say anything, simply tightened his hold on Dipper’s hand.

“You know,” Dipper said, “you still haven’t told me why you… uh… care so much about the state of my morality.”

Bill sighed, water sloshing around him as he settled back into the bath. “Well… sometimes I can’t help but worry about you, Pine Tree. About what you’ll become.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re a good kid, Dipper.” Bill’s gaze was distant. “But that goodness is directly linked to the presence of the people you care about. Your family. Your friends. Your sister. And I’ve seen what you’re willing to do to defend those bonds. Heck, the first time you let me loose on those gnome-ripoffs to save your sister? You KNEW there was a chance I’d go for Stoneface too, but you didn’t care. You don’t want anyone to die, but, more importantly, you don’t want anyone you CARE about
to die. And you’re willing to do ANYTHING to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

“Bill.” Dipper said quietly.

“Sorry, Pine Tree.” He disentangled his hand from Dipper’s, splaying it gently over his triangular scar. “But have you ever considered what it means to be immortal? You’ll have no choice but to watch as everyone – and everything - you love disappears one by one.” His eye met Dipper’s, images beginning to flash through their shared mental link.

“Your parents.”
A pair of pillars, collapsed and crumbling.

“Your friends.”
An open gate, rusting and bent off its hinges.

“Your great-uncles.”
A laboratory, covered in dust.

“Mabel.”
A lone star-shaped sticker, cast aside in the mud, the colours fading.

“Terrifying, isn’t it?” Bill smiled, an eerie, far-off thing. “Everyone’s going to disappear, and eventually it’s just going to be you. Alone.”

Dipper looked down, at Bill’s hand resting above his scar. Understanding began to seep into the edges of his awareness, prickling at his mind. He looked up again. “What about you?” he asked.

“Me?” Bill asked, looking surprised. His expression quickly smoothed. “Pine Tree, if you think I’d do anything apart from TAP DANCE UPON YOUR LAST REMAINING VESTIGES OF SANITY, then you’re wronger than COPERNICUS GETTING LAUNCHED INTO THE SUN!”

“That’s not what I meant.” Dipper said gently, reaching up to clasp Bill’s hand again in a loose grip. “I worry about you too. And it looks to me like you’ve been alone for a long, long time.”

Bill rubbed his temples with a hand. “Typical. Way to make it all about ME, Pine Tree.”

“Hey,” Dipper gave him a lopsided smile, “after all the shit I pulled? You’re kind of my responsibility, dude.”

Bill stared, and then smiled, a soft, wry curve of the lips. “RESPONSIBILITY. Yeesh, you sure know how to make a triangle feel special.” He muttered, seemingly to himself. The old mischief returned to his features, and that was the only warning Dipper received before he was picked up like a stray puppy and plonked atop Bill’s lap.

“Whoa! Bill!” Dipper flushed, suddenly flustered. Which didn’t make sense, because they’d been in exponentially more compromising positions all evening, but this time Bill was staring at him with this quiet fondness which made Dipper’s chest prickle with warmth. He averted his gaze, even as his hands automatically reached up to curl around Bill’s arms. “Honestly! Warn me before you decide to do that!”

A hand traced Dipper’s jaw, a finger tilting his chin upwards. Dipper’s breath stuttered, his heartbeat accelerating at the undeniable intimacy of their current arrangement. Bill was smiling at him,
something private and affectionate in his gaze. And it really, really wasn’t fair that he looked so disarming in this form, nor that the sheer force of his very presence seemed to fill the room with light. Like staring into the sun, Dipper repeated to himself.

“So, Dipper,” Bill’s finger danced across the edges of his scar, “how exactly do you plan on taking ‘responsibility’ for me?”

“I don’t know.” Dipper murmured, daring to curl a hand in Bill’s hair. The demon’s gaze darkened. “What do you want me to do?”

Instead of replying, Bill drew himself a little closer. Dipper’s heart quickened. Wait, really? Were they going to do this? Were they seriously going to do this? Wasn’t this moving a little too fast? Especially after the whole debacle that was Five Years Ago?

Well, Dipper reasoned, the demon had been flirting at him with increasingly alarming intensity over the past few hours. And there’d been that mortifying ‘special energy transfer ritual’ fiasco Dipper still refused to think too hard about, because thinking about it was to tear himself away from that comfortable state of denial that the conversation had ever happened. Anyway, it wasn’t like self-restraint was ever going to be Bill’s forte.

Dipper wasn’t going to overthink this. Five Years Ago had been… well, five years ago. And everything they’d been through tonight should’ve been proof enough they’d moved on since then.

(Also, Bill-as-a-human was kinda hot, and look, Dipper was still an adolescent boy with Adolescent Boy Urges. Urges which were going ‘Yes, you should definitely do this dumb thing with the crazy immortal demon who lives in your closet!’

His other hand also buried itself in Bill’s hair, a grounding weight even as Dipper resigned himself to the force of nature that was Bill Cipher. Their breaths mingled as Bill leaned in-

And promptly vanished.

Dipper yelped, alarmed. More than a little disoriented by the sudden presence of nothing where, for the last few minutes, something had asserted its existence in an immensely difficult-to-ignore way, it took him a while to figure out what had just happened.

When he did, he sighed. Right. Midnight.

He groped at the floor of the bath, hand blindly searching until it came across a familiar triangular object.

He picked it up. Bill’s triangular body dangled limply in Dipper’s grasp.

A single baleful eye stared at him. “LET ME DROWN, PINE TREE.”

Dipper couldn’t help it. He laughed.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter notes
Chapter Summary

Bill tries (and fails) to work through his issues, and Dipper tells a very important person the truth.

Chapter Notes

oh no it's been four months. i am so sorry.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Arc III: Project MKSWARM

Gravity Falls burning, all glowing embers and flames. The stench of destruction and ruin. The devastation of all he’d come to care about. And yet it wasn’t these visions of annihilation which was making Dipper’s heart clench, his breathing grow shallow, tears filling his eyes.

Bill stared at the memory in silence, before crumpling it and tossing it aside. It promptly un-crumpled itself, soaring upwards to join the horde of completely inconsequential recollections which infested Dipper’s mind.

He eyed the glittering night sky with hostility, before flipping it off. Which was admittedly petty, but it wasn’t like he had many avenues to vent his irritation nowadays. He’d really taken the ability to rot people’s internal organs for granted.

Honestly, humans chose to remember the weirdest shit. Always going on about things like ‘family’ and ‘first loves’ and ‘anniversaries’. Which were meaningless in the long term, because eventually everything was going to crumble to dust and regrets and it wasn’t like heart-warming sentimental reminiscences were going to save you from the clutches of the Writhing Thing with Innumerable Mouths but Only Two Teeth. Heck, Bill could replace all of Dipper’s memories with the sound of a thousand blackboard screeches, for all the difference it’d make.

Hey, there was an idea! Shame he had all those spells pinning his powers down. And even if they weren’t there, pulling something like that might permanently ruin his Pine Tree. Human minds were just way too fragile, which was convenient if you trying to break the record for the highest number of trauma victims you could create in under a minute, but otherwise kind of an inconvenience. Guess he’d just have to content himself with arbitrarily inserting bits of himself into random memories. Hopefully the kid wasn’t too confused about how his seventh birthday cake was suddenly a triangle with an eye!

Still, it didn’t make sense why he hadn’t removed that memory with all the others. Sure, things never made sense where the dream demon was concerned, but this was such a kick in the teeth to rationality that it actually looped back around to dance tantalisingly on the verge of actual sense. That was how things usually worked with Dipper, like the kid was the final link in the chain, the ultimate push which had Bill teetering on the brink of sanity.
Bill didn’t particularly like the implications of that. So he promptly tore them out of his mind and incinerated them, delighting in their near-soundless screams. They’d come back, though. They always did.

Aaanyway, it wasn’t like he was here to lie around contemplating his existence, never mind that his existence was probably the only interesting thing to be found in this shithole of mediocrity. Vibrating with sudden resolve, Bill snapped his fingers, setting all the conifers in the vicinity ablaze. It was fine, they’d grow back! Probably.

The demon hummed to himself as he drifted through the conflagration, his eye darting about from side to side. A few branches fell, weakened by the inferno. Bill ignored them.

There it was. A pristine specimen, seemingly immune to the firestorm which roared around it, like a glitch in the matrix. Bill snapped his fingers again, extinguishing the flames. Dipper’s mindscape fell into eerie silence, its charred, skeletal remains vainly struggling to stay upright.

Summoning his cane, Bill jabbed at the surface of the bark, hearing a hollow metallic clunk. Eye narrowing in satisfaction, he pointed the end of his cane at the near-imperceptible indent incised into the exterior. It melted, forming the impression of a screaming face as it did so.

Behind the door lay a rusting, long-disused machine. Two levers and an antennae sat atop it. Bill flicked idly at the one on the left. The ground began to rumble, and he watched with indifference as a trapdoor opened up behind him. Pine Tree always had the worst surprises. They always fell on opposite sides of the spectrum, either so predictable a pile of worms could figure them out, or of the ‘haha whoops did I mention I’m about to ruin your life and destroy everything you’ve been working on for millennia’ sort. To be fair, Bill usually liked the latter. He just didn’t like it when it was directed at him.

The trapdoor opened up to a flight of stairs, as was par for the course nowadays. Bill floated down, a hand tracing the surface of the walls as they transitioned from rough gravel to a smooth, marble-like mineral. Bill eyed his surroundings unconcernedly as he drifted to the foot of the stairs.

The narrow staircase opened up onto a broad, bunker-like tunnel. The glossy black walls curved inwards, veins of pale blue light running through them, crossing and interlinking and occasionally pulsating like something alive. These lines ran across the floor, converging to form a mass of glowing fractures, pulsing erratically to the rhythm of a fearful heartbeat. They were like cracked glass, fractured and broken and irreparable, shoved away to the innermost depths of Dipper’s mindscape.

Bill swung his cane back and forth as he floated through the passageway. He chortled as he passed a small likeness of himself roughly scratched into the walls. The words “HE’S ALWAYS WATCHING” were carved underneath in messy, panicked handwriting. Darn skippy he always was!

His attention was caught by a flash of red. Bill barely had time to liquefy his form before a concentrated burst of pure energy burned right through him. He realigned his particles with great dignity, eyeing the suspicious indent in the wall from which the beam had been shot. Oho, this one hadn’t been there last time.

His eye glittered in anticipation as he gazed down the corridor. Dismissing his cane in a flash of light, he braced himself before ricocheting forwards, gleefully triggering every single trap in a frenzy of chaos. Bill laughed maniacally as he dodged arrows and deadly laser beams and jets of fire left and right.
With an exhilarated cackle, he barrelled into the end of the tunnel, shaking himself off before adjusting his bow tie with great satisfaction. Sure, he could’ve just teleported and saved himself the trouble, but what was the point in that? Hadn’t he had this much fun since the time he snuck hallucinogens into the Smile Dip formula. Dusting down one of his corners (which was slightly singed), he reached out to the incongruously conventional wooden door lodged into the wall.

It swung open quietly, revealing a small, dusty room.

Upon closer examination, it appeared to be a greyscale replica of the twins’ bedroom, the very air steeped in nostalgia and longing and that creepy sort of innocence one associated with abandoned dolls and small staring children. It was a shame Bill didn’t have a nose, because this seemed like the sort of smell worth sneezing at. Although Pine Tree’s side of the room was relatively true to form – a messy, unmade bed, possessions scattered across the floor - the right hand side of the room had been stripped bare. Instead, a disturbing fuzzy blackness lined the wall, like some sort of existence-devouring mould.

Actually, that gave Bill some ideas. With a flourish, he generated a small roll of parchment, upon the top of which was scrawled “BEST PLANS”. Beneath stretched a long list of ideas, ranging from “SIPHON OFF ALL OXYGEN IN THE ATMOSPHERE” to “GIVE WINGS TO SPIDERS”. Bill added “EXISTENCE-DEVOURING MOULD” to the bottom, before disintegrating it with a flick of his hand.

Bill glanced approvingly at the triangle-shaped window as he made his way to the closet on Dipper’s side of the room. Triumphantly, he pulled the doors wide open, only to flail in alarm as memory after memory spilled out. Bill found himself promptly buried under the weight of a thousand forgotten recollections. With a huff, he managed to struggle his way out, dusting himself off in disgust.

The demon picked up a couple of the memories, tilting them from side to side to examine them. They were all blurry, encrypted in a code only one being in the universe would be capable of unscrambling. These memories only existed at the edges of Dipper’s consciousness, like half-forgotten dreams, their influence weakened but not erased. It was better that way. Safer.

Bill stared down upon the memories, all traces of levity gone. He should’ve deleted them while he had the chance. Heck, he should’ve deleted Pine Tree when he had the chance. But he hadn’t, and now here he was, stuck entertaining an infuriatingly intriguing fleshbag and ignoring the weird pains in his third metaphysical strata whenever he thought about it too hard.

He let out a tired buzzing noise, letting gravity overwhelm him.

The floor let out a strange, hollow thump as he landed.

Interest piqued, Bill rapped his hand against the ground. Yep, definitely hollow.

He shifted his hand into a giant fist, crushing the floorboards. Splinters flew everywhere. Shaking a few stray bits of wood off, Bill peered curiously into what appeared to be a small nook beneath the floorboards. A set of innocuous black boxes sat beneath, their surfaces smooth and seemingly impenetrable.

Bill’s eye narrowed in recognition, his body flaring red.

How dare he.

He knew what these black boxes were. He’d seen them five years ago. At the time, he’d paid them no attention, but now he knew better.
They were a defensive mechanism, a filter which shielded the processes of Dipper’s reasoning from outside prying. And there was only one entity in existence Pine Tree would want to keep his thoughts from.

With that thought, Bill felt his temperature rise even further, wisps of smoke unfurling from his avatar as he gazed upon the boxes.

Dipper had been deliberately keeping things from him. And that could only mean one thing. The kid had plans. Plans he really wanted to keep Bill from knowing.

The demon wanted to tear them apart, to rip into them and eviscerate them and show Pine Tree the consequences of his ingratitude. Destroying them would permanently scar Dipper’s mind – well, more than it already was – but Bill couldn’t find it within himself to care. He’d helped Dipper, he’d fixed him, and this was how the kid decided to repay him?

Bill wasn’t blind. He’d noticed the missing journal, he noticed Dipper’s evasive replies regarding his ‘talk’ with Yinglong, but he hadn’t drawn the lines because something about Pine Tree made him a foolish idiot. Yeesh, and he’d spent all that time trying to impress the kid.

Well, it didn’t matter anymore. Dipper had obviously decided to disregard Bill’s generous efforts to steer him onto the right path, and it wasn’t like it was Bill’s responsibility to put up with such a clear betrayal. It was sickening, in hindsight, how much of himself he’d laid bare. His past. His weaknesses. Heck, he’d fucking handed over his Royal Prerogative like it was nothing.

Okay, so maybe that last one really was nothing, because Hell was overstuffed with absolute incompetents and it wasn’t like Pine Tree could do anything with it, even if he did figure out the extent of its power.)

Either way, this was unacceptable. Bill hadn’t experienced betrayal of this extent since… well, since the last time. And that collection only served to make him angrier.

His palms sparked with flame. Bill loomed down upon the hapless fixtures of Dipper’s mindscape, the shadows at the edge of his light writhing haplessly, as though they were struggling to extricate themselves from the demon’s wrath.

He could destroy them. He could hurt Dipper. He knew every one of the kid’s vulnerabilities, every one of his weaknesses. Weakened as he was, Bill still had the upper hand here. He could turn Pine Tree’s existence into a waking nightmare, intensifying his paranoia into something debilitating. Something which might finally teach the kid the value of compliance.

A part of him recoiled at the idea. It twisted and thrashed vainly, even as Bill shoved it away into the darkest, deepest recesses of his collective conscious.

It wasn’t like Dipper really meant anything to him. Bill was just making the most of his circumstances. Besides, he’d already given the kid a second chance. Pieced his shattered mind back into a semi-coherent whole, something he’d never technically been ordered to do. Bit of a last-minute hack job, but Bill’s point stood.

Flames flickered at his fingertips.

Pine Tree had dared to throw away his help like that. After everything he’d done for him.

…after everything he’d done to him.

“That’s not what I meant.” Dipper said gently, reaching up to clasp Bill’s hand again in a loose
grip. “I worry about you too. And it looks to me like you’ve been alone for a long, long time.”

The demon’s rage fizzled away with a quiet hiss, his body returning to its usual hue. Fuuuuck.

Bill flopped face-down on the floor with a solid thud, oozing self-loathing. A puddle began to form, dripping into the hole in the floorboards.

Dipper hadn’t been lying when he’d said that. Bill knew that much. Kid was a fucking open book in some respects. Had a heart soft enough that Bill could throw it at a wall and watch it splatter.

But he was also sharp. Way too sharp for Bill to keep handing off bits of himself like (eyeball-free) candy. Bill felt a shudder run though his various assorted appendages at the thought of how much Dipper had probably figured out about him already.

“You’re terrified that I’ll leave you because that means you’ll have no one left.”

Yeesh, sharp was right. Dipper sure hadn’t hesitated before shoving those metaphorical knives into Bill’s less-metaphorical emotion organs.

The triangular demon summoned enough strength to fling himself at the opposite wall, before sliding down dramatically. Fuuuuck. He’d certainly been revealing way too much about himself over the past few weeks. Heck, he’d been stupid enough to start flirting with the kid. What had gotten into him?

Maybe it was because of that form. Yeah, that must have been it. Old habits had the tendency to die hard, and having a conscience was Bill’s worst habit of all. He could normally bury any and all morals under an uninterrupted loop of escalating insanity, but evidently having his old body back meant it had revived some of his less desirable traits. Traits like faith and justice and (ughhhh) charity.

Bill shuddered, letting out a low, staticky hum of disgust. Pine Tree was a terrible influence on him. He should’ve figured it out long ago, but Bill was at least self-aware enough to know he sucked at learning from his own mistakes. After all, who needed to, when you were powerful enough to superimpose some convenient alternate reality in lieu of any inferior ones?

Dipper wasn’t like that. Somehow over the years, he’d… grown. Matured from a paranoid mass of nerves to something terrifyingly perceptive.

Not that Bill found him terrifying, of course. It couldn’t be possible that Bill, all-knowing dream demon, dreaded emissary of insanity, could be afraid of a skinny helpless nerd like Dipper Pines. Even if it sometimes felt less like Dipper was looking at him and more like he was looking through him, even if the kid latched on to every hint he couldn’t resist dropping like it was something precious, even if he always seemed capable of placating the demon’s ire before it could escalate. Even if his expression would soften every time he looked at Bill, as though the demon reminded him of something warm and close and comfortable, rather than of blood and flames and destruction.

Even if, time after time, he’d gazed unflinchingly in the face of Bill’s victory and sent it crashing down around them.

But that was why he liked him. That was why he’d always liked Dipper Pines. No matter how many times Bill crushed him, no matter how deep he dragged him down and corrupted him, he’d always rise up again.

And it was also what made Dipper dangerous. Because excessive tenacity aside, he was, at least outwardly, about as remarkable as a piece of gum stuck on the end of Bill’s cane. And that made him
very, very easy to underestimate.

Unlike Bill, Dipper Pines learned from his mistakes.

And thanks to Bill, he’d made a lot of them.

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Mabel let out a phlegm-smothered noise, something caught between a giggle and a snort. “Heheheh. It kinda looks like Bill’s floating up there next to your shoulder.”

“That’s because he is, Mabel.” Dipper said tiredly, smothering a yawn. “Bill’s awake. We’ve been trying to tell you for this for the past week.”

Behind him, Bill gave a small wave.

Mabel let out a disbelieving snort. “Yeah, and tell that to Admiral Floppypaws over there.” She gestured vaguely at the opposite side of the bed, which happened to face a blank expanse of wall. “What’s that, Admiral Floppypaws? Dipper’s being a silly billy again? Haha, yeah, he does that sometimes.”

“Oh my god.” Dipper scrubbed his face with his hands. “How long is this supposed to last for, again?”

“Seeing how the numbers’ve been crunching lately, I’d wager about nine days!” Bill crossed his arms, hovering above Mabel’s head. She batted weakly at him, giggling. “Gotta say though, I’M not seeing much of a difference! Shooting Star’s always been A FEW ROCKS SHORT OF A COMET!”

Dipper sighed.

It had started off as a simple cold, one which they’d waved off as a result of too much late-night dance planning. But it had quickly escalated into a full-blown fever which left Mabel bedridden and incomprehensibly delirious. Their family’s anxieties had only been exacerbated following a trip to the hospital, whereupon a frazzled nurse had hurriedly informed them they were full to capacity.

“You could try Blackbourne, but I’ve heard their waiting list’s filled up as well.” He’d huffed, taking the opportunity to wipe sweat from his forehead. “Can’t figure out what’s caused the outbreak. Least it doesn’t seem infectious. Just make sure she rests up and keeps hydrated, and she should be back on her feet in a jiffy.”

And in response to their drained, anxious expressions: “Don’t worry, it doesn’t look like anyone’s died from this yet.”

Their mother had spent the rest of the car ride home ranting about the abysmal state of healthcare in the country. Meanwhile, Mabel’s head had slid sideways onto Dipper’s lap. She’d mumbled something about the sugar fairies stealing her honeysuckles.

“We don’t have honeysuckles.” Dipper gently reminded her, brushing her damp bangs from her forehead.

“That’s because the sugar fairies stole them.” Mabel had replied.

The only thing restraining Dipper from full-blown panic had been the fact that Bill didn’t seem particularly phased by this turn of events. Shortly after the hospital visit, he’d popped into Mabel’s
room, where Dipper had just tucked Mabel into bed and placed an ice pack under her neck. The triangular demon had hovered above her, peering down at her prone form, as though attempting to solve a particularly interesting puzzle.

“Figured anything out?” Dipper asked, after the demon had *hmmed* and *huhed* and prodded at Mabel’s face for a few minutes.

Bill’s body glowed as he peered into Mabel’s ear canal. “Your sister’ll be fine, kid.” He said shortly.

“Do you think it’s got anything to do with… y’know?”

“Probably.” And that was all Bill had said before he floated out of the room.

At the time, and over the following few days, Dipper was too preoccupied with stressing over Mabel’s condition to take note of the demon’s unusual withdrawal. But now, as Mabel’s fever began to recede (although the delirium remained), it was beginning to occur to him that something was off.

Dipper settled into his now-customary seat by Mabel’s bedside, surreptitiously glancing at his companion. Bill was currently examining a copy of ‘HOT HUNKS’ atop Mabel’s desk with vague interest.

Come to think of it, Bill had been acting weirdly… distant, lately. Somewhere along the line, Dipper had become accustomed to dealing with the demon’s clingy nature, and its sudden absence was beginning to unnerve him. Normally Bill would’ve perched himself atop Dipper as the latter worked, or made little witty asides via their mental link as Dipper went about his day, but he hadn’t been doing much of that recently.

And it wasn’t like Dipper *missed* Bill’s clinginess, exactly. But c’mon, they’d almost made out in a bathtub naked, and he’d kind of expected that to… actually go somewhere? Maybe not to making-out levels, because Bill was currently a triangle and all. Was it even possible to make out with Bill while he was in this form? He’d need a mouth for it to work, right?

Wait, but if Bill could drink stuff using his eye…

Mabel let out a quiet protesting noise. Dipper wrenched himself out of his thoughts before he could weird himself out any further. “You okay there?”

“My back itches.” Mabel grumbled, flopping about weakly like a fish on a pier. “I can’t reach it.”

“I’ll help.” Dipper offered, nudging his sister as she rolled onto her front. “Where does it itch?”

“A bit lower… no, up a bit.” Mabel wriggled around, letting out a dissatisfied sigh. “And tell Bob the Cactus I’m not interested in his life insurance. Everyone knows you can’t trust desert plants. They always try to sneak stuff through the contracts. *And* they hurt when you bump into them.”

“You tell ‘em, Shooting Star!” Bill quipped, still flipping through ‘HOT HUNKS’.

Dipper frowned, feeling some raised bumps through Mabel’s pyjama shirt. “Looks like you’ve got a rash.”

“You’ve got a rash.” Mabel said grumpily.

“Yeah, okay.” Dipper said absently, furrowing his brows. It felt like there was something *off* about the inflamed patch on Mabel’s back, but he couldn’t quite pin down what was so strange about it.

“Hey, Mabel? I think there might be something weird going on with your rash. Is it okay if I take a
Mabel let out an affirmative noise, before muttering something about purple elephants. Dipper grimaced, but drew the hem of her pyjama shirt upwards a little.

It took a few moments of staring before he could muster up a strangled, “Bill, I think you should take a look at this.”

Bill gazed at him neutrally, before dropping the magazine in his hands and floating to Dipper’s side. “Well,” he finally said, “guess that confirms it.” “Yeah.” Dipper replied, dropping the hem of Mabel’s shirt, obscuring a ring of nine raised spots. “Guess it does.”

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Dipper sighed in frustration, abandoning his research. An hour of internet browsing had yielded nothing but several dozen tabs and one pop-up virus warning. He glanced at the ex-dream demon floating over his bed, currently engrossed in an article entitled ‘HELP, IS MY BOYFRIEND LYING TO ME? SPOILER ALERT: HE TOTALLY IS!’

Over the past week, Bill had somehow amassed a growing collection of Mabel’s old trashy magazines. They were currently sitting in the bottom of Dipper’s closet, a glossy compilation of shirtless men and terrible relationship advice. Dipper supposed it was better that Bill had found some way to amuse himself while he was fussing over Mabel’s condition, even if he was receiving some seriously sketchy ‘guidance’.

“Ten tips on spicing up my sex life? PSSHT, thanks but no thanks! I already know how to spice up MY sex life! Oregano, mostly. A little sprinkling of paprika.”

…Then again, it wasn’t like any quantity of dubiously sound advice was going to have much impact on the smouldering wreckage that was Bill’s interpersonal skills.

“Bill,” Dipper said, leaning back from his desk, “are you sure Mabel’s going to be fine? I mean, considering the last plague involved the deaths of all the children in Chapelwick, I can’t really see this being a step down.”

“Shooting Star’ll be okay.” Bill floated a little higher, doing a leisurely mid-air somersault so he was facing Dipper from an upside-down position. “Haven’t sensed any strong magic around here since we dealt with Yinglong. Maybe if she was still around we might have something to worry about, but this seems like a pretty HALF-BAKED spell to me! Sure, it might look like an epidemic to YOU, but that’s only because you humans have the magical resistance of a RUSTY TIN CAN!”

“Yeah, yeah, I know, humans suck.” Dipper laced his fingers behind his head, staring at the ceiling contemplatively. “I’m just surprised this isn’t getting more attention. From what I’ve seen, it looks like a lot of people’ve been affected by the fever. I swear Chapelwick High’s missing almost a quarter of its students. You’d think the media would’ve reported on an epidemic like this.”

Bill snorted, righting himself. “Well, you’d think the media would’ve reported on the SHADOWY CABAL OF LIZARD PEOPLE PULLING THE STRINGS BEHIND EVERY MAJOR WORLD EVENT, but it looks like every camera’s got its blind spot!”

“Still…” Dipper looked away. “So you’re sure Mabel’s going to be okay? Even though she’s still hallucinating?”
“Considering her temperature’s getting closer and closer to the ARBITRARY RANGE your FLIMSY FLESH CONTAINERS require in order to function properly, I’d say so. Geez, kid, don’t you trust me?” Bill asked, before he stilled, his eye narrowing in resignation. “Wait, don’t answer that. Ask a stupid question, etcetera etcetera.”

“Still. It’s pretty worrying.” Dipper continued, considerately disregarding Bill’s segue into still-sensitive topics. “I was kind of hoping that if we stopped the plagues, we might be able to stop the apocalypse from happening.”

“And I was kind of hoping that you’d learn to tru-DEPEND on me instead of stressing yourself out like this! Seriously, kid, if you lose any more sleep, you’d be able to house an eldritch being in those trenches under your eyes!” Bill appeared before him, irritably cupping Dipper’s chin to better examine the aforementioned bags under his eyes.

Dipper closed his eyes, leaning into the touch. “Hey, I can’t help it. I might be immortal, but Mabel’s not.”

When no response was forthcoming, he cracked his eyes open. Bill was staring at him, his gaze conflicted.

Dipper blinked.

Abruptly, the demon jerked his hand away. Without saying a word, he drifted back to his magazine.

Dipper watched his retreat.

_Huh_, he thought to himself.

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Stanford called later that evening.

Their mother was the one to pick up the phone. Dipper had returned to his customary seat by Mabel’s bedside, bringing his notebook with him. He’d always found it calming to jot down his thoughts, the act of filling blank expanses of lined paper with neat handwriting inexplicably soothing to his frazzled nerves.

_Yinglong is known in Chinese mythology as a rain deity, although she also seems capable of controlling other aspects of the weather, such as wind and lightning. Her very presence seems to bring about inclement weather, and she appears to have the ability to influence the intensity and duration of such conditions._

Bill, meanwhile, had perched himself atop Mabel’s desk and was flipping the pages of another magazine, unconsciously imitating the time-honoured ‘teenage girl reading gossip magazines’ pose. He was floating in midair, knees slightly bent, a hand positioned on his left side as though propping up a non-existent chin. Bill was bobbing slowly up and down, a motion Dipper had come to recognise as signifying that the demon was relaxed and at ease. The movement ceased when their mother picked up the phone, and the demon’s gaze flickered to the door.

“-Pines speaking, who is this? Is this Stanley? Oh, Stanford! It’s been a while, hasn’t it?” Dipper perked up, closing the notebook in his lap. He nervously glanced at Bill, who had now gone completely still. “…I’m afraid he’s out grocery shopping- oh, you meant Dipper? Well, I’m sure he’ll be glad to talk to you again. He’s been stressing over Mabel ever since she caught that fever… Yes, she’s been quite ill lately, but she seems to be recovering. Dipper’s been glued to her side for the past week, the poor dears. So do you want to talk to him? Yes, alright. Dipper!” The last word was
shouted up the staircase. “Your Grunkle Stan wants to talk to you!”

“Grunkle Ford.” Dipper corrected her, taking the handset from her hand. She disappeared into the living room, thoughtfully closing the door behind her. “Hello? Grunkle Ford? How’s everything in Gravity Falls?”

“Bad. Awful. Terrible.” Dipper could hear the rustle of Ford’s exhale over the receiver. “My idiot brother’s at his old tricks again. We’ve been having some… issues with lawyers lately, so he had the brilliant idea to invite them to take a tour of the Shack and lure them into my minimisation-and-multiplication machine.”

“You made a minimisation-and-multiplication machine?” Dipper asked. “That’s so cool.”

“Oh. Well.” Ford sounded a little embarrassed. “It’s not really that impressive. Do you remember those height-altering crystals in the forest? I integrated some of them into that old cloning machine I built before I was sucked into the portal.”

“Old cloning machine…?” Dipper furrowed his brows. “You mean the copier?”

“You knew about the cloning machine?” Ford asked.

“Well, yeah! I cloned myself with it one time to impress Wendy.” Dipper said. “It… didn’t work.”

“Really?” Stanford sounded absolutely fascinated. “What was it like? I always wanted to try cloning myself, but I was too worried about the potential side effects. What happened?”

“Well, we ended up fighting and they tried to attack me, so I had to melt them using the Shack’s sprinkler. Though Tyrone and I made up in the end.”

“Tyrone?”

Dipper flushed. “That’s what I called my clone. So it was less confusing, y’know? It’s, uh… what I’d like to have been called.”

“I see.” Ford’s tone warmed, sounding slightly sympathetic. “Well, that’s some very useful information. I should be able to get a lot of mileage out of that in my future research. Thank you, Dipper.”

“You’re welcome.” Dipper scratched his nose. “So, uh, what happened with the machine?

“Oh, right. Well, Stanley knew about the minimisation part of my machine. What he wasn’t aware of, however, was the multiplication aspect. So the lawyers overran the machine and declared it their legal territory under the 1967 Clone Housing Act, and they’re now using it to generate more copies of themselves. In other words, we’re currently dealing with an infestation of angry miniature lawyers.”

“That sounds… bad.” Dipper said lamely. “Can’t you, uh, water them down?”

“Unfortunately, I installed water-resistant printer ink into the machine before modifying it, so the same tricks won’t work on them. They’ve been occupying the vents. Almost frightened Wax Larry King out of his wits. I recently woke to find my laboratory ransacked and tiny OSHA hazard warnings taped everywhere. We’ve been locked into a state of warfare – both legal and conventional – thanks to my brother’s foolish machinations.”

“Shaddap, Ford! Don’t see you helping!” Dipper could hear Stanley’s yell in the distance. “Gah-
ARRGH! They’ve got my trousers! Get off, you little pitbulls! This is property damage!” The sound of ripping fabric. “Don’t you dare, you undersized vermin! Those were my good pants! I stole them from a high-end designer store years ago!”

“Mr Pines, I’m open!” Soos’s voice also filtered through the earpiece. “What should I do?”

“Soos, take the fire extinguisher and hit them with the spray! Here, catch!” A loud thump, followed by a brief pause. “Shit, whoops.”

Stanford let out another sigh. “Just give me a minute, Dipper.”

The sound of footsteps retreating from the telephone. A low hiss. After a few moments, Ford returned to the receiver.

“Sorry about that. Just wanted to test out the new paralysis gas. It’s something Fiddleford and I have been working on for a while. Anyway, the reason I called you today is because our last chat ended rather… abruptly.”

Dipper froze. Despite being hundreds of miles away, he could almost feel Ford’s scrutinising gaze. Or maybe that was the triangular demon who had suddenly emerged from Mabel’s bedroom, and was now floating not three feet away from Dipper.

“Um…”

“Dipper, please, tell me the truth. Is Bill awake?”

Dipper locked eyes with the demon. “…Yes.” He finally admitted.

Stanford sucked in a breath. “Dipper, do you need to come back to Gravity Falls? Or maybe I can arrange something-“

“It’s okay.” Dipper said, continuing to stare at Bill. “I don’t think I’ll need your help. Well, actually, I might need your help, but not for Bill.”

“What makes you say that?” Ford asked, in a tone of voice which suggested he suspected Bill might be making Dipper say that.

“Well, you know the link we developed after we defeated him using the zodiac?”

“Yes. Although I’m at a loss to explain exactly why. The zodiac should have defeated Bill by severing his links to the mindscape, but there was nothing there that would’ve created that… that… bond between you two. I remember I theorised that your connection is what is keeping him anchored to existence, but I can’t comprehend how it might have been created in the first place.” Ford said, before pausing. “Sorry, Dipper, I went a little off-track there. Please continue.”

“Um, well, there was more to it than Bill depending on me for his survival. It was actually a soul link. Bill’s my vessel.”

Silence.

“I’m immortal.”

“What?!” Dipper flinched at the sudden outburst, holding the handset further away from his ear. “How- Why- When- How on earth did that happen?”

“Well, it might have something to do with the zodiac, but I don’t know.” He’d been beginning to
suspect otherwise, lately. “Though, uh, that means it was probably for the better that your experiments couldn’t damage him.”

“It’s just… I… I don’t understand. Are you sure about the… immortality?”

“Well, I managed to survive decapitation, so I’d say so.”

“Wha- Did Bill do that?” Stanford barked. “That’s it, I’m heading down to Chapelwick this instant-“

“No, wait, it wasn’t him!” Dipper interrupted frantically. “That’s- Bill was the one who helped me.

“If Bill didn’t do it, then who-?”

“Someone’s trying to start the apocalypse. Someone who isn’t Bill.”

Silence, again. Dipper sure was dropping these earth-shattering revelations right and left today.

“…The apocalypse?”

“Yeah, this time it’s a bit more… Biblical. We’re… two plagues in, I think. Or was it three? Well, it was two successful plagues and one attempted one. Apparently there’s going to be five. Bill’s been helping me investigate. And he’s actually being helpful, for once.”

Bill glowered at him. Dipper shrugged in a well, I wasn’t lying motion.

“I think…” Ford sounded a little winded, “I think I might need you to start from the beginning.”

“Yeah.” Dipper said. “That might be a good idea.”

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“So you managed to defeat a rain deity?” Ford asked, sounding a little awed.

“Well, Bill was the one doing most of the actual defeating.” Dipper shrugged, even though he knew Ford couldn’t see him. “The main problem was convincing him not to murder her.”

“Still…” Ford trailed off. “This is fascinating. I’d always suspected that Gravity Falls might not be the only place with supernatural creatures. This could bring a whole new dimension to my research. And immortality! I’ve run across a few immortal beings in my lifetime – it’ll be curious to see how it’ll play out in your case. For your sake, I hope you stop aging at some point. I’ve seen the alternative, and it’s not pretty.”

“Uh, Grunkle Ford?” Dipper interrupted, as Stanford began to sink into a frankly alarming monologue. “The apocalypse?”

“What? Oh! Right, sorry. Got a bit distracted there.” Ford chuckled. “Still, are you sure you don’t need me to come down…?”

“Well, that might be a good idea, but I think I’ve got a handle on things in the meantime.”

“From what I’ve heard, it sounds more like Bill’s got a handle on things.” Ford pointed out dryly.

Dipper narrowed his eyes at Bill, who was now looking undeniably smug. “You’re. Uh. Not exactly wrong. Guess a bit of extra expertise wouldn’t hurt.”

“Alright, then.” Stanford said decisively. “Once Stanley’s sorted out this… lawyer mess, I’ll try to
get down to Chapelwick as soon as possible. I afraid you’ll have to put up with Bill Cipher for a little longer.”

“I think I should be able to handle him.” Dipper said laughingly, reaching out to flick an affronted-looking Bill in his top corner.

“Even if that’s so…” Ford’s tone sobered, “Dipper, I know you haven’t had much choice other than to rely on Bill, but I’d advise you to be cautious. Even though his power’s been limited, you know he can’t be trusted.”

Dipper stilled, his eyes flickering cautiously towards Bill. The ex-dream demon’s gaze was inscrutable. “I know.”

“Do you really, though?” Ford went silent for a few moments, before letting out a heavy exhale, one weighed down by the force of long years of nightmares. “Now, I know he might not seem that much of a threat – maybe he’s made some overtures towards repentance or whatnot – but remember, he’s a demon. One who nearly brought our world to an end.”

“I know, Grunkle Ford, it’s just-“

“Bill Cipher’s manipulated greater men than you. It’s practically his modus operandi – he acts harmless, lures people in, drawing out their weaknesses through flattery – they’re nothing but convenient puppets to him. Believe me, I’d know. I’m not the only one. I’ve been through hundreds of dimensions, and so many of them are still scarred from his schemes. He’s been using these tricks for millennia. It’d be foolhardy to think he might’ve suddenly changed.”

Dipper bit his tongue, unable to come up with a response. Because… damn it, Grunkle Ford was right. But at the same time, he wasn’t. Because he and Bill were locked into this fraught dance of control and reliance which tinged their every interaction with multiple layers of significance. He wasn’t naïve enough to believe that Bill would abandon his goals just because of a defeat, but that only spurred him to ensure he retained the balance of power within their dynamic. He knew their objectives were disparate enough that they might not end up on the same side in the end, and he knew Bill knew this.

But at the same time, he was tired. Tired of treating Bill with suspicion. Tired of having to overthink his every action. Because he liked Bill Cipher. When everything was said and done, Bill was the guy he’d almost kissed in a bathtub, who’d saved him multiple times, who’d brought a seemingly never-ending stream of vivacity and energy into Dipper’s life. And if Dipper was willing to dismiss all that as a tactic of manipulation, what did that say about him?

Dipper glanced at the demon floating across from him, who had now averted his gaze, something resigned in his bearing.

“I don’t expect Bill to change.” Dipper finally replied, rather surprised by how steady his voice was. “But even so, I’m going to give him a chance. Not just because I have to depend on him, but because… I think he deserves some dignity. I know he’s done terrible things, and I know I can’t fully understand the extent of what he’s done, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to deny him even the benefit of the doubt.”

Bill twitched, his pupil expanding in what might have been surprise.

“I can’t say I support that decision.” Grunkle Ford was saying, his voice rough with what was either anger or concern. “Dipper, I realise you’ve had some experience with Bill, so you won’t be so easily manipulated. But you don’t know what it’s like to trust Bill, and to have that trust broken. He’s very
good at what he does – he can be very convincing. Right up until the very end… I really believed he was on my side.” Ford’s voice carried undertones of bitterness, almost like resentment. Like tiny jagged spikes of glass, near-imperceptible, but cutting nonetheless.

Dipper fidgeted, twisting the fabric of his shirt as he tried to formulate a satisfactory answer. “I can’t pretend to understand what you went through, Grunkle Ford. And I don’t expect you to forgive Bill. But I’m not going to reject his help. Kind of because I really need it, but also because… well, there might be more to him than what we’ve seen.”

“That’s optimistic of you.” Ford remarked, in a tone of voice which suggested he didn’t think it a particularly positive trait. “I certainly hope you don’t expect Bill to pursue some course of redemption.”

“I’ll try not to be delusional about it.” Dipper reassured him. Bill twitched again, his eye narrowing testily. “But that doesn’t mean I’m not leaving him room to redeem himself, if that’s what he wants to do.”

Ford was silent for a long while. “Well, circumstances being as they are, it looks like your reliance on Bill’s been placed largely outside of your hands. I don’t like it, but since it doesn’t seem like there’s any way for you to extricate yourself from this… connection, I suppose you’ll have to make do.” It sounded a little more like he was trying to reconcile himself with the situation, but Dipper decided not to point that out. “At least tell me Mabel knows.”

Dipper hesitated. “I’ve told her.” He finally said, which technically wasn’t a lie.

“That irked Dipper. Wasn’t he supposed to be the sensible twin? And Bill was looking amused again, which boded well for no one. “So, uh, was there anything else you wanted to talk about.”

“No… no, I don’t think so. That was a lot to take in. Immortality, my goodness.” Ford exhaled, although some cheerfulness had returned to his voice. “Though my previous experience with various assorted doomsdays tells me that as long as they’re handled properly, most apocalyptic prophesies can be averted. That being said, just… don’t trust Bill.”

“I know, Grunkle Ford.” Dipper said.

“He’s prone to acting on whims, so I’m not surprised he’s taken it into his mind that this particular Armageddon isn’t in his best interests-“

“He did sound kinda annoyed whoever’s behind this got there first.” Dipper rejoined helpfully, ignoring the demon’s glower.

“but he was responsible for bringing our world to the brink of disaster on more than one occasion. He’s probably got his own reasons for helping. I’d proceed with extreme caution, if I were you.”

“I know, Grunkle Ford.” Dipper repeated, feeling rather like a tape stuck on loop.

“I suppose you’ve had drilled it into your head by now.” Ford chuckled wryly. “I’m sorry, Dipper, but I really am looking out for your best interests. I just… don’t want you to make the same mistakes I did.”

“I’ll try not to.” Dipper promised.

“Well,” Ford said awkwardly, “I suppose I’ll… leave you to it then. Give Mabel my best regards. I
hope she recovers soon.”

“Yeah, so do I.” Dipper replied.

They said their goodbyes, and Dipper returned the phone to its receiver. He glanced at Bill, a little uncertainly, but the demon looked more thoughtful than irritated by the conversation that had (ostensibly) been carried out behind his back. Dipper wondered if he should’ve warned Ford that the demon was listening in. Nah, that’d just have made things awkward.

“Man, you… uh… really did a number on Great Uncle Ford.” Dipper finally said, as they rounded the bannister up the stairs.

“No need to sugarcoat it, Pine Tree.” Bill replied, staring straight ahead. “I destroyed his psyche and shattered his ability to trust any living being ever again. I think that’s what they call a job well done!”

Dipper peered into Mabel’s room. His sister was slumbering peacefully, and he drew the door shut, deciding not to disturb her. “I think he’s getting better. I mean, he let Grunkle Stan stay at the Shack and run his business, didn’t he?” He hesitated, hand tracing the wall, before blurting out an abrupt, “Do you regret it?”

Bill seemed to suddenly find the landscape painting hanging from the wall immensely intriguing. “Well, what’s a few betrayals if you’re working for the greater good? ‘Course, I didn’t expect ol’ Sixer to take it THAT hard. Thought he might throw a few things and scream at me for a while. Should’ve realised a square like him would be ALLERGIC TO FUN!”

“He might’ve been more receptive if your idea of fun didn’t involve ending the world.” Dipper remarked, entering his bedroom and booting up his laptop. He was greeted by the eye-searing mess of a website which had been his last research destination. Letting out a sigh, he began scrolling through a collection of semi-coherent conspiracy theories, a struggle which was only exacerbated as his computer began to lag under the weight of dozens of poorly-coded graphics.

Bill, meanwhile, flipped open and began devouring another issue of ‘TEEN BLISS’. Well, if Dipper ever needed ten tips on buying sexy swimsuits, he’d know who to turn to.

They read in companionable silence for some time, before Bill reopened their conversation with a bizarre, “Hey, Pine Tree? What do you prefer in a man: looks or money?”

Dipper squinted at Bill, who was still engrossed in the magazine. “What? Well… I… uh.”

"TRICK QUESTION! I've got both!"

Dipper stared at the triangular ex-dream demon, before cracking up. “Seriously?”

Bill turned to face him, crossing his arms. “What? Is it THAT unbelievable?”

The demon’s offended glower only made Dipper laugh harder. Which was weird, because it wasn’t *that* funny, but Dipper had been running on a severe sleep deficit and there was just something about Bill getting high-and-mighty about his looks and personal finances which made it hard to stop laughing. He wiped his eyes, fending off more hiccups of laughter. “N-not at all! I mean, you’re… um… definitely the hottest triangle I’ve ever met. Those symmetrical angles, geez. I’d like to take a protractor to them sometime.”

“Pine Tree,” Bill flinched, beginning to glow, “what are you-?”

“And these corners, wow.” Dipper continued, fighting off a further bout of hilarity. “They’re so
sharp, I swear you could cut diamond with them. Plus, you’re a triangle, which probably makes you extra rigid.”

“You’re being INDECENT.” Bill hissed, now glowing so brightly he could’ve doubled as a sun lamp.

“I mean, you’re equilateral, right? That means your medians, bisectors and altitudes are the same.” Dipper leaned forwards, giving Bill a flirtatious wink. “I’d sure like to find your point of concurrency.”

Bill let out an incoherent screech of embarrassment, which coincided with Dipper finally giving in and breaking down into laughter. He vaguely noticed the demon, still screeching, slam the door to the closet shut. He wiped tears from his eyes, shaking his head. Dipper was still chuckling as he resumed his research.

He turned as the closet door slowly creaked open, Bill peering out from within. He was still shimmering, slightly. “You… have very pointy elbows.” The demon finally said.

Dipper feigned shock, clutching a hand to his chest dramatically. “Whoa, Bill, that’s filthy. You’re going to set my innocent maiden heart all aflutter.”

“Not doing anything for you, huh.” Bill replied, his eye narrowing analytically. “What else am I supposed to compliment you on? The even spacing of your toes? Your perfectly curved fingers? The roundness of your nose?”

“Stooop. You’re too much.” Dipper buried his face into his hands, assuming a façade of mortification. He lifted his head slightly, peering out at the demon. “But seriously, the sentiment is, uh, appreciated. Thanks for the… flattery, I guess.”

Bill still looked somewhat dissatisfied. “What if I told you your capillaries are really good at transporting blood? Would that work?”

“I think you might have some room for improvement.” Dipper replied honestly.

Bill’s eye narrowed, clearly taking the statement as a challenge. Dipper grinned as the demon subsequently proceeded to rattle off a series of ‘compliments’, feeling their dynamic settle back into place, like a puzzle piece he hadn’t even realised was missing.

“And your fingernails grow at a faster than average rate, so if I pulled them out, it’d only take about TWO months for them to come back- why’re you looking at me like that, Pine Tree?” Bill cast a slightly suspicious gaze upon him.

“Like what?” Dipper propped up his chin with a hand, smile growing.

“Like you’re… you’re-” Dipper watched with some amusement as the normally fast-talking demon cast about for words, growing increasingly flustered by the second. “Fuck it, I don’t have to deal with this.”

Before he could react, Bill snapped his fingers, sending a cloud of pencil shavings raining down upon Dipper's head. Once the eye-watering, coughing and general bewilderment had subsided, he looked around, but the demon was nowhere to be seen. He had presumably ensconced himself back within the safety of the closet while Dipper was otherwise preoccupied.

_Huh_, he thought.
I like the idea of Bill getting so irrational around Dipper that he ends up looping back around and making sense again.

Also, since Bill was defeated via the zodiac in this version of canon, Stan and Ford never had a chance to reconcile. This means they’re still living in the Mystery Shack sniping at each other rather than getting along on the oceans.
Chapter Summary

Dipper goes on a definitely-not-a-double-date, and is reminded why taking insane dream demons out in public is a bad idea.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dipper rounded the corner towards the LGBT society room, before doing a double take. Angela had scooped Dominique up under the armpits and was restraining her in much the same manner one might a particularly recalcitrant cat. Dominique, meanwhile, was lashing out, screeching near-incomprehensible epithets as she flailed about wildly. Archie was standing off a little to the side, well outside kicking radius, his expression caught between bemusement and disturbance.

“Maybe she’s come down with the same PSYCHOGENIC AFFLICTION as your sister!” Bill sounded inappropriately gleeful at the prospect. “This mastermind of yours might not be so bad! Inflicting MASS HYSTERIA on the UNSUSPECTING POPULACE used to be a favourite pastime of mine! Just ask those tarantulees a few centuries back!”

“Hi.” Angela gave Dipper a small wave, as though oblivious to the struggling weight in her arms.

“I don’t really want to ask, but what happened?” Dipper approached the flailing mass with caution. He was beginning to make out some of what Dominique was yelling. Something about how this was “the last straw” and how she was going to “track him down and strangle the life out of him”.

Dipper rather hoped he wasn’t the ‘him’ in question. Dominique actually looked capable of murder at that moment.

“Someone vandalised our club room.” Archie replied, twisting his hands. “…Wait, no, you probably shouldn’t look inside – it’s pretty bad.”

Curiosity overtaking sense, Dipper nudged open the door. He immediately regretted it.

Furniture lay strewn across the room like casualties of a war, chairs overturned and the table knocked to one side. Books had been torn from the shelves and scattered across the floor. The giant rainbow flag hanging from the wall had been torn in half, the two pieces trailing dejectedly across the ground like a popped balloon. Dipper could have almost believed some wild animal had been let loose and was responsible for this destruction, were it not for the collection of crude epithets scrawled across the walls in spray paint. He managed to glimpse a few choice pejoratives before his mind caught up with his surroundings and nope.

Dipper slammed the door shut. “You were right. Shouldn’t have looked. That was awful.”

Archie grimaced. “I think the worst part wasn’t the graffiti. It’s just- the idea that people would hate us enough to do this. I mean, it wasn’t like we were hurting anyone. We were mostly trying to fly under the radar, you know?”

“One person hates us enough to do this.” Angela corrected him.
“Chad.” Dipper said.

“Chad.” Archie said.

“Chad.” Dominique spat, her expression a mask of fury.

“Oho, that guy? Looks like the brain breakage didn’t stick! Course, you’d actually NEED a brain for it to work in the first place! Haven’t ruled out Knucklehead secretly being a unicellular organism which just up and sprouted muscles one day!”

“Still,” Archie said, clutching his sleeve nervously, “s’not like we’ve got proof.”

“Exactly. And that’s— here, Angela gave the struggling weight in her arms a little shake, “—why we’re not going to rush off and assault him. I’d prefer it if you didn’t get expelled, Dominique.”

Being shaken like a ragdoll seemed to do Dominque some good, as she slowly began to subside. She still looked fairly angry, however. “That fucking asshole. If I ever get my hands on him—”

“I know, I know, you’ll tear his head off or something.” Dipper couldn’t help but flinch at Angela’s offhanded remark. Oblivious to the reaction her statement had engendered, Angela slowly lowered Dominique to the floor. “Just as long as you don’t do anything dumb. You know what I mean by dumb.”

“You don’t get it.” Dominique snarled, looking a few inches short of tearing her hair out. “I worked so hard on this and now Chadwick Phillips thinks he can waltz up and ruin everything again like he’s been doing for the past three fucking years. Because apparently becoming a football chump means you get to abandon all human decency or something.”

Archie placed a tentative hand on her shoulder. “I— um. Maybe we should go talk to Principelle. Maybe she can do something about it. I mean, she’s, uh, always been on our side.”

Dominique stiffened, before exhaling. “Yeah. I guess I will.”

Dipper glanced at Angela as the two departed in the direction of the principal’s office. She looked thoughtful, gaze locked on Dominique’s retreating back.

“Man, Dominique really doesn’t like Chad, does she? I mean,” he added hastily, “not that I blame her. If I was in her position, I don’t think I’d be able to stop myself from strangling him.”

“It’s strange to think they used to get along.” Angela mused.

“They did?”

“Yeah. When we were little kids. Well, they weren’t exactly friends, but they hung out sometimes. Mostly because they liked teasing the other kids. I mean, Dominique’s still got that gossipy streak, so...” Angela shrugged. “Chad started avoiding her after she came out. But he didn’t actually start acting like a dick about it until high school. Maybe he feels like he needs to prove something.”

“Prove what?”

“I’m not sure.” Angela shrugged again. “It’s just a feeling.”

“Maybe our ol’ buddy’s trying to hide his lowly origins as anthropomorphic pond scum! Too late, buster! I’ve already GOT MY EYE ON YOU.”

“Well,” Dipper finally said, “I guess it was a good thing you managed to stop Dominique from
attacking him. Even if it’d be satisfying to see her punch him in the face.”

“I won’t give him the satisfaction of being the reason she’s expelled. Besides,” Angela’s expression flattened, and Dipper could see traces of Seraph in her steely gaze, “if push comes to shove, I can punch harder than Dominique can.”

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Dipper was in the middle of cramming his books into his locker when he ran into Thorne. Well, not quite ‘ran into’, as the jock clearly seemed to have been searching for him, a fairly easy feat when a quarter of the school seemed to have evaporated into thin air.

“Heads up, kid! Your thorny friend at twelve o’clock! Or was it six o’clock? Not that it really matters anyway, cause TIME HAS NO MEANING!”

Dipper spun around to come face to face with an intimidated-looking Thorne. It was something of an unnerving sight, because the boy was big enough to snap Dipper like a twig. Which he’d demonstrated. Multiple times. “Hi, Thorne. How’s it going?”

“Erm. Hello. I just wanted to-“ Thorne finally seemed to have worked up the nerve to look up from his fidgeting hands, because his eyes widened. “Whoa, are you okay?”

“What do you mean?” Dipper asked, attempting to nudge his locker shut. His assorted notebooks and textbooks put up admirable resistance against his efforts.

“Er, well,” Thorne gestured towards his own face, “you look a bit like a racoon had a baby with a panda and the baby didn’t sleep for three years straight.”

“Gee, thanks.” Dipper said, scrubbing self-consciously at his eyes. “Mabel’s been sick. I’ve been stressed.”

“Oh.” Thorne shrank into himself. “Sorry, I just… is it the fever that’s been goin’ around? Because Lisa’s caught that too.”

“Lisa? Oh, your sister.” Dipper gave his locker door another irritated shove. “Is she doing okay? She’s not having hallucinations or anything?”

“Hallucinations? I… don’t think so? She’s just been sleeping a lot.” Thorne reached around Dipper and gave the door a simple push. It clicked shut obediently. Traitor. “But there was somethin’ weird. She’s got this rash on her back that looks like a circle.”

“Huh.” Dipper said, suddenly wide awake. “Mabel’s got that too. Bill says it’s a sign it might be the next plague.”

Thorne flinched like a spooked animal. “Wait, are they gonna be okay? They’re not gonna die or anything, right?”

“Bill seems pretty convinced they should be fine. So I guess you should take that as you will.” Dipper said, and then continued, because three hours of sleep apparently wasn’t enough to sustain his brain-to-mouth filter, “At least they’re not all under nine years old this time.”

Thorne wibbled, and Dipper felt a little bad, although probably not as bad as he should have. Maybe he still had a grudge left over.

Nevertheless, Dipper decided to show some mercy, tactfully changing the subject to something less
loaded. “So what’re you doing here anyway? I thought the football team had training this afternoon.”

“I dunno.” Thorne scratched his head, kicking a stray flyer out of his path. “Hard to play a game when no one’s turned up. Anyway, so I thought I might look for you, because I wanted to ask you if you… uh… if you… well…” The boy fiddled with his hands before mumbling something under his breath.

“Sorry, I didn’t quite catch that.” Dipper said, side-stepping an absent-minded cluster of tech geeks immersed in their phones.

“Do you like spicy food?” Thorne blurted out abruptly.

“What?” Dipper asked, confused by the sudden conversational turnaround.

“Well,” Thorne said, now visibly sweating, “there’s a really good Sichuanese restaurant in Blackbourne- and I was thinkin’ we might- I mean, I’ll pay for you, and there’s non-spicy options as well-“

“Are you asking me out?” Dipper squinted at him, now utterly flummoxed. No, that couldn’t be right. Thorne was going out with Cherie, right?

“Hey, paws off the Pine Tree!” Bill snapped. “Maybe come back once you’ve grown three sides and an ACTUAL SPINE!”

Thorne flushed to his ears. “No! It’s just- I did some pretty shitty things, and I thought I might try to make it up to you. Think of it as… as an apology.”

An apology. “You ripped my head off my shoulders because you thought I was hitting on your girlfriend.” Dipper said blankly.

“Was that a no?” Thorne squeaked.

“And then you punched a hole in my abdomen and pulled my intestines out.”

“Cherie’ll be there.” Thorne said desperately. “For… safety. And you can bring your demon with you, if you want.”

It felt like Cherie’s presence was more about securing Thorne’s safety, but Dipper refrained from pointing that out. “Okay.”

“And I can- wait, really?” Thorne perked up like a puppy hearing the jangling of a leash.

“Yeah. I mean, it was at least partly Yinglong’s fault. And it’s not like I’m gonna turn down free stuff.” Dipper said. “Besides, I get the feeling Bill would probably like spicy food.”

“Aww, so you were thinking about ME, kid?” Dipper’s mental image of Bill fanned himself with a hand. Which also happened to be shaped like a fan. “Well, you don’t need to worry your not-so-little head about my feelings! Heck, I could probably get over my ETERNAL SEETHING HATRED of Time Baby if you asked REALLY NICELY!”

“That’s great!” Thorne said brightly. “How does Saturday sound?”

“Saturday sounds…” Dipper suppressed a yawn, “Saturday sounds fine.”

“No. Wait. Sorry, I lied. I still hate Time Baby more than I like you.”
An arm suddenly wrapped around Dipper’s shoulder, startling him. It wasn’t Thorne, because the boy was standing in front of him, still looking a little too relieved that Dipper hadn’t chewed him out.

“Dominique?” he guessed, extricating himself by ducking under her arm.

Dominique looked a little disappointed by his nonchalance, but quickly recovered, planting both hands on her hips. She seemed a good deal cheerier than she had earlier in the day. “So! I had a nice long chat with Principelle, and we managed to get things sorted out. Firstly, bad news: we still don’t have any proof that a certain someone was behind the vandalism. She said our room was in a spot the cameras didn’t cover. I mean, we all know who did it, but we’re not gonna be able to pin it on him.”

“Huh? Did somethin’ happen with you guys?” Thorne asked, peering over Dipper’s head curiously.

“Yeah, something did happen.” Dominique crossed her arms. “Your best friend apparently thought it’d be a great idea to spray paint homophobic messages all over the walls of the LGBT society room.”

“Oh. Oh no.” Thorne re-deflated piteously. “I’m so sorry.”

“Relax, Thorne.” Dipper could see Dominique bite back a sigh. “I’m not blaming you. I just don’t get why you keep hanging out with an asshole like that.”

“It’s kinda my fault, though.” Thorne looked away, metaphorical tail between his legs. “He probably got the idea after what I did to the art room.”

“Nah.” Dominique waved a dismissive hand. “No one’s to blame for Chad being a douchebag apart from Chad himself. But seriously, why’re you two even friends?”

“Well, if I wasn’t his friend, I don’t think he’d have any.” Thorne fiddled with his shirt sleeves. “I dunno. He wasn’t always like this. It’s like he changed after we started high school.”

“Everyone changed after we started high school.” Dominique sighed. “Doesn’t mean we all became jackasses.”

“Wait, isn’t he one of the popular kids?” Dipper interjected, “Why wouldn’t he have friends?”

“S’ more like a title, really.” Thorne mumbled. “Gets you cheerleaders, I guess.”

“Speaking of cheerleaders,” Dominique brightened, “have you seen what they’ve been up to lately? Talk about weird.”

“Oh yeah.” Thorne recalled. “They pitched a fit about the cafeteria not sellin’ bottled water or somethin’.”

“They called the cafeteria ladies shills for Big Aqua.” Dominique recounted gleefully. “And have you seen their new uniform patches? Seriously though, edgy nonconformity is so last year.”

“What do they look like?” Dipper asked.

“Hm, well.” Dominique made a few abortive gestures, before glancing upwards. Her eyes widened. “Wait, there! Look, there’s one!” She pointed at a red-headed cheerleader, who was currently engrossed with a compact of powder. Eventually, she turned to examine a poster on the wall, uncovering the patch affixed to the centre of her uniform.
Dipper stared. Bill Cipher stared back.

“…Well, you know what they say! IMITATION IS THE SINCEREST FORM OF UNTHINKING WORSHIP! Don’t know why I spent all that time trying to impress rich old guys when I could’ve been harnessing the FANATICAL ADORATION of the HORMONE-ADDLED ADOLESCENT MASSES!”

Well, maybe not quite Bill Cipher. The top hat was missing, for one. And instead of a bow tie, Bill seemed to be ensconced in a… tutu of some kind? The triangle was posed in a quintessential cheering position, pom-poms in both hands.

Dipper wasn’t sure whether to burst out laughing or descend into helpless fury.

Somewhere beyond the rushing sound in his ears, he was vaguely aware of Dominique letting out a dismissive snort. “Pssht. The one-dollar bill called. It wants its vague symbolism back. I mean, the illuminati triangle? Really?”

“Hey, lay off the geometry! You don’t see me making fun of your FLESHY USELESS MEATSUITS, do you? I mean, I SHOULD, because they’re so FLOPPY and POINTLESS and PEELABLE.”

“Aw, I think it looks cute. It’s like something outta a cartoon.” Thorne offered. He glanced at Dipper. “You okay there, buddy?”

“Fine.” Dipper said tightly. “Great. Perfect.”

Fortunately, Thorne seemed to take his denial at face value. “That’s good. Hey, d’ya think that if I asked really nicely, Tiffany would give me one of those patches?”

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“I don’t know why I’m doing this. You don’t deserve good things. Not after that stunt you pulled with the cheerleaders.”

“Aw, kid, but you said you’d let me eat something! I can’t remember the last time I ate something! When I was possessing your body, the only thing I did was drink soda! Hey, Pine Tree, remember that time I POURED SODA INTO YOUR EYES?”

“You’re not helping your case.” Dipper massaged his temples, before scrunching the unresisting piece of paper before him in a single sweep of frustration. He tossed it into the wastepaper basket beside his desk, which was rapidly growing into an accumulated pile of exasperation and failure. It was a simple magic circle. He could do this. Just… not while he was riding the tail end of a week’s worth of exams and sleep deprivation.

Bill hovered before him, hands planted on his sides, something like concern filtering into his gaze as he watched Dipper’s attempt at ancient magical runes morph into what looked more like a parade of tortured stick figures. Finally, he let out an impatient staticky buzz, tilting Dipper’s head up with a finger. “Alright, that’s it. Put down the pen, Pine Tree.”

Dipper blinked blearily at the demon. “Wait, I think I’m nearly-“

“Kid, I could stuff my eye hole with thistles and still do better than THAT.” Bill lifted up the sheet of paper, eyeing Dipper’s latest attempt with the sort of distaste he generally reserved for mentions of Time Baby or irregular polygons. “Look, Dipper, you’ve clearly pushed your pathetic fleshy meatsack beyond its limits. You need to take a break.”
“But you said you wanted-“

“Nope. C’mon, up. Go outside and appreciate the EPHEMERAL BALANCE OF LIFE AND DEATH that constitutes nature or whatever excuse you humans give for your meaningless habit of staring at grass for hours on end.” Bill insistently swatted at Dipper’s face until he stood up with a grumble and stumbled out the door.

He stared blankly down the hallway for a few minutes. Maybe he could check in on Mabel. Or maybe not. She needed her sleep. He glanced at her bedroom door as he passed.

Grabbing a bucket of scraps from the kitchen, Dipper stepped into the backyard. The trees lining the back of the house were beginning to tinge orange, sagging under the damp chill of fall.

Waddles seemed to be similarly affected by the weather. He was lying on his side, tail twitching in a subdued manner. He perked up as Dipper stepped into the sty, only to droop in disappointment when Mabel was nowhere to be seen.

“Sorry, buddy.” Dipper murmured, emptying a bucket of scraps into his feed trough. “I’m worried about her too.”

Waddles snuffled morosely, nosing at some wilted spinach with little enthusiasm.

A loud thumping noise caught Dipper’s attention. He turned to see Bill Cipher behind the glass screen leading to the backyard, reeling back in pain, hands clutched to his face. Fortunately, the demon seemed to regain his dignity quickly enough.

“Ah, glass sliding doors! The SEVENTH-MOST DIABOLICAL INVENTION you humans’ve had the ingenuity of creating! Weighing in right after ASBESTOS, and narrowly edging out the inestimable CLIP-ON MAN BUN!” Bill slid open the offending structure, cradling his nose with a hand. “Hey, Pine Tree, hope you don’t mind me borrowing your clothes again!”

“Oh.” Dipper said inanely. “No, I don’t- why are you a person?”

“Yeesh, kid, where’d your cultural sensitivity go?” Bill wiped his nose on his sleeve (or rather, Dipper’s sleeve), leaving a smear of red. “You can’t just up-and-ask a triangle that! But if you really HAVE to know, I cleaned up your sad attempt at a magic circle, and then I got your sister to read out the spell! Turns out she’s pretty decent at following instructions while she’s DELIRIOUS AND RAVING! So, how’s it lookin’?”

Bill’s new body was considerably smaller than his previous one. He was still going with the dark-skinned blonde look, only his hair seemed somewhat… fluffier? A little less ‘flawless Grecian curls’ and a little more ‘bird’s nest’. On this occasion, he’d picked out one of Dipper’s old hoodies, a faded navy blue piece which had been worn threadbare over time and which now flopped loosely halfway down his palms. It was accompanied by the ubiquitous bow tie, which seemed to clash with the utter casualness of his chosen garments. Thankfully, he seemed to have abandoned the top hat without prompting.

Overall, he looked… well…

“You look cute.” Sleep-deprived Dipper apparently wasn’t in full control of his motor functions, because this slipped out before he could salvage whatever tatters of common sense had survived forty-eight straight hours of rote memorization of physics formulas and research into hallucination-causing curses. It was obviously the wrong thing to say, because Bill froze, his visible eye widening as a trail of blood trickled down his nose. “I mean. Uh. You look different. And like you need
tissues.”

Bill stared at him a little longer, before letting out an awkward cough. Or maybe that was the nosebleed. “Ahem! Yes! Looks like there wasn’t enough energy in that cube for the full works! It’s not all that bad, though! Never really liked that body in the first place.” His lips twisted wryly, before he quickly regained equilibrium. “Sides, I’m used to being small! Easier to make people underestimate you before you CRUSH THEIR HOPES AND DREAMS UNDERFOOT!”

Dipper hid a smile. It was hard to take Bill seriously when he made grandiose proclamations while looking like that. Which was kind of the point, he guessed. “Yeah, okay, let’s go inside and get you something for that.”

They re-entered the house, Bill stumbling over the threshold but thankfully righting himself before he could hit the ground. Dipper picked up a box of tissues, before spinning to face Bill, who was experimentally licking the blood off his fingers. “Uh, no, don’t do that. Here, use this.”

He leaned over, tilting Bill’s head backwards with his thumb, and began gently wiping the blood from the demon’s face. “Geez, I don’t get why you keep doing this to yourself.”

No response. Dipper paused, hand suspended in mid-air. Bill was staring at him oddly again.

“Is there something you want?” Dipper glanced at the box of tissues. “Uh, I mean, I guess you’d rather do it yourself?”

The demon gave him an inscrutable look, but slowly moved to retrieve the box. Dipper watched as Bill tore the tissue in half, before meticulously rolling it into a neat tissue log and jamming one end up his nose. As the demon did the same with the other half, something occurred to Dipper.

“You know, I just realised…”

Bill let out an absent noise in response. “What is it, Pine Tree?” He finished fixing the other roll of tissue up his remaining nostril, turning towards Dipper.

Before Bill could react, he strode forwards, comparing their respective heights with a hand. “Hey, I’m taller than you!”

“So’s a pile of FIVE HUNDRED SQUIRREL CORPSES, what’s your point?” Bill scoffed, crossing his arms defensively, shuffling out of his vicinity like an offended turtle.

Dipper suppressed a grin. “Nothing much. But anyway, I was thinking – shouldn’t you have been able to heal the damage by now? I mean, remember that time with the thorns?”

He didn’t expect Bill to tense again, looking much like a deer before an oncoming truck. “Well, that’s because…” The demon looked away, mumbling something under his breath.

“Sorry, I didn’t quite catch that.” Dipper stepped forwards. As if by magnetic repulsion, Bill immediately stepped back. “Wait, is something wrong? Like, with your magic?”

“No.” Bill’s expression was one of vague panic, his eye darting back and forth between Dipper and the door, as though considering an undignified escape. “It’s because… because I-WELL WOULD YOU LOOK AT THE TIME YOUR FRAGILE WORLD IS ROTTING AWAY AS WE SPEAK LET’S GET A MOVE ON PINE TREE.” With that garbled sentence, he none-too-gently seized Dipper by the shoulders, shunting him out the door in a flustered whirlwind of motion.

Dipper decided against resisting as he was swept outside, feeling rather like debris being swept up in
the midst of a storm. He spared a glance at Bill’s face as he went. The demon’s pinched expression could either be because his new body was a size too small for him, or because there was something he really didn’t want Dipper to know. And given his little demonstration a few seconds ago, it was probably the latter.

For some reason, it was beginning to make Dipper a little annoyed.

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Aside from a small mishap whereupon Bill had cheerily informed the struggling mother-of-three sharing their bus stop bench that the best way to straighten out an unruly toddler was to grab them by the feet and give a few hearty shakes (“Or maybe that was for cotton linens,” he added, after being subjected to several horrified stares. “It’s real easy to get them mixed up! Hey, d’ya know how long you’re meant to leave a two-year-old in the washing machine for?”), the two managed to board the bus with relatively little fuss.

Even so, Dipper couldn’t shake off the feeling that something was wrong. And it wasn’t just the two tissue straws protruding from Bill’s nose, although these were currently garnering them more than a few curious stares.

Speaking of which- “I think you can take them out now.” Dipper pointed out, leaning over and easing a straw out of Bill’s left nostril. He managed to note a surprising absence of blood, before the demon leaned away from him, as though magnetically repulsed.

Dipper blinked, a little affronted.

Nonetheless, Bill appeared oblivious to his rising irritation, seemingly preoccupied with the extraction of the second tissue straw. After an unedifying interval whereupon Bill failed to notice the probing scrutiny of his companion, Dipper admitted defeat, turning forwards with an exasperated huff.

As the bus rolled ahead, a contented hum emanating from its engine, Dipper felt his eyes begin to droop. His sleep-deprived mind was drawn into the rumbling mechanical lullaby as the gentle jostle of tyres on asphalt generated a comfortable rhythm. It pushed and pulled with the tides of his exhaustion, drawing him deeper and deeper into the tempting abyss of sleep.

Maybe he could close his eyes for just a little. Just for a little while…

When he stirred to wakefulness, his head was resting on something. Strands of hair tickled his nose as he blinked awake. Sometime during his impromptu nap, his head had slid sideways to settle on Bill’s shoulder. He straightened, a little embarrassed, and glanced outside. On his left, Terrace Lake glimmered cheerfully, content to mirror the still blue skies stretching above. To his right, the polished buildings of Blackbourne shone, a symphony of glass and chrome reflecting the sun in blinding chorus.

“You should’ve woken me up earlier.” Dipper mumbled, rubbing his eyes. The short nap hadn’t completely erased his exhaustion, but it had taken the edge off. “Anyway, we’ll be there soon.”

Bill didn’t respond. Curiosity piqued, Dipper turned to peer at him.

The demon was staring at Dipper again, his gaze caught between vague confusion and concern, tinged with an inexplicable guilt which made Dipper’s chest twist, his heart thudding uncomfortably as though it was some foreign organ.

“Hey, are you okay? You’ve been acting weird.” Trying to dispel whatever mental fog had befallen
the demon, Dipper reached out to brush some strands of hair which had fallen to cover Bill’s face. However, Bill intercepted his hand before he could do so, nudging it away in a motion which might have been taken as casual.

“I’m fine, Pine Tree.”’ Bill’s troubled expression belied his words.

Dipper paused, glancing between his still-raised hand and Bill, as the answer to the question which had been gnawing on the back of his mind finally resolved itself. Something had been missing, a subtle blank in the tapestry of their interactions which had translated itself into a strange sort of tension. He hadn’t picked up on it earlier, still bleary from exhaustion, but his semi-awake mind had finally translated his jumbled recollections into a single conclusion.

To put things bluntly, Bill hadn’t been touching him.

He’d noticed that Bill had dropped his clinginess a few days ago, but the extent to which he was actively… avoiding Dipper’s very vicinity was beginning to ring alarm bells. Even as a triangle, Bill had always been in close proximity, hanging over Dipper’s shoulder like a particularly jovial omen. These habits had only been exacerbated as a human, whereupon Bill had seized any opportunity to cling onto Dipper, as though the latter was a life-preserver in the sea of monotony. So it was a little winding to have Bill’s habits slip from ‘scandalous’ to ‘bafflingly puritan’ in a whiplash-inducing span of time.

Bill had stopped touching him sometime after the incident with Yinglong, and even though Bill was willing to awkwardly flirt(?) with him and loudly proclaim his protectiveness, their brief reconciliation hadn’t overcome whatever complication had arisen in the demon’s mind regarding the physical dimension of their relationship.

The realisation sparked another surge of annoyance, as well as some colder, less explicable emotion. Honestly, if something was wrong, why couldn’t Bill just tell him?

Frowning, Dipper opened his mouth to say something, but was interrupted by the bus grinding to a halt. He glanced outside. They were there.

Dipper hurried off the bus, Bill closely (but not too closely) in tow. He spotted Thorne immediately, the boy’s nervous frame reluctantly towering head and shoulders above the crowd. His shoulders were hunched, apparently a futile attempt to conceal the bulk of his body. Cherie was standing beside him, scanning the vicinity like an inquisitive meerkat.

She was the first to spot them, rocketing to the tips of her toes as she waved. “Dipper! Hi!” Addressed towards Bill: “You look different.”

“At least it gets kind of boring wearing the same body all the time.” Bill made a dismissive gesture. “Gotta keep things fresh! I have no idea how you humans survive trapped in your own decaying flesh-prisons day after day! Oh, wait, I forgot. YOU DON’T.”

Thorne appeared considerably less happy to be confronted with the being who had trapped him in a vortex of nightmares and encouraged Dipper to murder him. “Uh. Bill Cipher, was it?” His voice cracked on the last word, as though the very air in his lungs wanted nothing more than to extricate itself from the situation. He made a few aborted gestures at motion, before stiffly pointing a hand in the opposite direction. “The. Uh. Restaurant’s that way.”

Bill teeth glinted as he smiled, a predator sensing weakness. “Well, well, would you look at that? It’s Pine Tree’s thorny friend! So, champ, how’re you hanging in there?” He slung an arm around the boy’s shoulder, who reacted by flinching and attempting to withdraw like a poked snail. “Aw, why
so nervous? You don’t need to get your guts all in a twist over ME! I mean, we’ve got Pine Tree for that! Haha, it’s funny because you TORE OUT HIS INTESTINES LIKE TISSUE PAPER.”

Dipper gave Cherie a ‘should we step in?’ look. Cherie’s responding roll of the eyes could be roughly translated to ‘nah, he brought this on himself.’

They made their way along the lakeside towards their destination, Bill making thinly veiled threats towards Thorne the entire time. His genial arm-slinging as beginning to look increasingly like a chokehold. Given their current respective sizes, it felt much like watching a kitten intimidating a grizzly bear.

“You know,” Cherie whispered, “did Thorne seriously disembowel you?”

“Yeah, but it wasn’t that bad.” Dipper lied. “I couldn’t really feel it.” Slightly less of a lie, seeing as his spine had probably snapped in two by that point.

“Anyway,” he eventually ventured a glance at Cherie, “how’ve you two been doing? I haven’t really seen you since exams started.”

Cherie hummed thoughtfully, gaze distant as she scanned the serene waters of Terrace Lake. “We’ve been… getting better, I guess. Had a long talk. Like, he apologised a lot. But I think that he actually got it this time. Whatever you said to him must have worked. I kinda wish I could’ve seen it for myself.”

“Yeah, uh,” Dipper tried to keep the guilt from leaking into his expression, “it was definitely something.”

“Anyway, how’ve you been doing? Thorne told me Mabel’s come down with that fever, and you’ve, like, stopped sleeping. It’s, um, showing.”

“What?” Dipper rubbed his eyes blearily. “Oh. Haha. Guess it is.”

“Seriously, when was the last time you got some sleep?” Cherie peered at him. “Like, that can’t be healthy.”

“Yeah, I keep telling Pine Tree that being the living dead isn’t much of a step above ACTUALLY being dead.” Bill finally released Thorne from his impromptu confinement, much to the latter’s visible relief. “Kid’s got serious issues! Can’t deal when he’s not in control of the situation 24/7!”

“Hey.” Dipper interjected, irritated. “It’s not that bad.”

Two pairs of eyes (plus one lone one) regarded him doubtfully.

“It’s pretty bad.” Thorne eventually ventured.

Dipper huffed, crossing his arms as he marched ahead.

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“I didn’t know Blackbourne had a Chinatown.” Dipper remarked, as the calculated impersonality of polished steel gave way to a chaotic jumble of neon lights, red paper lanterns and gold glitter. Various stores and restaurants were jammed together in the wide alley, linked by strings of fairy lights. Dipper briefly lost sight of Bill among the crowds milling about, only to find him standing in front of a traditional medicine shop, examining an unsettling heap of dried cicada shells with fascination.
“Can we buy some?” He’d asked, eye shining, once Dipper had caught up with him. Dipper had shaken his head in bemusement and steered him on.

Upon reaching the centre of the street, Thorne made a sharp turn through an unassuming doorway which opened straight to a flight of stairs. Following their descent, he pushed open a second door, revealing a surprisingly fair-sized dining room. The furnishings were plain but serviceable, dimly lit by several pendant lights in the shape of lotuses. The restaurant was currently devoid of customers, likely because they had arrived during the post-lunchtime lull.

There was a counter just to the side of the entranceway, behind which a middle-aged woman was polishing glasses with a bored expression. She brightened as she spotted Thorne, clearly recognising him.

“啊，索恩！你朋友也一起来了？”

“你好，阿姨。” Thorne said, a little awkwardly, “我们有四个人。”

“So you are all Thorne’s school friends?” The woman asked, ushering them towards a table. “It’s very nice to meet you! My name is Mandy. I am a friend of his family. Here, sit, sit. Would you like tea or water?”

“我觉得他们可能要喝冷水。”Thorne remarked, with an eloquent glance towards his table companions. Mandy hid a small smile. Cherie and Dipper traded puzzled looks. Bill was too preoccupied with rearranging the folded napkins on the table to notice.

“Yes, well, some of the foods here are very spicy, so cold water will be good.” Mandy nodded authoritatively, handing each of them menus. “Alright, I will let you get to ordering. Tell me when you’re ready!”

Curious, Dipper flipped through a few wrinkled pages. He was greeted by lists of unfamiliar dishes in both Chinese and English, accompanied by photographs of food which were so faded he could barely tell the greens from the meat. After a few minutes of browsing which left him entirely unenlightened, he turned to Thorne. “So… what do you recommend?”

“Oh…” Thorne scratched his chin. “Well, I think… actually, do you want me to pick stuff out for you?”

“Yeah, that’d work.” Dipper said, closing his menu.

“How much spice can you stand?”

“I… um, quite a bit, I guess?” Dipper ventured. After all, he’d survived Grunkle Stan’s ‘Special Surprise Soup’, whereupon the ‘Special Surprise’ consisted of an entire bottle of tabasco sauce. Including the bottle. Apparently, he’d gotten distracted while cooking.

“And what about you?” Thorne addressed Bill timidly, as though uncertain whether the demon would suddenly decide to leap over and maul him to bits. “Do you like spicy food?”

“I’m sure I would, if Pine Tree hadn’t deprived me of the FULL GAMUT OF POSSIBLE EXPERIENCES I could’ve enjoyed by sealing me into this dimension and trapping me in his closet for months on end!” Bill said amiably, having somehow ensconced himself in napkins like a victim of a spontaneous fabric explosion. Dipper stifled a sigh.

“He’ll like anything you give him. Don’t worry about it.” He looked up to see Cherie and Thorne giving him bewildered looks. "What?"
“You keep him in your closet?” Cherie asked.

“Well, yeah.” Dipper replied blankly. “What, am I supposed to let him walk around and traumatise my family?”

"…I think I might've underestimated how weird you are." Cherie finally said.

Bill leaned forward, a stray napkin slipping off his head and onto the table. "If you think THAT’S weird, you should see Pine Tree’s internet search history! SHIT’S HYSTERICAL!"

“Hey!” Dipper squawked, flushing.

“You don’t think so? Do you need an example? Lemme see… off the corner of my head, in chronological order: substitutes for lubricant, how to get glitter glue off skin, side-effects of prolonged glitter exposure, remedies for itchy-" Bill was cut off as Dipper lunged across the table, slapping a hand over his mouth.

“That was ages ago!” he screeched.

Cherie had turned a little pink, laughing in embarrassment. "Well, everyone's got something in their internet history they're ashamed of. That's pretty normal."

"They do?" Thorne asked, confused.

“Like, don’t you have any embarrassing searches you wouldn’t want anyone to know? For, like, cheerleaders or something?” Cherie suggested.

“Why would I be lookin’ up cheerleaders? All the ones we’ve got are batshit insane.” Thorne looked baffled. “Sides, I’ve got you, don’t I?”

Cherie turned even redder. “Aww, that’s sweet.”

“Weird, but sweet.” Dipper agreed, still restraining a struggling Bill.

At that point, Mandy reappeared to take their orders. Thorne rattled off a list of dishes in Mandarin, while Dipper attempted to slink back into his seat, pretending he hadn’t just been trying to smother Bill like an errant flame.

“Anyway,” he said, once Mandy had disappeared into the kitchen, “how’s your family doing, Thorne? I hope you didn’t get in too much trouble for… disappearing like that.”

“And trying to murder innocent strangers for talking to your girlfriend!” Bill added gleefully, ignoring how Dipper kicked him under the table.

Thorne flinched, looking down. “Uh, well, it was a lot better than I was expectin’, to be honest. I think they were actually worried, though you probably couldn’t tell it from… uh… the way they act. But Principelle came in and actually convinced them that I was fucking up because of all the pressures they’ve been puttin’ on me. They’ve agreed to think about the Blackbourne sports program, which is pretty cool."

“Principelle’s awesome.” Cherie adjoined, sipping her water.

“Helps that Mom and Dad still like her from back when she was our youth group leader.” Thorne concurred. “They didn’t even ground me. Looks like I’ll actually make it to Saint Balfour’s festival this year.”
“Saint Balfour’s festival?” Dipper asked. “What’s that?”

Cherie brightened. “Only, like, the best event we’ve got going on in Chapelwick. It’s so fun – we’ve got a whole bunch of stalls and games and a concert in the school hall. And there’s the couple’s dance in the town centre!”

“A dance, huh?” Dipper remarked dryly.

“Dunno if I’d say Balfour’s the best thing we’ve got going on.” Thorne mused. “I like the Christmas carols in the cathedral. It’s got candles.”

“All the better to set lil’ kids on fire with!” Bill interjected brightly.

“So who was Saint Balfour? Was he an actual saint?” Dipper interrupted, before Bill could delve into the finer points of child-incineration.

“Apparently, but it was, like, a really long time ago. Like, back in colonial times, when Chapelwick was mostly Catholic settlers. Apparently, he was the reason Chapelwick became a town in the first place.”

“Whoa, really?” Dipper sipped some of his water.

“Yeah. Like, I don’t really remember the details, but they say he could talk to the angels.”

“Pssht, like these squares’d have ANYTHING of value to say!” Bill scoffed. “No one who fucks up financial reconciliations that badly has a single opinion worth listening to!”

“Financial reconwha?” Thorne asked, bewildered.

“He could?” Dipper interrupted, pre-empting the derailment of their conversation.

“Yeah, he climbed up Terrace Mountain every day to pray with them.” Cherie responded.

“Wait, but isn’t Terrace Mountain like a half-day trip up?” Dipper frowned. “He must not have had much time for the actual praying.”

“Well, something must’ve worked, because he, like, had the usual slew of miracles. Healed a bunch of sick people, pulled food from thin air to give to the poor, all that saint stuff. But I guess the most important thing he did was fund the building of Chapelwick Cathedral.”

“So he was the one who built the cathedral?” Dipper folded his arms, considering. “It looks old, but I didn’t think it was that old.”

“Well, that was only the first one. It burned down… like, sometime around the 1800s. They had to rebuild it.”

“Huh, so it was rebuilt two hundred years ago.” Dipper mused.

Wait… two hundred? Something about that was pinging Dipper’s radar, but his sluggish brain couldn’t pinpoint exactly what.

“Hey, Pine Tree!” Bill leaned in to whisper into his ear. Which wasn’t all that effective, considering Bill’s ‘whispering’ could startle the deaf. “D’ya think that might’ve been around the time ol’ LOONEYPANTS MCAPOCALYPSEFACE hurled himself into the lake?”

“Maybe, but it’d be a bit of a stretch.” He responded, ignoring the interested looks on Cherie and
Thorne’s faces. And, because he couldn’t help himself: “That’s kind of an awesome name.”

“I know, right?” Bill grinned at him, and Dipper felt that part of himself which had frozen up during the bus ride slowly melt. “I came up with it myself!”

“Wouldn’t have guessed.” he murmured in response, nudging Bill’s knee with his own.

Bill immediately straightened, a little too stiffly to be considered a casual gesture, and subtly moved his knee out of nudging range.

Dipper felt that part of himself freeze back up.

Before he could remark on Bill’s aversion to touch, Mandy again manifested, this time accompanied by large plates of food. There was a plate piled high with glistening slices of tender eggplant interspersed with morsels of pork mince and a dish filled with fried golden-brown chicken smothered in ruby chili peppers. Mandy withdrew into the kitchen for some moments, before re-emerging with an alarming red broth which audibly crackled with aggressive heat, as well as an oversized tureen of fluffy jasmine rice. Although their table had already been equipped with chopsticks, she also left a stack of metal utensils by the side of the table, with a knowing wink.

Cherie prodded at the chicken with a chopstick as Thorne filled their respective bowls with rice. “This looks delicious.”

“Try some. S’ all good. Well, maybe except for the beef – that one’s seriously spicy. It’ll probably burn your tastebuds right off if you’re not careful.” Thorne said absently, handing Dipper a bowl of rice.

Dipper glanced at the bright red broth. It steamed menacingly, beef and chili peppers drifting slowly across its surface like drowned corpses.

He decided to start off with the eggplant.

Levering a few slices into his bowl with a fork, he took an experimental bite. Its soft flesh yielded readily as he chewed, a tongue-tingling sweet, yet savoury taste spreading through his mouth. It was slightly spicy, a comfortable heat which lingered on his tongue.

“Mmh.” Dipper made an appreciative noise. “That’s really good.”

Thorne preened himself. “Told ya so. This place’s got the authentic stuff.”

He tried the chicken next. Like the eggplant, it was fairly spicy, its crispy exterior setting his tastebuds buzzing at first taste. Despite the overabundance of chilli peppers which accompanied the dish, it remained comfortably hot.

Meanwhile, Thorne, defiant to his own warnings, had plonked several slices of beef onto his rice. He boldly devoured one, before letting out an abrupt exhale and fanning his mouth. “Whoo. Always forget how spicy it is.”

“Is it that bad?” Cherie asked, scooping some up with her chopsticks. Curious, Dipper followed suit.

His senses were immediately overwhelmed by heat. Perhaps it might have had a flavour other than ‘pure pain’, but Dipper’s tastebuds were currently too preoccupied with the assault currently being inflicted upon them to notice. Whatever was in this made Grunkle Stan’s ‘Special Surprise Soup’ seem like oatmeal.
His eyes watering, Dipper gasped convulsively as he reached for the water and gulped some down. Through his haze, he could see Cherie do the same thing.

Cherie coughed. “Jesus. That was an experience.”

“I think I blacked out at some point.” Dipper agreed, taking another gulp of water.

Thorne looked smug. “Warned ya.”

Dipper turned to Bill, who hadn’t been so much eating as he had been rearranging the grains of rice in his bowl into new and innovative shapes using his chopsticks. Which… right. So Bill knew how to use chopsticks, but he still couldn’t figure out doors. “You okay? You can eat, if you want to.”

Bill regarded him blankly, before raising some chicken to eye level.

“Uh, people generally eat with their mouths.” Dipper hurriedly intervened, before any unfortunate accidents could happen.

Bill slowly lowered the chicken, popping it in his mouth. His eye widened. “Wow, Pine Tree, thish stuff hurtsh to eat!” he said, with his mouth full.

“Uh, yeah, that’s the point of spicy food. You should probably chew. And swallow.”

Bill obediently did so, still looking excited. “You’re telling me that humans willingly eat food that hurts them?! Yeesh, your species’ sense of self-preservation is worse than I thought! I LIKE IT!”

“Ooh, maybe you should try the beef.” Cherie suggested around a mouthful of eggplant.

“I dunno if that’s-“ Thorne said, his jaw going slack in horror as Bill retrieved a hearty helping of beef and chilli peppers, before shoving the entire monstrosity in his mouth without a hint of hesitation. “Dude. Dude. No.”

Dipper’s hand tightened around his fork in sympathy as Bill’s eye widened, the demon making a choked noise. And then he let out a completely obscene groan, eyes fluttering shut, and Dipper’s felt his hand tighten around his fork for a completely different reason entirely.

The sound was followed by a few tentative moans, as Bill began to acclimate to the sensation, and Dipper made the mistake of glancing at his expression. Their gazes caught, locked. Bill’s pupils were blown wide, desperate and overwhelmed, and Dipper was left trapped, an unwitting voyeur to his display.

“Uh.” Thorne managed, looking supremely uncomfortable.

“Well.” Cherie said in monosyllabic agreement, her eyes carefully trained on her plate.

It was all Dipper could do to watch as Bill revelled masochistically in his selected dish. His eyes were locked on the bob of the demon’s Adam’s apple as he swallowed, a bead of sweat sliding down the line of his throat. A long, breathy exhale as Bill recovered from the sensory overload, followed by the wet slide of tongue against lips as he chased the remainder of the taste.

Bill reached up to slide some hair behind his ear as he went down for a second round, his lips closing lewdly around his chopsticks, the demon letting out a quiet moan that sent Dipper’s mind tumbling straight into the gutter.

“Huh.” he thought inanely. “So that’s why they call it a foodgasm.”
“People always tell me the spicy boiled beef is the best dish!” Mandy called out from her spot behind the counter, giving Bill two thumbs up. “Glad to see you enjoy it!”

“Oh yeah, he’s sure *enjoyin’* it.” Thorne muttered. Cherie let out an involuntary giggle of hysteria.

Dipper buried his head in his hands, ears burning, as Bill continued with his little display. Unfortunately, it did little to block the indecent noises which persisted in assaulting his aural capacities with the most suggestive imagery his imagination could conjure.

Dipper was beginning to realise he might have underestimated his imagination.

Nobody was willing to budge until the plate began to (thankfully) empty and Bill’s ‘enjoyment’ proceeded to wind down, culminating in sated panting as he finally finished the remainder of the dish. The other occupants of the table could only stare at each other uncertainly.

Cherie was the first to summon the will to break the silence.

“So… I’ll have whatever he’s having?” she quipped.

Chapter End Notes

Chinese Translations:

“啊，索恩！你朋友也一起来了?” – Ah, Suo En (Thorne)! You brought your friends with you?

“你好, 阿姨。我们有四个人。” – Hello, Auntie. We’ll need four seats (Note: Auntie (阿姨) is a general title which can be used for women who aren’t related to you).

“我觉得他们可能要喝冷水。”- I have the feeling they’ll probably need cold water.

Also, apparently drinking cold water doesn’t actually do much for the burn of spicy food, and might actually make it worse, but that’s how I’ve always done it ¯\_(ツ)_/¯

And though it got pretty damn close this chapter, next chapter Conspiratheory will finally earn its E rating in what is, true-to-form, possibly the screwiest way possible. So, uh, steel yourself for that, I guess.
Arc III Part 3: Even if I hurt you

Chapter Summary

An old acquaintance makes his return. Dipper fails to deal with his emotions in a healthy and productive manner.

Chapter Notes

On the request of some readers, the beginning and end of sex scenes will be marked with a ***.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“So you’re tellin’ me…” Thorne’s eyebrows were drawn so closely together they resembled a fuzzy caterpillar, “You’re sayin’ that if I’d had my way, we’d be one more step closer to the frickin’ apocalypse?”

Dipper and Bill exchanged glances. “Kind of.” Dipper eventually admitted. They had concluded their meal, thankfully free of any Bill-related shenanigans. The demon himself had proceeded to help them demolish the remainder of the eggplant and chicken, albeit with considerably less pomp and circumstance. They were still seated around the table, forming a private circle as Dipper filled them out on the more alarming implications of the past month’s events in a hushed voice.

“Why couldn’t you have just… I dunno, told me that?” Thorne scrubbed his face.

“I’m not sure it would’ve worked. You were so far gone the threat to Chapelwick’s kids didn’t even register.” Dipper took a sip of water. “I might’ve brought it up as a last resort, but I guessed it’d be more effective to get to the root of the issue first.”

“That being Thorne’s problems with me talking to guys who aren’t him?” Cherie asked bluntly. She had sat back, arms crossed and face growing increasingly grim as Dipper outlined everything he’d conveniently… omitted from his previous discussions with her. “Like, okay, I kind of get where you’re coming from, but why the hell didn’t you tell me that the fate of the entire goddamn world was at stake here?”

Dipper fiddled with the tablecloth in a manner he hoped didn’t come off as too guilty. “Look, I didn’t want to make you panic, okay? Best case scenario, preventing one plague would’ve steered the entire apocalypse thing off course, and nobody would be any the wiser. Of course, with the fevers, it’s kind of obvious it didn’t happen, but still.”

“Panic? Dude, I watched my boyfriend tear your head off your shoulders.” Cherie bit back in response, prompting both Dipper and Thorne to wince. “Like, I could’ve helped! Because this is really serious – I mean, people are gonna die.”
“I know.” Dipper said quietly.

“Do you, though? I mean,” Cherie bit her lip, looking away, “you’re immortal, aren’t you? It isn’t your life at stake here.”

“Gonna stop you right there, Cupcake.” Bill finally stirred from his silence, speaking with uncharacteristic mildness. “Pine Tree might be immortal, but that doesn’t mean he’s not treating this seriously. He’s got people he cares about, people whose lives he prioritises well above his own. You know how he hasn’t been sleeping lately? That’s because Shooting Star’s been caught up in the latest plague, and he’s been researching nonstop to find some kind of solution.”

Dipper blinked, surprised. Had Bill just defended him?

Cherie, meanwhile, looked chastened. “Shit, seriously? Oh man, I shouldn’t have raked you over the coals like that. Me and my big mouth.”

Before Dipper could respond, Mandy materialised with a swiftness which ill-fit her build as a portly middle-aged Asian woman. “How is everything? Do you want more water?”

Thorne shook his head. “不用了。谢谢你。我们可以结账了。”

“好，我去拿账单过来。” Mandy smiled politely and departed, before returning with the bill.

“Anyhow, I said I was payin’ for you guys as a thank you, so-” Thorne began.

“Here, I’ll pay half.” Cherie offered, opening her wallet. A coin rolled out and onto the floor. “Argh. Just gimme a sec-“

She froze as Bill manifested the coin in his hand in a burst of blue flame. “Tsk, tsk, Cupcake. You’ve got to keep an eye on these things, unless you WANT the money gremlins to start dragging them back into their nests.”

“Oh, is that why my coins always end up a bit further than I expect whenever I drop them?” Thorne asked with some interest.

“Yes! Course, they’re the sort of cowards that become invisible once you look at ‘em. A distant relative to the SHADOW HANDS, which lurk in dark, cramped spaces and seek to wreak havoc upon the world by tying headphones in knots and leaving sand at the bottom of bags!”

“Man, everything’s makin’ sense all of a sudden.” Thorne mused, before turning to his girlfriend. “Hey, is something wrong? You’ve gotten all quiet.”

“You are a demon.” Cherie blurted out with some awe. Oh, right, Dipper realised. She’d never seen Bill actively use his magic in person, had she?

“Whaddya mean, he’s a demon? Course he is!” Thorne straightened, clearly offended. “Weren’t you there when he trapped us in some kinda nightmare dimension?”

“Well, like, yeah, but I mean. It’s different seeing him use his powers in reality.” Cherie scrambled to rectify her misstep as Dipper stiffened, hurriedly covering the tell by taking another sip from his glass. “So, uh, what kind of demon are you? If demons even have kinds, that is.”

Bill turned to Dipper, clearly placing the conversational impetus on him. Dipper frowned in response, before hesitating. He could feel the curious gazes of Thorne and Cherie upon him. “Uh. Well. He’s… Satan? Like. Y’know. The devil?”
“Course, I haven’t been called that in MILLENIA!” Bill added hastily, but it did little to ease the bombshell shock which plastered itself across Cherie and Thorne’s faces. “Got sick of all the red tape, so I quit for self-employment as a dream demon! Much better hours and pay!”

Cherie was the first to speak. “Dipper. You’re keeping the devil in your closet.”

“Uh, yeah.” Dipper scratched his head nervously. “Not like there’s anywhere else I can put him. I mean, maybe I could hang him on the wall and tell my parents he’s an art assignment, but Mabel and I tried that once and he ended up getting thrown out with the trash.”

"You bonded your soul to the devil’s. The actual, literal devil’s." Cherie eyed Dipper narrowly.

"Well, when you put it that way, it kind of sounds like a bad idea."

“And didn’t you say he tried to take over the world at some point?”

Bill waved a dismissive hand. "Hey, I like you! I won't obliterate anything you'll miss."

“Wait.” Thorne interrupted. “If he’s the devil, how do you know you can trust him? Because isn’t his whole schtick, y’know, lyin’ and temptation?”

“Yeah, you’ve got a point.” Dipper admitted. “Thing is, as Cherie said, we’ve done this whole ‘end of the world’ rodeo before. And to be honest, I think we’re sick of the whole thing.”

“I was starting to get bored having my plans foiled over and over again.” Bill said in agreement. “Sure, now I’m stuck to Pine Tree like a fifth limb, but at least it’s something NEW. Gotta take a step back from multidimensional schemes to STOP AND STAB YOURSELF ON THE ROSES once in a while!”

“It helps that he lost the main source of his power five years ago, though that’s complicated the ‘save the world’ thing somewhat.”

Thorne nodded contemplatively, but Cherie still seemed stuck on a few points, like a smudged CD caught in a repeating loop. “You’re depending on the devil to keep yourself alive.”

“That’s a two-way street, bucko!” Bill responded keenly. “I don’t like it much, but Pine Tree’s power is the only thing keeping me from toppling into the ECHOING VOID OF INCONSEQUENTIALITY!”

“You’re in a relationship with the-“

“Anyway,” Dipper interrupted, because if there ever was a no-go subject, that was it. “I know this might have… shattered the paradigms of your worldview a bit-“

“I dunno what that means, but if you’re talkin’ about the fact that we’ve spent our entire lives listenin’ to sermons about how your buddy’s the root of all evil, then yeah.” Thorne interjected.

“PSSSHT, root of all evil? Have you SEEN humanity lately? You’re all perfectly capable of fucking yourselves up WITHOUT outside intervention!”

“-but we have to cooperate with Bill if we want to prevent anything worse from happening. Because there’s someone out there who’s actively plotting to cause Armageddon, and he’s the only person I know who’s powerful enough to stop them.”

“Sides, it’s not like you’ve got much say in the matter!” Bill contributed cheerfully. “There’s no
Thorne and Cherie regarded them silently, before Thorne broke the silence. “I mean, it’s a big thing you’re askin’ here, tellin’ us to trust the devil. Still, if it weren’t for him, there’d be a lotta kids dead, and I can remember how shitty it was gettin’ possessed by that dragon, so I think I might wait and see how it goes. Because I owe him that much.”

“Thanks.” Dipper smiled gratefully. “What about you, Cherie?”

Cherie still looked fairly dubious. “I wouldn’t say I’d trust Bill, but as he said, it’s… not really like we’ve got a choice, do we? But, like, I guess he’s been helping us out so far, so I’ll guess I’ll see how it turns out?”

And that was that.

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A dizzying array of scents greeted Dipper as he slipped back into the bustle of Chinatown. The homely sweetness of Chinese buns, the smoky aroma of barbequed pork, the off-putting bitterness of medicinal herbs and the lingering stench of stale cooking oil overwhelmed him for a few brief moments, before he shook himself back to awareness and hurried to rejoin his friends. Safely enveloped by the clamour of Mandarin around them, they managed to continue their conversation.

“Still, I just wanted to say that you, like, don’t have to keep doing this by yourself.” Cherie remarked. “Like, if you need any help with research, I can help you out.”

“Me too! I mean maybe not for the nerd stuff, but I can help if you need some muscle. Cause, no offense, but you don’t look like you have much.” Thorne volunteered.

“Hey, I’m getting stronger!” Dipper protested, steering Bill away from the cicada shells. “I’ve been working out with Angela in the mornings.”

“You work out with Angela?” A new light of respect dawned in Thorne’s eyes. “Whoa, and your ego’s still intact?”

“It’s a bit dented.” Dipper admitted, watching the clamorous colour of Chinatown fade into the bright tranquillity of the lakeside. “Still, I came to terms with the fact that I’m going to stay a stick a long time ago, and that helped. Kind of.”

“Man, now I kinda wanna see.” Thorne said. “Can I come?”

“Um, sure?” Well, Angela had never said anything about them being private workout sessions. “We’ll be there on Monday morning, if you want to join us and, uh, watch me fail.”

“Cool!” Thorne said brightly. “I mean, not the watchin’ you fail part. It’s just that I wanna know Angela’s routine, ‘cause she beats me half the time when we’re arm wrestling. Seraph always managed to beat both of us, though. Wait, d’ya know Seraph?”

“Oh yeah, she-” Dipper found himself cut off as Bill’s hand closed around his wrist, pulling him until they were almost face to face. His breath hitched involuntarily as he became acutely aware of his heartbeat thudding in his ears, each pulse leaching all rational thought from his brain.

“Don’t look now, Pine Tree,” Bill murmured, voice low, “but I spy with my little eye a very old friend of yours.”
Amassing whatever tatters of sense still remained in his head, Dipper cautiously tilted his head in the direction of Bill’s gaze.

Across the road, a fair distance away. A man peered out from behind a power pole, like a shadow which had lost its owner. He was outfitted in the provincial trenchcoat and fedora, both shaded in a hue of grey which was all the more conspicuous in its very attempt to seem inconspicuous. In his left hand was clutched a walkie-talkie, towards which he would occasionally direct whispers of such furiousness it rather defeated the purpose of whispering.

Viewing this felt pleasantly surreal, like seeing a dog chase a mailman down the street or a boomerang rebound and incapacitate its thrower.

“Man, is that guy trying to copy what he saw in a spy movie? Cause it ain’t workin’.” Thorne said, echoing Dipper’s thoughts.

Bill let out an amused exhale. It tickled Dipper’s neck. His smile was knife-sharp, the warm gold of his iris cooling to an eerie yellow as he surveyed the scene before him. “Five years later, and this sad sack STILL hasn’t learnt his lesson about sticking his state-sanctioned nose where it doesn’t belong.”

“No way, that’s not…” Dipper found himself briefly lost for words as the man turned slightly, throwing his face into profile, “Agent Powers?”

No doubt about it. Even at this distance, he recognised that humourless visage, like a frown carved into a craggy mountainside. “What on earth is he doing in Blackbourne?”

“Following the same case we are, by the looks of it.” Bill answered. “That tangle of puppet strings you call a government might not be able to wrangle its way out of a paper bag, but even IT’S begun to catch up to what’s going on!”

“So he’s a government agent? Like the CIA?” Cherie asked, peering over Bill’s head.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Bill said absently, his eyes still trained on the agent. “Everyone knows the CIA’s nothing but a convenient front for the lizard people and their nefarious plans to convert the earth into their personal sunbaking rock.”

“I… had no idea about that, actually. Thanks for telling me?”

“If it makes you feel any better,” Dipper said, “neither did I.”

Bill stared fixedly at Powers for a few more moments, before appearing to make up his mind. “Alright. Cupcake, Champ. You two.” He pointed at them, before making a dismissive gesture. “Scram. Wait at the bus stop for us. Pine Tree and I will tail him.”

“Aw, why can’t I come?” Thorne protested, watching the gesticulating Agent Powers with avid interest.

“We’d attract too much attention as a group. C’mon, kid.” Before Dipper could respond, Bill seized his shoulders, steering him towards an oak tree directly behind Powers’ while the agent’s back was still conveniently turned.

“-need to notify HQ that the signs were leading us here all along. I’d place it as a Category B threat, if not an A.” Even at this distance, they could hear his counterproductive attempt at a whisper. “Our readings are off the charts. No, I meant that literally. I don’t do hyperbole. We’ve got a chart and these readings aren’t on them.” Good to see five years hadn’t changed him at all.
Bill peered out from the pole, eyeing the agent like he was a particularly pesky mosquito ripe for the swatting. “He’s on the move. Let’s go, Pine Tree.”

Grabbing Dipper’s hand, he hurried them both into an alleyway conveniently situated behind Powers’ latest hiding place. He ducked into the corner, peering out with an eagerness reminiscent of a shark circling its prey.

Dipper couldn’t help but smile. The demon’s enthusiasm was contagious.

“Yes, I’ve engaged the media jammers as per protocol. We don’t want word getting out about any of this. Not the mass fish deaths, not the outbreak of fever. Agent Trigger and I have enough to deal with as it is.” So that was why there hadn’t been a huge uproar about the latest plague. Guess Bill was right about every camera having its blind spot. “No, I don’t know what this means for Project MKSWARM. I’m waiting for the one on duty to report back with the latest data.”

“Project MKSWARM?” Dipper mouthed at Bill. His companion shrugged.

Agent Powers suddenly straightened. Peering out from the alley wall, Dipper could see a windowless black van rolling down the street. He flattened himself further against the concrete. “Speak of the devil. I think that’s them.”

Oblivious to the actual devil observing him from a safe distance, Powers waved down the van. The front window opened slowly, and a gloved hand extended from the gap. It deposited what looked like a roll of tape into Powers’ hands, before withdrawing into the shadowy confines of the car like an eel into the inky depths of the sea. Dipper watched as the tinted window drew back up, and the car vanished into the distance like a mirage.

Powers, meanwhile, was scrutinising the roll of tape. “I’ve got the data. Everything seems to be in order. Tell HQ I’ll be heading back as soon as… wait.”

Dipper had the presence of mind to yank Bill back the moment Powers’ head swung in their direction. “No, I have the feeling that I’m being followed. Had it for a while now. I’ll conduct a perimeter check before I head back.”

Under his hands, he could feel Bill tense. “Looks like our little agent friend finally learned to tell his BADGE FROM A BEAR TRAP! Hey, kid, got any ideas for a way out?”

Dipper made a cursory scan of their surroundings. Predictably, the alleyway was closed off on the opposite end. No exit there. It was a blank expanse of grimy concrete on both sides – no convenient doors for them to duck into. And Agent Powers’ footsteps were rising in crescendo.

“Maybe I can use my magic to-“

“No need.” Dipper whispered, as inspiration (or desperation) struck. Taking Bill’s shoulders, he pushed him back against the wall.

“Pine Tree, what’re you-“

“Just trust me on this one.” Dipper grabbed Bill’s head with both hands, stepping forwards so their faces were only a fraction of an inch apart. From an outsider’s perspective, Bill’s fringe conveniently obscured the distance between them.

“I’m examining the west end-“ Agent Powers cut himself off as he came across Dipper and Bill, and the two froze in place. But then he let out a faint noise of annoyance, and passed along. “Ugh. Never mind. Just a couple of teenagers.”
They let out simultaneous exhales of relief as his voice faded into the distance. Dipper could feel Bill’s breaths against his cheek, an insistent reminder of their proximity which grew ever more pressing as the adrenaline ebbed away. The thought he had kept caged in the depths of his mind bubbled to the forefront.

He could kiss Bill.

He watched Bill’s eye flicker down to his lips, the demon’s train of thought clearly running along the same tracks as his. Despite the growing urge to close the gap between them, Dipper restrained himself to the narrow distance. Bill had been sending mixed messages all week, and Dipper’s key priority was figuring out how the demon felt about all this.

Slowly, cautiously, Bill lifted a hand, settling it on the left side of Dipper’s head. His fingers slid into Dipper’s hair. Dipper’s breath hitched, his heartbeat thudding in his ears.

Bill leaned in, hesitated… and then gently, but firmly pushed Dipper back.

The confusion must have shown on Dipper’s face, because Bill quickly looked away. “We oughta get back to those two. Kept ’em waiting longer than those poor suckers who slipped and fell into Time Baby’s paradox collection!”

Dipper watched as the demon slipped past him, the hopeful affection of a few moments ago draining away as cold detachment sunk its frozen barbs into his chest, like a poisonous bud taking root.

“Huh.” he thought, a little resentfully.

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The ride back home was uneventful, save for the wall of ice which was slowly but surely creeping between Dipper and Bill, freezing all attempts at conversation before they could take place. The demon had made a few unusually sedate remarks regarding their fellow passengers and the assorted ways they were likely to pass on (“Course, that’s assuming the apocalypse doesn’t get ’em first!). These were met with neutral-to-discouraging noises from Dipper, who, for his part, didn’t trust himself not to snap back with annoyance the moment he opened his mouth. The awkwardness was palpable, and Dipper looked forward to nothing but heading immediately to bed and pretending that Bill didn’t exist for the next few hours. Hopefully the sleep would revitalise him enough to begin working through whatever emotional blockade he and Bill had crashed into this time.

Which was why, upon seeing an awake and decidedly-lucid Mabel sitting at the kitchen counter chattering away with Rowland Bishop, Dipper’s first reaction was, shamefully, something closer to irritation than relief.

To his credit, the relief followed soon after. “Mabel! Why’re you - are you feeling better?”

“Dipper! Bro! Hi!” Mabel nearly knocked the dishware over in her enthusiasm to run and greet Dipper. “Can you believe it? Rowland told me I was out for more than a week.”

Dipper certainly could believe it, seeing as he’d spent the entire period wearing himself thinner than a thread. “It was more like nine days, actually. How are you feeling? You’ve haven’t… seen anything strange, right?”

Mabel giggled. “You’re the strangest thing I’ve seen today, bro-bro. I’m feeling great! It must have been—” here, she made a swooning gesture — “the power of true love.”

Rowland chuckled. His bejewelled tie caught the light, glinting. “Anything for you, my dear.”
Dipper never knew five simple words could have made his hackles rise like that. “Uh. Anyway… do you remember anything from when you were delirious? Anything at all?” He tried not to glance too significantly at Bill.

Mabel hmm’ed, tapping her cheek with a finger. “No… I don’t think so. I remember feeling sick and lying down – everything after that’s kinda blurry. Ooh! But I remember waking up and then Rowland was at the door and he gave this to me as a present!”

She brandished a small perfume bottle before Dipper’s face. It looked expensive, the exterior covered in a shimmering velvet. A gold typescript spelled out ‘Glorious Legends’ in looping cursive. “That’s the perfume he wears every day!”

“I was hoping the reminder of my presence would revive you, but it seems as though the cure was in our hearts all along, my dearest.” Rowland said, and Dipper refrained from remarking that it must have been a pretty shoddy cure, if Mabel had been laid up for nine whole days.

“What do you think?” Mabel gave an enthusiastic pump of the nozzle, and Dipper found himself doused in an alarming cloud of scent. He coughed as it flooded his nostrils with a sharp gasoline bite.

“It’s…” He sneezed, his body rejecting the intrusion of whatever that smell was. “It’s…” like bottled skunk, he couldn’t say.

“Flammable.” Bill completed for him, plucking the bottle from Mabel’s fingers. “Very, very flammable.” he mused, eyeing it closely.

“It was recalled from forty-five states due to safety concerns.” Rowland said proudly.

“Isn’t that supposed to be a bad thing?” Dipper tried to slip away from the cloud of perfume, but it clung to him like a hungry parasite.

“Not for me.” Rowland made a grandiose gesture. “I’m a man who enjoys a little danger.”

“As well as SPONTANEOUS HUMAN COMBUSTION, from the looks of it!” Bill commented. Dipper reminded himself to stay well away from fire for the next day or so.

“Ooh, and I almost forgot! Hi there, Dipper’s boyfriend!” Mabel gave Bill’s arm an enthusiastic slap of welcome, and Dipper couldn’t tell if the strained expression which flitted across the latter’s face was from the slap, or from being referred to as his boyfriend. “You know, you’re a bit smaller than I remember you being!”

Dipper froze, but Bill’s smile didn’t falter. “Really? You sure that’s not the EXTENDED DELIRIUM talking, sweetheart?”

Mabel puffed her cheeks. “Hey, I’m all better now!”

“Actually,” Dipper blurted, “there’s something I wanted to tell you.”

Bill glanced at him, a look which clearly said ‘You sure you want to do this now, Pine Tree?’ Well, okay, Rowland’s presence (and existence in general) was less-than-precipitous, but what was it Cherie had said? About secrets like these being like time bombs?

“Really?” Mabel looked eager. “Actually, I’ve got something I wanted to tell you too! A really really really good thing!”

“Oh, what is it?” Bill asked, attention diverted by Mabel’s enthusiastic flailing.
“Well, Rowland here—” she grabbed his hand – “just invited me to the couple’s dance for St Balfour’s Festival! Isn’t that amazing?” Her eyes were starry.


“Do you know what that means?” Mabel squealed, clinging to Rowland’s arm. “It means we’re official!”

“We were already official, dear.” Rowland gently reminded her.

“But it means we’re officialler than official! Dipper, did you know? Legends say that any couple who dances at St Balfour’s festival is gonna get blessed by St Balfour himself and that means they’ll stay together forever!”

For the sake of his sanity, Dipper hoped otherwise. But he couldn’t find it in himself to cast any shadow on Mabel’s unbridled joy, so he reeled himself in, even managing a genuine smile. “Aw, good for you, Mabes. I hope you’re happy.”

“Of course I am! Ooh, and you can bring your boyfriend with you too! Oh man, this is the best day of my life and I sure hope absolutely nothing happens to ruin it! Anyway, what was it you wanted to say, bro-bro?”

Dipper felt the smile slip off his face.

“Uh. It was… nothing important. You two have fun now. I think I’ll... go to bed. Yeah.”

“Aw, what? I wanted to talk to you more! Oh well. Rowland, do you wanna catch a movie together? They have rainbow popcorn there! RAINBOW.” The last word was spoken in an awed whisper.

“I suppose I could deign to grace the lower class with my presence for a little while.” Rowland said tolerantly. Dipper’s skin crawled, and he quickly departed the room before annoyance compelled him to say anything he’d regret. Bill followed at his heels.

“So, Pine Tree,” Bill said, the moment the door closed behind them, “it looks like—“

“Shut up.” Dipper said, with a sharpness that surprised even himself. “I think I need some sleep.” He added, a little softer, before sniffing himself. “Actually, I might need a shower first. You can… do whatever. You know how to use my laptop, right?”

Bill nodded, although he still looked a little tense.

“Allright. That’s… cool. I’m gonna go shower now.”

Dipper shut the bathroom door, before leaning back and letting out a long sigh. What was up with him today? He’d been such a jerk to Bill – and honestly, if the demon didn’t want to kiss him, that was his prerogative. And it wasn’t like Rowland Bishop had done anything that aggravating. So why had he been so annoyed?

He should probably apologise to Bill for snapping at him like that. Maybe after he woke up. A nap would do him some good.

Hopefully it was all just the sleep deprivation. Yeah, that was probably it.

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Bill stared at the pulsating blue fractures which leaked from the trapdoor like radioactive waste,
threatening to splinter and crack and shatter Pine Tree’s mindscape into tiny little woodchips.

“Well, fuck.”

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Dipper opened his eyes to darkness.

Instinctively, he reached up, pulling Bill’s hand off his eyes. It was late, the walls of his room stained red by the setting sun.

He felt blank. Like he’d left his emotions unstoppered, and they’d drained away in his sleep. A vast expanse of emptiness which threatened to spill out of him and engulf everything. He wondered vaguely whether, if he clawed himself apart, it would leak out of him instead of blood.

He couldn’t remember what he’d been dreaming about. But he was fairly certain why.

He sat up, turning to face the demon lying beside him. Bill’s expression was inscrutable. Dipper reached out to brush his bangs out of his eyes, leaving the scar on his right eye exposed. Bill didn’t respond.

He wrapped a hand around Bill’s neck.

“Dipper,” Bill said softly, “what do you think you’re doing?”

“If I snapped your neck, do you think it would heal?” Dipper asked.

“Maybe.” Bill replied casually, as though they were having a conversation about the weather. “Course, there’s always the possibility I’d poof right back into a triangle.”

“Huh.” Dipper said. He tightened his grip slightly. “How does this feel?”

Bill made a considering noise. “Not bad. Much nicer than getting eaten alive by fire ants. They like the kidneys best, I’ve heard.” The last sentence was spoken in a slightly strained tone, as Dipper pressed down even harder, before easing again.

“Still,” Bill said, once he could breathe again, “if you’re planning on snapping my neck, you oughta use both hands. One’s good for strangulation, but not much else.”

“I don’t want to snap your neck.” Dipper said. The sunset washed over his skin, making the hand over Bill’s throat appear as though it had freshly emerged from someone’s abdominal cavity. “I just wanted to talk.”

“Really? I thought these fleshy meatsacks don’t really like communicating with blocked airways. This conversation’s going to be pretty one-sided, kid.”

Dipper pushed down again, shifting so he was straddling Bill’s hips. The sheets slid off the bed with a final whisper. “That’s fine.”

From this vantage point, it was easier to see Bill’s expression. His features were set into careful neutrality, unnaturally still, like a wax sculpture.

“You know, you’ve been getting on my nerves lately.”

Bill made an affirmative noise – he couldn’t really do much else, not with Dipper’s hand tightening like the coils of a constrictor– and Dipper took it as a cue to continue.
“You keep sending me mixed messages. You want me to take ‘responsibility’ for you – but you won’t even give me a chance. You don’t want me getting too close to you, but you don’t seem to have a problem with climbing into my bed and holding me while I sleep. You don’t mind flirting with me and telling everyone that I belong to you, but you pull back every time I try to return the favour.”

“So you think I might be playing games with you, is that it?” Bill asked. Dipper couldn’t tell what emotion lay beneath his voice. It was irritating, how quickly he’d learned to hide his thoughts in this form. He loosened his grip.

“Maybe.” Dipper replied. “Maybe I just want to know what you want.”

“Hence the power play.” Bill’s eye flickered, amused, down to Dipper’s hand. “Why don’t you just command me to tell you the truth, kid?”

“That’d be the easy way out for both of us.” Dipper tightened his grip, hard, and Bill’s head fell back, his spine arching involuntarily. “I don’t feel like giving you the easy way out. Not this time.”

“Yeesh, give a man a little control and watch him try to boss the world around. Haven’t seen a guy go this power-crazy since I handed Milgram that electro-shock generator!” Bill said, once his instinctive gasps for air had subsided. “’Sides, what if I told you what I wanted was your hand off my neck and us as far apart as feasibly possible?”

“Is that what you want?” Dipper asked. “If you want me to stop, just tell me.”

Bill’s features twisted into grim bemusement. “Just tell me, the kid says. Trample my ego a lil’ more, would ya? Maybe there’s still a few bits you haven’t finished grinding under your heel!”

“Do you want me to stop?” Dipper repeated.

Bill was silent for a few moments, before exhaling subtly. “No.”

“Alright then.” As a reward, Dipper pushed down even harder, watching as Bill’s fingers clutched at the bedspread. Bill looked good like this, he thought idly, all splayed limbs and desperate panting.

“So,” he continued, giving Bill a few moments to recover, “here’s how it’s going to go. I’m going to ask you a few questions about what you want from me, and you’re going to answer them. I won’t force you to answer truthfully.”

“And if I lie?” Bill asked. His voice was breathy, his eye almost all pupil. It glinted dangerously in the blood-red light.

“You can lie. You’ll just end up denying yourself what you actually want.”

“Well played, Pine Tree.” The corners of Bill’s lips turned upwards, a hint of respect in his expression.

“I’ll start off easy.” Dipper released Bill’s neck. The demon let out what might have been a protesting noise, but it quickly disappeared once Dipper unknotted his bow tie, before sliding his fingers lower, lower. They came to rest at the edge of his (Dipper’s) hoodie, his thumb slipping around and up to brush against Bill’s bare skin. “Do you want me to like you?”

“Yes.” Bill replied evenly.

“Good.” Dipper pushed the demon’s shirt up, watching with approval as Bill obediently assisted him
in removing the article of clothing. Leaving it tangled in Bill’s arms, he returned his attention to the exposed skin of his chest, trailing his fingers down Bill’s sternum. “Though I guess that doesn’t count for much. You want everyone to worship you, and that’s pretty close to liking.”

“You know me too well.” Bill smirked, and then groaned as Dipper tipped his head forward and mouthed at his clavicle. His head slipped to the side, hair sliding forward to conceal his scar, and Dipper took the opportunity to trace the line of his neck with a finger. Bill shivered as he followed it with his lips, gently nibbling at the sensitive skin.

“Alright, second question.” Dipper breathed into his ear before nipping at the lobe. Bill’s fingers spasmed around the fabric of his shirt. “Do you want me to hurt you?”

A brief span of hesitation. And then-

“No.” Bill said.

With an approving hum, Dipper again mouthed at Bill’s neck, moving down to where he could feel the demon’s pulse fluttering to an irregular rhythm. Savouring how Bill’s breathing picked up at the sensation, Dipper brushed his lips against the soft skin, sliding his tongue over it in an open-mouthed kiss.

And bit down. Hard.

Bill arched up with a strangled moan, hips jerking against Dipper’s. He inhaled sharply. The demon was hard, which wasn’t much of a surprise. What was, however, was the aching arousal which Dipper had somehow managed to completely ignore in favour of making Bill come apart under his hands. Succumbing to temptation, he ground down against Bill’s erection, eyes slipping shut as he rocked forwards. Blindly, he ran his teeth down the length of Bill’s throat, punctuating the motion with another hard bite near the base of his neck. This time, he drew blood.

He was rewarded with a sharp gasp and Bill’s hands flying up to grasp his hair. Dipper traced his tongue over the indents in his skin, tasting sweat and copper, before sitting up and pinning Bill’s hands back to the bed.

“I didn’t say you could do that.”

Bill let out a whine of disappointment, which was quickly muffled as Dipper slid his fingers into his mouth. Dipper’s skin prickled with heat as the demon made wet, lewd noises, moaning around the intrusion as his tongue wrapped around Dipper’s fingers, saliva trickling down his jaw as Dipper forced his mouth open.

“Sometimes,” Dipper said, “when you’re being extra irritating, I start to wonder what it’d take to shut you up.” His thumb rubbed against Bill’s bottom lip, a gesture which was almost covetous. Bill’s eye fluttered shut, his jaw slackening as he took in more of Dipper’s fingers.

“It’s almost a shame you’re not human more often. Otherwise, I could just do this—” here, he thrust his fingers deeper into Bill’s throat and oh, how convenient, no gag reflex – “only, I wouldn’t be using my hands.”

He’d thought about it a few times over the past week, at times when his common sense began to fray from overwork and sleep deprivation. Usually in the shower, hand working furiously around his cock as he remembered the press of Bill’s body against his, wondering what might have happened if he’d pushed a little harder.

The thought of Bill’s lips stretched around him. The thought of returning the favour. Of riling up the
demon to the point of overstimulation, until his hands were twisted in Dipper’s hair as he gasped. He’d tried not to wonder if their mental connection meant Bill would know about these thoughts, that he’d have to face the demon with the shared knowledge of what he’d done, of what he wanted to do-

Somehow, it had been the thought that Bill definitely knew, that he had to know about every single filthy, depraved fantasy that had ever crossed Dipper’s mind, which sent him over the edge.

Bill’s muffled moan dragged his attention back to the present. He’d unconsciously begun shifting against Bill’s hips at the recollection, and now he did so deliberately, relishing in the delicious friction.

“So, what do you think?” he asked, a little breathless, withdrawing his fingers with an obscene sound. “Do you want me to fill your mouth with my cock?”

“Please.” Bill gasped. He looked dazed, fingers tightening around the bedsheets as he tried to rock against Dipper.

“I’ll consider it.” Dipper commented, surveying his hand, and the indents Bill’s teeth had left. “After you learn not to use your teeth.”

“I could pull them out for you.” Bill said, a glimmer of his usual humour flickering through.

“You could.” Dipper acknowledged, his other hand sliding down to slip beneath the fabric of Bill’s pants. The demon groaned as Dipper palmed his cock, before sliding his hand up, his thumb stroking the sensitive tip. He slid his hand back down, quickly building a rhythm as Bill writhed and gasped beneath him.

He kept his eyes fixed on Bill’s face, how his expression twisted into something almost like pain as Dipper worked his cock. His other hand trailed down to Bill’s left nipple, watched the demon arch and keen as he twisted the sensitive nub.

“So much for a mute button.” Bill said breathlessly. His eye was glazed over, and he looked half-senseless with pleasure. His cock was leaking precome, each slide of Dipper’s hand growing slicker with his arousal. He watched the demon fall apart under his hands, and the emptiness inside him hungered.

“Tell me you need this.” Dipper’s abrupt statement was punctuated by a sharp bite to Bill’s neck.

“That’s…” Bill’s mouth fell open at a particularly deft twist of Dipper’s hand. “That’s not a question, kid.”

“It doesn’t matter. Tell me.”

Bill gritted his teeth, apparently uninclined to respond. But then Dipper squeezed, and something in the demon seemed to break.

“Fuck. Yes. I need you, Pine Tree. I need you so much and I don’t - fuck that feels good - I don’t even know why. You drive me insane – yes right there – because even after what you did – yes yes yes don’t stop – I can’t stop thinking of what you could do if I could just set you free.”

That wasn’t what Dipper had asked. It was more – it was verging on too much. He tried to forget Bill’s words, focus instead on his desperate expression, how his hands stayed knotted in the bedspread as he thrashed under Dipper’s touch. Still, the emptiness churned and roiled, its bottomless appetite still unsatisfied.
This was triumph, of a kind. The sort of meaningless victory that left him yearning for more.

“I want to see you unfettered,” Bill gasped, “I want to engulf and devour everything holding you back – *fuck fuck fuck Pine Tree I’m close-*“

Dipper closed his eyes, breathing in Bill’s scent. The emptiness surged, pressing against his lids like a rising tide. He ignored it, focusing instead on how Bill arched against him, shuddering, as he came. He felt warm wetness against his fingers, followed by the slowing rise and fall of the demon’s chest.

(He didn’t feel anything.)

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Bill eventually exhaled, propping himself up on an elbow as he recovered. “Well, that was a bundle of fun. You gotta get a bit more practice in with the choking bit though, Pine Tree. I know your lil’ noodle arms can do better than THAT.” He nudged Dipper, then paused. “Pine Tree?”

Dipper didn’t respond. The emptiness had subsided to a dull ache, one which weighed upon his limbs like stone.

“Again, huh?” Bill said, voice dry. “Alright, kid, we’ve got at least five minutes before your conscience really starts kicking down the door, and the least I can do is give you a decent orgasm or two before you inevitably decide to drown in your own self-loathing and guilt – so, whaddya say I return the favour?”

That pulled Dipper back into the land of lucidity. “*Seriously, Bill?”*

“Ooh, maybe I could use my mouth! I mean, your imagination was pretty vivid on that one-”

“No.” Dipper straightened, blinking a few times. The room was shrouded in deep, still shadow. The only source of light was Bill’s left eye, which let off a faint golden glow. Belying his mischievous tone, it was fixed on him with something like concern. “You’d probably end up biting it off anyway.”

“Hey, you gotta break a few eggs to make an omelette! And by eggs I mean your WEIRD FLESHY MAMMALIAN GENITALIA, which defy all attempts to comprehend their PRIMITIVE UNVIABILITY! I mean, look at them, just DANGLING THERE, TEMPTING THE CLAWED HANDS OF FATE. It’s a miracle you don’t get them snagged in MOVING MACHINE PARTS or STOLEN BY PREDATORS more often!”

The demon rambled on as Dipper stumbled to his feet, switching on the lamp before snatching the box of tissues from his desk. He wiped Bill’s come off his fingers, trying not too hard to think about how it had gotten there in the first place.

Unfortunately, the purpling bruises blooming across Bill’s neck were considerably harder to ignore. Dipper sucked in a breath, reaching out to brush a finger against the tender skin.

Bill stiffened, catching Dipper’s hand before it could reach him. “I’m fine, Pine Tree.”

Dipper stilled, still a little too numb for the rejection to sting. “You’re doing it again.”

“Doing what?”

“Pushing me away. It’s just… I don’t get it. You let me *hurt* you.”
“You looked like you needed it.”

“I shouldn’t have.” Dipper said. “That was messed up. Why did I do that?”

Why had he done that?

Bill rolled onto his back, expression blanking. “Pine Tree, there’s two hundred thousand dimensions out there which consider triangles the most erotic form in existence. You haven’t plundered the depths of depravity until you’ve heard what these sickos would do to my poor innocent vertices. Your fantasies of choking me with or without the involvement of your reproductive organs are positively adorable in comparison.”

Dipper went still, considering.

“That’s the thing.” His focus sharpened, awareness gradually trickling back into him like the grains of an hourglass. “You know what my fantasies are like. You live in my head. Have I… wanted to do this before?”

“Alright, so maybe this was a bit of a change from your usual daydreams of us frolicking through fields of flowers.” Bill acknowledged. His gaze wasn’t quite meeting Dipper’s. “But you know what they say! Nerd on the streets, PSYCHOPATHIC AXE-MURDERER between the sheets. And also sometimes on the streets, for variety!”

“You know what I mean.” Dipper said, a little nettled. “I usually don’t even like the thought of seeing you hurt.”

“No, but you like the idea of control a little too much to be a well-adjusted person.” Bill replied pointedly. “If I remember correctly – Tuesday you were thinking of me on my knees-”

“Yeah, but that was normal.” Dipper pressed on, refusing to be dissuaded by the heat rising in his cheeks. “Seriously, I challenge you to find one teenage boy who hasn’t at least thought of jacking off on someone’s face at some point.

“You’d be surprised, Pine Tree. But I get your point. You’ve got issues, but not sexual issues.” Bill conceded. “Your tastes are positively vanilla. Pure as the driven snow.”

“I wouldn’t go so far-” Dipper began.

“Beige wallpaper. Empty, echoing rooms. DESOLATE, BLANK SPACES WHERE NO ONE CAN HEAR YOU SCREAM.” Bill recited flatly.

“Yeah, okay, I get it.” Dipper grimaced. “So what I’m asking is… where did that come from?” He dared to spare another glance at the bruises on Bill’s neck. True to the demon’s prediction, the guilt was starting to creep back in.

Bill hesitated. “…Five years ago.”

Dipper started. Part of him had sort of expected it, but it had come as a surprise anyway. “You mean… did we…?”

“No.” Bill replied. “Not exactly. But you were keeping a lot of things… suppressed, back then.”

“Huh.” Dipper said. “Yeah, I can kind of see that.” He had kind of felt it, too, when Bill had pushed him away. And even earlier, such as when Chad had threatened the demon at the dance. Remnants of mingled hatred and some twisted, possessive sort of protectiveness which writhed like a sickening
“You know how I sealed a bunch of your memories away so that your brain wouldn’t collapse on itself thanks to the ENDURING TRAUMA of your FUCKED-UP EXISTENCE? Well, it hasn’t been working out QUITE AS NICEFLY as I’d hoped.” Bill sat up straight, his eye fixed on Dipper’s. “You’ve been putting yourself under immense mental strain lately, and it’s starting to wear on the safeguards I EXPERTLY CRAFTED to keep your ASSORTED INSTABILITIES under control. Long story short: your mind’s starting to crack under the pressure.”

Dipper’s eyes widened as Bill’s tirade continued. “Whoa, that – is this another thing where you really should’ve told me what was going on but you didn’t out of some misguided belief in what was best for my overall health and wellbeing?”

“Speak for yourself, kid.” Bill retorted. “I haven’t seen YOU tell Shooting Star the truth yet.”

“I’ve been trying, haven’t I?” Dipper pinched the bridge of his nose, attempting to ward off the inevitable panic. Panic was bad. And from what Bill was saying, panic was going to make him do bad things.

…Actually, he was kinda tempted to dropkick the demon right now. Though maybe that was just a normal reaction to finding out that Bill hadn’t told him about the fact his mind was starting to break apart, Jesus.

“In that case, is there anything we can do?” Dipper asked, keeping his breathing as even as possible.

“Right now, our best possible solution is to reintegrate these memories back into your mind. I’ve spent this past week decrypting them. I told you earlier I wanted to give you a choice about it, but it looks like my hand’s been forced.” Bill replied. “They’re in a separate memory facility right now, but I should have them ready for restoration soon. Course, there’s a not-insubstantial risk that it might end up breaking your brain completely, which is why I didn’t try it sooner!”

“So this is a ‘rip the Band-Aid off before my brain starts rotting’ kind of solution, huh?” Dipper mumbled through his hands.

“Got it in one, Pine Tree!” Bill slapped him on the arm genially. Dipper winced.

“Well, if it means I don’t start hurting you again…” Dipper glanced at the bruises on Bill’s neck. “Come to think of it, why haven’t you healed them? You can, right?”

Bill blinked. “Right! THAT! Sure, I could heal ‘em up, if that’d make you feel better.”

Dipper swallowed, fighting down the urge to touch the bruised skin. “It isn’t about what I want.”

Bill’s expression flattened. “In that case, I’m not gonna bother. I like ‘em, and I liked getting ‘em.” He pressed down on a bite mark experimentally, flinched, and then did it again. “Mm. Yeah, I’m keeping these.”

Dipper flushed, glancing away towards his desk. Papers from the safe littered the surface, each lined with inscrutable clusters of numbers. Bill must have been trying to decipher them. He lifted one up to the light.

2,72,30 23,1,23 10,1,1 9,17,2 8,10,9 5,6,29 16,66,1 2,1,25.

10,2,11 14,3,18 8,23,8 1,1,8 8,10,9 4,11,8 11,64,27.
It didn’t make any sense. Then again, a lot of things didn’t, these days.

Dipper turned back to Bill, trying to string together some kind of response. “Even so, I really shouldn’t have – I guess what I meant to say was… I’m sorry. I should have done that. Not for these reasons, at least.”

He quietened as Bill began glaring at him. It felt a little like staring into an angry sun. “There’s a lot of things I want you to be sorry for, Pine Tree. This isn’t one of them.”

Dipper didn’t have anything he could say to that. They lapsed into silence, which was broken by Bill’s abrupt question.

“What reasons?”

“Huh?” Dipper said, and then bit his lip, trying to recall whatever perverse logic his mind had been running on at the time. “Oh. It’s kinda fuzzy but… I guess what I was thinking was that I…”

He trailed off, hesitating. “I wanted you to need me as much I needed you. And I wanted you to show it.”

Bill hummed, shifting slightly. “Is that so bad? Needing each other?”

“Well, no, but…”

“It isn’t like we’d ever trust each other.”

Bill head was tilted forwards, casting his expression in shadow. Dipper couldn’t read it, but maybe that didn’t matter. He reached out to switch off the lamp, casting the room into gentle darkness. He padded back to the bed, pulling the sheets back up with him as he went.

Bill’s arms wrapped around him, pulling him close, like tentacles dragging him closer and closer towards the gaping maw of the abyss. Dipper didn’t resist. He could feel the demon pressed against him, his hair tickling the back of Dipper’s neck. The bed smelled of sex and sweat and the faintest hint of something like brimstone.

“Is that why you’ve been avoiding me lately? Even after what I said to Grunkle Ford?”

Bill’s arms tightened. “A second chance doesn’t mean you actually trust me. It just means you didn’t have a choice, and you’re trying to make the most out of it.”

Dipper hesitated. “Is that what you want from me, then? Trust?”

Bill huffed out an amused sound. “There’s a lot of things I want from you, Pine Tree.”

“Like what?”

“Well, all the bones in your right leg, for starters. I’ve been itching to start a collection. Ooh, and maybe you could throw in your liver. I miss my old liver pile.”
“What about things which aren’t my internal organs?”

Bill hummed. “Well, I’d like you to do that again sometime. And it’d sure be nice if you’d grovel for my forgiveness a lil’ more often. For the things I actually think deserve grovelling.” He paused for a moment, and when he spoke again, his tone was serious. “But mostly, I want… time. I need time to figure out what this means. What you mean. But at least we have that, don’t we?”

Dipper swallowed. “Yeah.” They had too much time in all the wrong places, and not enough where they really needed it. “We do.”

The lighthearted lilt returned to Bill’s voice. “See, Pine Tree, there’s so many things I need from you. Limbs, organs, company. Trust doesn’t have to come into it.”

“I could trust you.” Dipper heard himself say. “One day. Maybe.”

He could feel the sharp edges of Bill’s grin against the nape of his neck. “Yeesh, kid, I think that hurt worse than the strangling. You oughta leave the lies to me.”

Dipper couldn’t reply to that. So he didn’t, letting Bill’s hand stroke his back. It was a soothing gesture, one you might give an animal about to be sent to the abattoir.

“I’m not your enemy.” He eventually said.

“No.” Bill agreed. “Not right now, you’re not.”

Dipper shifted to face Bill. The demon was staring at him, his features obscured by shadow. All with the exception of his eye, which was fixed upon him. Unflinching. Unblinking. Always watching.

He shivered, a flicker of the old fear bubbling to the surface. But instead of fleeing, Dipper closed his eyes, pressing himself closer to Bill’s warmth, letting the abyss swallow him whole.

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Leaves crinkled under his feet as he jogged forward, morning dew tickling at the soles of his feet. Dipper focused on the rhythmical in-and-out of his breathing, letting everything else wash away from his mind. Ahead of him, Angela and Thorne were conversing in easy tones. On another day, he might have felt annoyed by how effortless this pace seemed to them, but right now he was he was trying to concentrate on the burn of his muscles as he ran, a burn which slowly consumed the nagging thoughts which had chased him all through the weekend.

Bill had returned to his original form at some point while Dipper was asleep, which was something of a relief. The demon had returned to the confines of Dipper’s closet, while Dipper had busied himself with homework. Or at least pretended to.

They hadn’t talked. That was fine, though. Dipper wasn’t entirely sure what he was supposed to say. Bill had made it entirely clear apologies weren’t welcome, and Dipper suspected any attempt to discuss his memories of Five Years Ago would be nipped in the bud. So that had left him with only his thoughts, which somehow managed to be less pleasant company than Bill. He had spent Sunday dogged by the persistent feeling that he was, somehow, the wrong size for the rest of him. Like he was simultaneously too small and too big to fit in his skin, a vertigo-inducing sensory cocktail which had him burrowing further and further into his work.

By the time they slowed to a stop, Dipper’s mind felt comfortably blank, like an old whiteboard which had just been given a thorough scrubbing. He walked to catch up with the other two, who were currently tossing a football around, still talking.
“-so Lisa’s sayin’ she doesn’t remember anything that happened over the last few days.” Thorne chuckled, throwing the football at Angela with a force that might have knocked Dipper back a few steps. Angela, however, caught it easily. “And there mom was, worryin’ herself sick.”

“I notice she wasn’t worrying herself sick when you went missing.” Angela pointed out, a little dryly.

“Nah, she’s just good at not showin’ it.” Thorne laughed again, though the sound rang a little false. “Dipper, catch!”

Dipper managed to catch the proffered ball, albeit with a pained grunt and slight stumble. “Oof. Mabel’s doing better too. Doesn’t remember anything about how she tried to row our pet pig because she thought he was a boat and our lawn was the sea.”

“Sounds like she had it pretty bad.” Angela said, catching his slightly off-kilter throw. “Doesn’t she have exams to catch up on?”

‘Yeah, I think Principelle’s scheduled make-up exams for everyone who was sick, though they’ll get a bit of time to study.” Dipper said. He managed to catch the football with another grunt. “She’s getting an extension on her art assignments too.”

“Cool, cool.” Upon receiving his throw, Angela paused for a few seconds, tossing the ball up and down in her hand, before appearing to make up her mind.

"Hey, Thorne!” she called out, before hurling the football as far as it would go. "Fetch!"

The jock streaked after it so enthusiastically Dipper could almost see his tail wagging behind him. Angela smiled fondly as he disappeared down and under the hill, before turning to Dipper. “There was something I wanted to tell you, but I didn’t know if it was a good idea to do it in front of Thorne.”

“What is it?” Dipper asked, interest piqued.

“Well,” Angela hesitated, “Seraph called me yesterday.”

“Whoa. What’d you do?”

“Slammed the phone down the moment I heard her voice.” Angela replied frankly.

“Whoa.” Dipper repeated.

“I told her that I needed some time.” Angela crossed her arms, looking tired. “Yeah. I reminded her about that.”

“So… uh… what’d she say?”

“That she wants to apologise for that, but she’d prefer to do it in person, if possible.” Angela said. “I told her that I needed some time.”

Time. Dipper’s heart squeezed. “That’s… fair enough.”
“Yeah, that’s what she told me.” Angela looked away, watching as the wind collected red-gold leaves, blowing them into dizzying spirals of motion. “She said she’d wait. Thing is, I have no idea what I want to do.”

“I think I’m angry with her. I know she was… hurting… after she left Chapelwick, so I understand giving her some space. But it’s been so long without a single word from her – and it’s just not fair, how it’s always been like this. She’s always been the one calling the shots, always keeping her distance, and I just went along with it because I was an idiot with a big dumb crush on her. But this – this is like the last straw, because even if she didn’t realise how I felt about her… I thought we were friends.”

Dipper stayed silent, letting her continue. After fiddling with her ponytail in quiet frustration, she did so. “But at the same time, I’m... scared. I’m scared that if I don’t say anything – if I let this chance slip away – there won’t be another opportunity.”

“She shouldn’t be making you feel like that.” Dipper said quietly.

“What? No, that’s not – I don’t think that Seraph would abandon me just because I won’t forgive her. That’s not the kind of person she is. Heck, if I told her I was in trouble right now, she’d probably come running. I’m just worried that if I don’t manage to say something this time, she’s going to think I haven’t forgiven her, and I won’t have the nerve to try and reach out again.”

“Do you forgive her?” Dipper asked.

“That’s…” Angela sighed, “I don’t know. To be honest, I think I was ready to forgive her from the beginning, but I… I just don’t want to make it too easy for her, you know? Because this… this was pretty serious. I mean… what do you think?”

“It’s not really my place to tell you whether you should forgive her or not.” Dipper said carefully. “But it sounds to me like you’ve already made up your mind. Maybe you could hear her out and then decide whether she really means it?”

“Like it’d make much of a difference either way.” Angela snorted. “But I get what you mean. I guess I’ll have to think it over a bit more.”

“Sorry I couldn’t help much.” Dipper looked down, toeing at a leaf with his shoe.

“Nah, it’s cool.” Angela smiled slightly. “I mostly just needed to vent. Thanks for that, by the way.”

"I got it!" They looked up as Thorne returned, football held aloft like a trophy.

"Great job!" Angela gave him a thumbs up before ruffling his hair, abandoning all pretence of levity. "Who's a good boy?"

Thorne perked up, his eyes shining. "It's me!"

"Oh my god." Dipper said.

“Still, you sure took your time down there.” Angela commented. “Did I throw the ball that hard?”

“Nah, that was – actually, I almost forgot! I gotta show you guys!” Before Dipper and Angela could tell what was happening, Thorne had herded them like an overenthusiastic sheepdog down the trail he had followed. They soon reached the outskirts of the school, where Dipper remembered laying down spools of red thread winding between the trunks of oversized trees.
“Look!” Thorne pointed at a particularly huge specimen, its branches covered in swaying, fluttering gold. “Ain’t it awesome?”

“It’s a tree.” Dipper said.

And then he squinted. “Wait… are these…?”

Angela let out a long, low whistle.

What he had initially thought were golden-brown leaves rippling in the breeze were, in fact, the flapping wings of hundreds upon thousands of monarch butterflies. Dipper watched as the colossal mass shifted slightly in the wind, a few stray butterflies fluttering loose before returning to the fold.

“Man.” Thorne whispered, almost reverently. “You ever see anythin’ like this?”

Come to think of it, during Weirdmageddon, Dipper could vaguely recall Bill replacing the leaves of several trees with plump, venomous centipedes which launched themselves towards anybody unfortunate enough to be in the vicinity. Still, that wasn’t quite the same as this, so Dipper wasn’t technically lying when he replied, “Not really.”

“It’s weird, though.” Angela remarked, after another period of awed staring. “We’re not usually in the migration path for monarch butterflies.”

“Really?” Dipper asked. “So you guys haven’t seen this before?”

“No, they shouldn’t come here.” Angela frowned. “I think our fall’s too cold for them.”

“Must be all that global warmin’.” Thorne suggested.

“Maybe.” Dipper said. The living mass of insects swayed and rippled, leaving behind a lingering sensation of unease in the pit of his stomach. Or perhaps that was Bill, stirring to wary alertness in the back of his mind. “Maybe it’s something else.”

Chapter End Notes

Hoo boy this chapter was a doozy to write. Mostly because it was the culmination of a whole bunch of foreshadowing in regards to Dipper’s character, as well as the underlying implications of Bill and Dipper’s relationship. I had to rewrite the sex scene a few times before I felt it was hitting the right beats. Whew.

On a side note, the reconciliation of diametrically opposed philosophical standpoints through the medium of breathplay is highly risky and should be attempted only by professionals. Please do not try this at home.

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