This Divide Between You And I

by cellard00rs

Summary

Ford tries to explain himself to Stan and some truths better left buried come to the surface.

Notes

….so. Yeah. If you read this trash thanks. *runs off into the night to get over my embarrassingly bad writing*

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Russian Translation: https://ficbook.net/readfic/3513382
Chapter 1

Stan winces as he lies on his side, facing the wall. He can’t get comfortable no matter what position he tries. Every part of him feels sore and worked over. Not that it really matters. Not a hell of a lot does considering how his life is going of late. He tries to think of something positive, like the kids, but his mind can’t help circling back to the newest occupant of the Mystery Shack.

Stanford. His brother. He has him back, after all this time, and they can’t even look at one another. Stan shouldn’t care. He really shouldn’t. It was like he told Ford; the kids are the only real family he has left. But it’s hard to feel that way whenever he sees his brother at the kitchen table or in the hallway. Ford has kept to his word, mostly sticking to the basement but every now and then they cross paths. They’ve been civil to one another, mumbled monosyllabic conversations like ‘hey’ and ‘excuse me’ but not much else.

Mabel, sweet girl she is, has tried her best to get them past it. She’s tried family dinners and game nights and come just short of hog tying them to one another to get them to talk. But there’s nothing to say. What can they say? Their relationship is gone, broken. It’s a long forgotten legend like most of the occurrences in Gravity Falls.

And maybe it’s better this way. It’s been a long, long time. They’re not kids anymore. It’s too late for them to sail around the world now. Gray hair, bad eyes, wrinkling skin – none of it adds up to adventure and excitement and treasure hunting. Honestly, what exactly did Stan think was going to happen when he brought Ford back? That his twin would embrace him with open arms? That they’d run the Mystery Shack together? Ford wasn’t the type to con the unassuming populace and there was no way Stan could do any of the nerdy, boring stuff Ford was into like – quantum mechanical mineral measuring or whatever.

Everything he had done to get the portal up and running had taken what little geekery he might have had inside him. And it wasn’t much. Hell, everything that had involved the portal and its repairs had been like pulling teeth. Slow, arduous, bordering on masochism but he had done it – all of it – to bring Ford back because that was all that mattered. But, like most things, he just hadn’t thought it through.

It doesn’t matter if they are in the same house now because he realizes that he was actually closer to his brother when there was a dimensional rift between them. Stan starts counting dollar bills in his mind; a surefire classic that usually helps him catch some z’s when he hears his bedroom door squeak. He starts to turn to see who it is when a deep voice asks in a cautious whisper, “Stanley? Are you awake?”

Stan’s mouth goes dry and his whole body pulls into a tighter ball. He thinks about not answering but his smart mouth beats him to the punch, “No, I’m playing poker.”

Stan hears Ford shift his weight and he bites the inside of his cheek, wondering if he should roll over and face him, stop him, do something. But the choice is taken away from him as he hears his door close. But he can still feel Ford. He knows his brother is still in the room, hears him let out a heavy sigh and his voice is quietly muffled, “I can leave if you want.”

Stan doesn’t have to look to know Ford is talking more to the closed door than to him. He can picture him there, forehead pressed against the wood. Stan doesn’t know why he’s so apprehensive. While they’ve been civil to one another as of late, Ford was nothing short of condescending when he first arrived.
Give me back my name; give me back my house – that had been the gist of it. No, ‘thank you’. No, ‘I missed you’. Just the same regurgitated rhetoric – you ruined my life, you made me lose out on my dream school, you’re an irresponsible moron and yes, he hadn’t exactly said the last one but he may as well have. His whole being had radiated with it and wasn’t that always the way? Ford was right, Stan was wrong. Ford was the golden child and Stan was the worthless lunkhead.

My god, how had they even been close in the first place? Was it merely the bond brought about by being twins? Or was it…

Stan quickly banishes those heated memories from his mind and instead tries to focus on the important facts. Ford is a blazing jerk who always thinks he’s right and he’s done nothing short of run his mouth off since he came back. But right now, in this moment, he’s acting…hesitant.

Stan hears the knob start to turn and the words leap out of him, “What do you want, Ford?”

Silence answers him for several heartbeats before he hears a gentle, “To talk.”

“So…talk.”

Ford doesn’t say a word and Stan feels his sarcastic nature rising to the forefront. He’s just about to dryly point out that Ford is doing quite the opposite of talking when he hears heavy footsteps. Ford approaches his bed and Stan again debates the merits of turning to face him. Ford’s voice is uncomfortably close, “Is it-is it okay if I sit?”

Stan shrugs, “It’s a free country.”

“Is it?”

Stan’s eyes narrow and Ford elaborates, “I’ve been gone a long time. Thirty years. A lot could have changed. For all I know, we’ve been overrun by Australia.”

Stan can’t help but smirk, “Australia?”

“They could have weaponized kangaroos.”

“That supposed to be funny?”

“Maybe.”

He rolls his eyes, “Leave the jokes to me, Poindexter.”

The bed dips with Ford’s added weight and Stan ignores how his cheeks heat up. He’s too old to feel this kind of shit. Instead he clears his throat, “So, what do you want?”

Ford is sitting up but the bed is really too small for two. Stan can feel Ford’s body touching his and its like that stupid lightning ball doohickey he has in the Shack. You touch the globe and the purple ‘lightning’ twines towards your fingertips. That’s what their contact is like. Light but oddly electrifying. Again, too old for this kind of shit but he feels it all the same and it’s hard to ignore.

“I want to tell you why I didn’t thank you.”

Stan lets out a groan, “Never mind. Get out. I can fight with you in the morning.”

“I don’t want to fight,” Ford says but the words still carry some heat, “I want to explain.”

“Fine, fine. Go ahead. This oughta be rich.”
Ford huffs and for a second Stan thinks he’s going to leave but instead his brother waits, as if trying to calm himself. When he speaks next his words are cooler, “I didn’t thank you because it was a reckless thing to do.”

“Thought you said you didn’t want to fight.”

“Just shut up and let me finish!” Ford snaps, then curses under his breath, “Jesus, Stanley, I’m…I’m trying to tell you, alright? Just…would you let me? Please?”

Stan harrumphs and waves a hand above his head to signal him to continue. Ford starts again, “It was a reckless thing to do but I’m not saying you were stupid for doing it. I know that’s what you think I mean when I say it but it’s not. You’re not stupid, Stanley.”

The sentence makes a lump form in his throat. One he viciously gulps down as Ford continues, “But you are reckless. A reckless knucklehead that I was worried about and I did a pretty poor job of explaining that when I came out of the portal and I wanted to…apologize for that. It’s…taken me a couple of days to-to acclimate back to this dimension. Especially considering I never expected to return to it.”

“You saying you were suffering from jet lag?”

“In a manner of speaking,” Ford mutters, “And we do have a lot of unresolved issues. Ones we never got to talk about. When I had you come here all those years ago I was…” Ford pauses and Stan gets the impression he’s struggling for how to continue. Eventually he does, “There was so much going on. So much I had been through and I was so focused on it, too focused on it. There were things happening here. Unexplainable, awful things and I was in such a hurry to try and fix it that I didn’t take into account your own troubles.”

“Like my mullet?” Stan offers out of nowhere and Ford lets out a breath, “Was that supposed to be funny?”

“Better than your weaponized kangaroos.”

“That mullet was pretty awful.”

A laugh bottles in Stan’s throat but doesn’t quite escape, “Go on.”

“Anyway, we fought. Again. I’ve…regretted that.”

Stan swears his marked shoulder twinges and he rubs at it, “Me too.”

“Then I was…gone. I was…there. And I expected to stay there but when you brought me back and I realized you used the portal I was upset because I was worried for you,” the bed makes noise as Ford shifts to look at him, “Do you understand? When I first returned I didn’t see the children or Soos…I just saw you. You activating the portal and possibly throwing your life away. Anything could have come through, Stan. You have to understand that. Anything.”

The way Ford says the word makes Stan’s veins turn to ice and he realizes, with a jolt, that while Ford said he was worried what he really meant was that he was scared. And Stan can feel that fear. Can feel it settle over him like a cold, wet blanket . In a whisper, he asks, “What was it like? Where…where you were?”

Ford is silent for a long time and Stan doesn’t think he’s going to answer until he hears a soft, “Don’t ever ask me that again.”
Stan swallows thickly and he wonders what will happen now when he suddenly feels Ford’s hand on his own. He forgot he’d been rubbing at his shoulder. Ford’s hand is large and warm and the extra finger feels so perfectly familiar that the lump returns to Stan’s throat. Ford’s voice is normal again when he speaks, “But I am glad to be back. And that you are safe and that I got to meet the children. They’re quite delightful. Even if Dipper is a bit…overzealous.”

“You telling me you don’t like the hero worship?”

“I’m not much of a hero.”

Stan wants to argue but doesn’t even know where to begin. Instead he feels gentle fingers trace his shoulder, pushing aside his own hand and the edges of his shirt to reveal his scar. He shrinks away from the contact and he can feel Ford stiffen, “I…caused that.”

“Yes.”

“Stan…”

“Enough with the apologies, don’tcha think? You and I could apologize to one another for centuries and nothing’d make up for everything that’s happened. ‘Sides, I’ve said I’m sorry loads of times and I ain’t seen anyone forgiving me.”

“I take it you are referring to the incident involving my dream school.”

“That’d be the one.”

Stan really expects Ford to leave now. This is usually where their fighting starts. Instead, much to his surprise, Ford lies down next to him. Stan is more tempted than ever to roll over but he continues to resist, instead curling up tighter. Ford seems undeterred by the action, “Dad shouldn’t have kicked you out.”

Stan’s eyes widen at that but Ford goes on, “I talked to him about it. It wasn’t until a long while afterwards. I’ll admit I was mad. I was mad for a long, long time. Honestly, I’m still mad about it sometimes but…I did talk to him about it. Made some throw away remark about whether or not he’d talked to you, whether or not he regretted what he did but he was…you know, our father. Stoic, proud.”

“Not impressed?”

Ford grunts, “He’s stubborn and inflexible.”

“Sounds like someone I know.”

“Look who’s talking. Why don’t you look in a mirror sometime?”

“I’d just see your face.”

“Think we established you’d see Dad’s face.”

Stan grimaces, “I told you not to say that. I don’t look like him.”

Stan can’t see him but he imagines Ford is grinning, “Still, the impression I got was that he did regret it but that it was too late to do anything about it. He’d put his foot down and that was that.”

“That was Pops for you.”
“I…take it him and Mom…?”

Stan nods then remembers Ford probably can’t see him in the dark room. Or maybe he can because Ford just lets out a breath, “I figured. Shermy?”

“Gone. That’s why I got the kids. Their parents didn’t have too many other options. Sent them to me for the summer so they could get some fresh air and sunshine.”

“Bet they’d be upset to know they’re getting an awful lot more than that.”

“Yeah,” Stan agrees, “Don’t think they’d be too jazzed to hear about the whole opening portals to other dimensions and facing off against zombies and pterodactyls.”

“Wait - you faced a pterodactyl?”

Stan nods again, “Punched it too.”

Ford lets out a laugh. The sound is dry, like he hasn’t done it in a long, long time but Stan remembers the sound and hearing it makes his own heart constrict painfully in his chest. It feels so good that for a few moments he forgets all about the mountains of shit they have between them. After all, it’s not like Ford’s changed his mind about his name and the future of the Shack. And it’s not like they can turn back the clock and get back all that lost time. Still, the sound is nice and Stan decides to just throw caution to the wind and enjoy it for a little while.

But when Ford speaks again the laughter is gone and there’s a melancholy tone, “Seems I missed a lot.”

The words are out before Stan can stop them, “You really never thought you’d come back?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Stan can feel the bed move, knows Ford shrugged, “There was no reason to think otherwise. I didn’t expect you to restart the portal. I assumed you would read the journal and know not to.”

Stan’s mouth sets into a firm line, “You shoulda known I would stop at nothing to get you back.”

“We hadn’t spoken in years. When last I saw you, we fought. I didn’t…”

Stan finally does roll over and he looks into Ford’s face. The darkness is not as resolute as he thought and he can see every line, every curve and he speaks firmly, “Stanford, you’re my brother. You’re my twin.”

Ford looks up at him, voice quiet; “I know.”

Stan repeats himself, “Then you shoulda known I would stop at nothing to get you back. Nothing.”

Ford licks his lips, “Stan…there’s…there’s something else you should know. It’s the other reason I came here tonight. It’s another reason I was…so-so livid when I returned.”

“What?”

Ford looks away, “Where I was….it was vast. It-It wasn’t like I was waiting where the portal first dropped me. As I’ve said, I never expected to return. When you reopened the portal it came to me. It was drawn to me. Because of you.”
Stan slowly digests this, “So…wait…what are you saying?”

“I’m saying that the bond between us transcended two dimensions. It pulled me to you.”

“…Because we’re twins?”

The look Ford gives him is telling and Stan feels his heart thump awkwardly in his chest, “Oh.”

Exactly. Now do you see why I was understandably alarmed when I arrived here?”

“But-but that was a long time ago! A lifetime ago.”

“Apparently not as far as we’re concerned. At least subconsciously we both feel…we still feel…” Ford can’t seem to continue and frankly Stan’s not sure he wants him to. He thought that was over. Done. But as he lies here in bed with his brother he knows that’s not true. It’s never been true. He feels his face heat up, pulse jittery and he tries to write it off with a bad joke, “So I shoulda told the kids about what happened after that dance then, huh?”

Ford clears his throat, “That would have been entirely inappropriate.”

“Since when do I care about being appropriate?” Stan grumbles but he knows Ford is right. That’s why he only mentioned the part where Angie McCorkle threw her punch in Ford’s face and him doing the same to himself right after in solidarity. The bit afterwards, the bit when they went home – that was private. Private and not something the kids should know about. Ever.

In fact, it was something that no one should ever know. No one but the two of them. The memories of that night surface, rising from the dark depths of his mind where he always pushes them and he valiantly tries to stamp them back. It’s best left forgotten.

Or is it?

Stan thinks over what Ford told him about their connection and says, “Wait, earlier you said it was ‘we’. You, uh, you said we both feel…”

“Yes, it works both ways,” Ford grudgingly admits, “Once you reopened the portal it found an easy path to me. And not just because you wanted me back. Part of me must have wanted to return and in particular wanted to return to, ah…”

He doesn’t say it but Stan still hears the ‘you’. Ford wanted to come back to him. Whether he wants to admit it aloud or not. Stan looks over at him, “Isn’t that a good thing?”

“Clearly you don’t understand the insanity of the situation,” Ford rubs at his face, “Christ, you’d think after thirty years I would be over this! Smarter than this.”

“I don’t follow.”

Ford lets out an aggravated groan and ruffles his hair, “Goddammit, Stanley, you infuriating idiot! How can you not get the simple logistics of this? The violation of social mores! My intellect should be better, stronger, and more powerful than my emotions – particularly my baser ones!”

“Is this your weird way of saying you still got a crush on me?” The question bitterly leaves Stan before he can stop it. He doesn’t know why he says it. It doesn’t really matter. The moment he’s done Ford is letting out a snarl and rolling over top of him, pinning him down to the mattress hard. He slants his lips across Stan’s in a rough, awkward kiss.
For a second Stan is back in time, back to that moment after the dance, when they had been kids and up in their room. They’d just been fooling around. Just been trying to get over the disappointment of the night. Blue and pink suits covered in punch to one side, both of them inside their blanket fort dubbed ‘Fort Stan’. And somehow, someway, it had led to a kiss. Their first – not their last. And now Stan is back in the present and it’s like trying to relearn to ride a bicycle. Or maybe something even more difficult to tackle – like a unicycle.

Ford draws back quickly, looking beyond mortified and he’s shaking his head, muttering under his breath, “So stupid, such a mistake. Should just forget I ever…we shouldn’t…”

But Stan stops him, hands threading into the hair at the back of his head and drawing him downwards once more, “No. We should. Absolutely.”

And then Stan is kissing Ford. And it’s still terribly weird. Ford’s lips are soft and warm. They’re damp and sweet. Stan knows his are chapped and dry and probably aren’t all that pleasant. But he keeps trying – head angling for a better connection, a deeper contact. It’s like trying to light a fire with damp matches but he won’t give up, insistent, eager to get the flame going.

Ford’s own lips move a fraction as his body becomes less stiff, mouth parting just enough to allow Stan’s tongue access and that’s when the spark ignites. A deep chested sound of pleasure reverberates through Ford’s whole body and it lights Stan’s up like a Christmas tree. Like old machinery coming back to life they start to work together, against one another, fluid and perfect. Any semblance of the original awkwardness immediately flees in light of this new unity.

The kisses become hot and desperate. Hungry with crushing need. Stan’s hands are now clutching at Ford’s arms, his back, damn near clawing at him. He wants him closer, needs him closer. It’s as if he’s trying to absorb the other man into him, merge them into one person. A sort of hysteria builds up inside him. It’s been too long. It’s just been too damn long. And he missed him So. Fucking. Much.

And he thinks he might be saying these things between the kisses, the heavy breaths and pants and Ford’s forehead rubs against his own and their hips inadvertently grind together and the sound that leaves Stan isn’t even human. And at that, Ford tries to pull back, tries to catch his breath, tries to regain control but Stan won’t let him, dragging him back down, kissing him again and again.

All sense of time and space leaves and there is just this. Just them. And Stan wants more. He wants it all. He needs it all. His hands go for the bottom hem of Ford’s shirt; starts to tug it up, his hot palms meeting warm flesh but that seems to snap his brother out of it. Ford forcibly drags himself away, sits up on the bed, breathless and wild eyed as he breathes, “Can’t…not now. Not yet…”

Stan lays there, heart pounding, body more alive than it’s ever been, wild heat coursing throughout every vein. He feels like he could power an entire city, fight a whole army and as always he speaks before he thinks, “Good to know I won’t be needing Viagra anytime soon.”

“Who is Viagra?”

Stan snorts, “Not a who. A what. It’s a drug for…” he waves to his lower extremities, “Y’know, older men who can’t get the flag up the flagpole.”

Ford looks to where Stan is gesturing and even in the dark Stan knows he has to be bright red, especially when he mumbles, “You are unbelievably crude.”

“Mmm and you love me for it.” The words come out unbidden and they both grow quiet. Ford sighs and rubs at the back of his neck. “I…you’re my brother, Stanley. You’re my twin.”
“And they say you’re a genius.”

“Stanley….” Ford says quietly, tone chastising and Stan’s eyes close, the high from their kisses starting to fade as reality sets back in, “Ford, I know. Okay. I know you’re family. I know it’s wrong. I know that that bugs you and that to the world as a whole everything we just did is…” he swallows, “Look, I know. Okay? I really do but… I just… I don’t care. I never have.”

“I know. But I do.” Ford says firmly, “I always have.”

“Yeah. That’s our problem. Well… one of ‘em anyway.”

Ford slowly rises from the bed and Stan feels the loss of it far more dramatically than he should. Ford goes to the door and his hand hovers over the knob, “I should go.”

“Ford…”

“I told you what I needed to, Stanley. I… explained myself. At least a little better than I did when I first arrived. And we have a lot to work through. Obviously. But… I think we made some progress.”

Before Stan can say another word Ford is gone. Huh. Made some progress. His brother… ever the scientist. Stan lies back down and looks at the ceiling. He runs a hand along his lips, feels the heat there. Then he sets his mouth into a hard line. No. They haven’t made progress. Not yet. Not where it counts. But this isn’t over. Not by a long shot.
So, this has become a series. I just...I have a lot of feelings about these twin knuckleheads. And so this is me writing what I think about it. This bit is from Ford’s point of view but don’t worry, I’ll be back to Stan's next round.

**THEN**

It’s a hot night in Jersey and the punch on his suit is already starting to dry. Ford trudges up the stairs, his twin behind him. Their parents are out for the night, visiting relatives to not so discreetly scam for money. It’s not like their parents didn’t make a decent enough living on their own, but they could always use a little extra cash. Frankly Ford’s glad that he and his brother got to stay behind.

Their parents figured they were old enough to have the house to themselves and they hadn’t wanted them to miss the school dance. Neither of them had had dates but Ford had mentioned to his mother, with no little embarrassment, that he was looking forward to seeing a certain girl there.

No doubt she had talked to his father because the old man had pulled him to one side before they left and gave him a frank (and in his opinion, entirely mortifying and totally unnecessary) talk about sex. The basics of which had been to have a good time but to not ‘knock her up’. Ford had merely nodded because he couldn’t even begin to imagine explaining to his Dad why that wouldn’t happen. For god’s sake, he’d barely even talked to Angie.

And now that he had finally talked to her – really talked to her – he could say without question that she was not interested. Hence the punch-stained suit. Stan’s suit had been stained by himself. He had seen Ford take a face full of Angie’s punch and then immediately done the same to himself. They had laughed it off because there they were – the Pines twins – standing there soaked.

“Guess you always have to match me,” Ford had chuckled.

“You know it, brother,” Stan had returned warmly, “Shoulda got yourself a suit like mine. Harder to tell.”

“Yeah, think I’ll pass. Blue works better for me than pink.”

“It’s salmon, ya jerk!”

“Ohhh, sorry, Mr. Fashion.” Ford had said with an eye roll and then he’d let out a sharp ‘Hey!’ as Stan had tugged him into a headlock, his knuckles rubbing with light affection against his scalp, “I’ll show you, Mr. Science!”

They had wrestled around for a bit before calling the night a bust and now Ford finds that all the good humor from earlier has fled him. He takes off his ruined jacket and tosses it on his bed. He and Stan still share a room even if they outgrew the bunk beds. They now each have their own half of the room. Ford’s side is near the window – constellation maps and pictures of Einstein, Tesla, and Darwin over his bed. Stan’s side is a jumbled mess of dirty clothes, half eaten food and ragged magazines. He put up one or two boxing match ads and an oddball painting of a clown rendered on
black velvet.

Ford endlessly teased him about it but he secretly liked it too. He even had plans to buy Stan another black velvet painting he’d seen in town. It was of a sailboat and he knew his brother would like it, considering their years working on the Stan O’ War. Ford thinks of the ship with a sigh and looks out the window.

It certainly would be nice to sail off tonight. He’s done his best to get over his melancholy about the incident with Angie but every now and then it nags at him. Stan, who has already changed out of his suit and is now in a plain white shirt and boxers, senses his mood because he picks up a dirty ball of clothing off the floor and chucks it at him.

Ford feels it smack against one side of his face and he sputters, “What was that for?”

“Just trying to wipe that sad sack look off your face.”

“I don’t have a look.”

“Yeah, you do. You look like you did that time you got a ‘B’ on your homework. Do you know what I’d do for a ‘B’?”

“Hey, I got that ‘B’ because it was a creative writing project! Besides, I managed to get it bumped up to an ‘A’ when I-”

“Yeah, yeah,” Stan interrupts, “Blah, blah – look, just tell me what’s got you so down in the dumps this time.”

Ford lets out a breath, “Angie…”

“Ah, come on! Don’t tell me you’re actually upset about that. I mean, honestly, I don’t even know why you went up to her in the first place. And since when did you have a thing for Angie McCorkle of all people?”

“I don’t. Not really,” Ford mutters as he sits down, “It’s just…did you know red hair only occurs naturally in one to two percent of the human population?”

Stan pulls a face at this, “So?”

“So, Angie’s a red head. And she seemed nice and…you know, redheads suffer from ridicule and I just thought…I’d hoped…”

Ford looks down at one of his hands. Stan has seen this happen too many times to count and it always sets his teeth on edge, “You telling me someone’s been ridiculing you lately? ‘Cause if so, I need some names.”

Ford's lips curl up a little. He’s always questioned their father’s decision to ‘toughen’ Stan up by making him take boxing lessons. As far as he can tell, all it’s done is given his brother something of a bruiser complex. One that magnifies whenever it becomes clear that Ford is suffering from some bullying.

He shakes his head, “No, no one’s said anything. But I thought maybe Angie would understand. That she’d know what it was like to be…different. And that maybe from there we would hit it off.”

“Is that what you opened up with? ‘Hey Angie, you and I are different from the rest of these bozos so we should hook up’? ‘Cause if so, I can understand the punch in your face a bit more.”
“That’s not what I said,” Ford returns dryly, “I’m not an ignoramus.”

“No, but you do get pretty tongue tied when it comes to the ladies.”

“Oh, and you don’t?”

“Hey! I had a girlfriend.”

“Had being the operative word,” Ford says smartly and he finds himself pelted with another article of dirty clothing. The brothers laugh and Stan shakes his head, “Yeah, but you see, that right there is what should have tipped you off to Angie being no good. After all, she’s Carla’s cousin.”

“Well, you liked Carla an awful lot,” Ford replies, impressed with himself for not sounding bitter. Saying Stan had liked Carla is an understatement. There had been a time when Stan hadn’t been able to shut up about her. It had been ‘Carla this’ and ‘Carla that’. There were times where he had been gone for long hours, off with her, and Ford had done his best not to be jealous.

Done his best and failed miserably. And then there had been the worst of it – the afternoon where he had caught them together in this very room. They had just been making out. Or at least Ford hopes that was all they were doing – it was a blur now and he likes to keep it that way. But every now and then little bits of it pop up in his mind. Stan’s body over hers, Stan’s hands in her hair, lips pressed together and the sounds she was making…

But they had had all their clothes on. He was pretty sure they had had all their clothes on. All he knows for sure is that their Dad should have probably had the frank sex talk with his sibling and not him. Or maybe he already had. Regardless, he was honest enough with himself to admit that Carla was actually one of the reasons he had even bothered to approach Angie.

After all, if one McCorkle girl was willing to give a Pines kid a chance, there was no reason not to think another one would. And there were a lot of McCorkle girls. Their family was one of the biggest in town. He could still remember when one of them had had to do a presentation on their family tree. It had almost taken up that entire class period.

“Hey! Earth to nerd robot!” Stan nudges Ford, “What are you thinking about?”

“Oh, uh, how big the McCorkle family is.”

“Yeah, you can’t go swinging a cat without hittin’ one of ‘em. Well, excepting Carla on account of her running off with that hippie.”

“You still upset about that?”

“Nah, water under the bridge. Just like you should feel about Angie.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Ford rubs his hands together, feels the weight of his extra digit and winces, “It just would have been nice is all. Having someone understand…”

“Hey, I’m your twin. I understand.”

Ford shoots him a look but Stan merely shrugs, “Alright, maybe not in the way you think I should but I do in the ways that count.”

Ford’s lips twitch again, “Yeah, I suppose.”

Seeing that his brother is still down an idea to cheer him up comes into Stanley’s head, “Hey, we got
the place to ourselves! How’s about you and I resurrect ‘Fort Stan’?”

Ford’s eyes widen, “Fort Stan? We haven’t had that up since we were kids!”

“We’re still kids, doofus.”

“Stan, we’re graduating next year.”

“So?”

“High school, Stanley. We’re graduating high school. We’re hardly kids.”

“I stand behind what I said,” Stan mutters and he nudges him again, “Come on. It’ll be fun! Just like the old days.”

Ford lets out a loud sigh as if it’s a huge burden but he can’t keep a smile from his face, “I’ll get the blankets…”

Stan claps his hands together loudly, “Great! I’ll go get the snacks!”

“Hey! Make sure to grab more than just a couple bags of toffee peanuts!”

“Got it!”

NOW

Ford wakes up in a cold sweat and reaches around blindly for his weapon. He can’t find it and immediately begins to panic. He rolls and falls to the hardwood floor and with a start he realizes he isn’t there. He’s here. He’s in his home dimension.

But his heart still continues to beat double time and his breathing is ragged. He knows he’s in the fevered grip of an attack and he needs to stop it, he needs to stop it, he just needs to stop it…

He tries to regulate his breathing, clutching his head in both hands, eyes shut. He starts to fear he won’t be able to handle it. His thoughts are a chaotic jumble and before he can stop himself he whimpers his brother’s name. Hearing it aloud helps. It used to be how he dealt with it when these first started. When he first arrived there.

The things he saw, the things he had to go through…they led to so many attacks. And saying Stanley’s name always, always helped. And clearly it still helps. He will never tell him this. He can’t tell him. He whispers his name over and over again until the hysteria slowly recedes. He catches his breath and rubs at his face, eyes slightly moist.

He rises to his feet and now calmly searches for his weapon. When he first arrived through the portal it had been strung across his back, always there at the ready should he need it. Once he became acquainted with the children he knew he couldn’t keep it out in the open. As such he had locked it up in one of his old cabinets – one that, thankfully, Stan hadn’t touched since his moving in.

Ford unlocks the cabinet and pulls out the rifle, feels the comforting weight of it. He equips it easily and decides to do his security check around the perimeter. He’s secretly done one every night since he arrived. Old habits die hard. He knows the dangers he faced there are not here but they’re close. Always close. There’s such a thin veil between this world and the other.

He walks around with the silent stealth he honed over thirty years. He checks on the children first.
Both Dipper and Mabel sleep with the ease only granted the purely innocent. Looking at them he feels his heart clench. He hasn’t spent nearly as much time with them as Stanley but he doesn’t blame his brother at all for telling him to keep his distance.

He would never want to endanger them. And that’s what he would bring. Danger. That’s all he’s every brought anyone. Danger and grief. He looks at Mabel first – so gentle hearted and adorably weird. She’s cuddled up with a pig – what had she called him? Waddles? He wonders when it became fashionable to take in barnyard animals as house pets. Especially potentially delicious ones. But girl and pig are happily sleeping next to one another and that is all that truly matters.

Then he casts his eyes over to Dipper – so like a young version of himself. Self-conscious, unsure, but terribly brilliant. Stan wasn’t wrong when he said Dipper had been bathing him in hero worship since his arrival but it was certainly not something Ford deserved.

Quite the opposite, in fact. Dipper shouldn’t look to him as anything but a cautionary tale. One that extols the downfalls to be found in the reckless pursuit of mysteries and theoretical science. Fiddleford had warned him and he hadn’t listened. He knew so much better now. And poor Fiddleford – one clandestine trip into the town after midnight had told him of his old friend’s fate.

It was one of the first things Ford had done. He had had to see how Gravity Falls had changed in his time away but he hadn’t wanted to expose Stanley. So one night after his security check he had risked an excursion. The overall tone of Gravity Falls hadn’t shifted much, which he found to be something of a relief but when he’d come across Fiddleford…

His old friend had been wandering the city junkyard, muttering to himself and carrying a raccoon under one arm. At first Ford hadn’t even recognized him. But then the man had started talking to himself, jabbering on and on about needing some wired hootenannies and thingamajigs for his new robot (or as he had pronounced it ‘ro-bert’) and Ford had recognized his voice.

He also recognized the signs of insanity. How had this happened to him? He knew Fiddleford had been affected when he’d gone through the portal but he certainly hadn’t been this far gone. But then maybe it had just touched him more deeply. After all, Ford had been there. He knew how…trying it could be.

Ford moves on, away from the children to check out the rest of the Shack. He moves through all of the displays, shaking his head at each one. Everything in here is just preposterous. There’s a Thigh-clops, a Beavercorn, a picture of a horse riding a horse…just a compilation of kitschy, homemade crap. And somehow Stan makes money off this.

Not that Ford is too surprised. He remembers the townspeople well enough to know that they would pay to see this sort of fluff. In fact he blearily recalls them having a rather unconventional pioneer day celebration. He still couldn’t believe it had actually once been legal in Gravity Falls to marry woodpeckers. Naturally, he had not attended. However, from what he had heard it had been a raging success for the family that had held it – what were their names? The Southeasts? He couldn’t really remember.

Still, the Shack’s attractions cause a torrent of anger to rage inside him. It’s like Stan is mocking all of his serious work. Mocking…him. He looks down at one of his hands. It would fit right in with these ‘artifacts’. He’s surprised Stanley didn’t make up some mock-up of them. He could have the hands floating in a jar; mark them the hands of the mysterious ‘Sixer’, explanation label beneath reading ‘The six-fingered freak that disappeared, good riddance!’

But apparently not so much of a good riddance that Stan could actually leave him gone. He had brought him back. Thirty years he had worked on the portal to bring him back. And Stan had wanted
a ‘thank you’. He had risked the entire world and he wanted a ‘thank you’. He had risked himself and he wanted a ‘thank you’.

Ford could still remember when he’d removed his coverings and saw him standing there – really standing there. Stanley. His brother. His twin. His-his everything. Real and alive and in the flesh, within inches of him, standing there and looking so goddamned happy. So, of course Ford had punched him in the face. How could he do anything else? Here was the person whose mere name had helped him survive there and he had risked himself! If anything had happened to Stan because of him…

And that was the thing about his panic attacks – they were never truly gone. They just floated on the edges, ever encroaching, ever waiting for a moment to pounce. And the thought of Stan dying because of his foolish desire to see Ford again – just the thought of Stan dying period, causes another attack to descend upon him.

He takes in several sharp breaths and starts walking again, focusing on the stupid things around him like the Sascrotch and the Fiji Mermaid to calm himself. He clutches his weapon, strokes it until he has everything back under control. He goes into the gift shop and finds everything secure. He fingers a few of the bobble heads, making them madly nod at him before moving on to other rooms in the house.

He’s reaching the end of his rounds and he knows where his last stop is. It used to be one of his first stops but since the…‘incident’…two days ago he hasn’t had the courage to stop by again. In fact, since that incident he’s been sticking stringently to the lab as much as possible. An easy task since Dipper was so eager to please. As such the boy was more than willing to bring down all of his meals.

Though he had also had to deal with Mabel. It was kind of impressive how she managed to make each one of those meals express her displeasure. There were the eggs and bacon turned into a frowny face, the spaghetti and meatballs turned into a frowny face and – his personal favorite – the bowl of clam chowder turned into a frowny face. How she had managed to make the bit of clams and potato stay in position was anyone’s guess.

But he couldn’t risk seeing Stan. Especially not after how irrationally he’d acted when last he’d seen him. He had kissed him. Thirty years. Thirty fucking years of trying to get over his brother and no recovery in sight. It’s been decades but apparently that doesn’t matter to his mind or his heart or his fucking idiotic libido! He still can’t believe what he’d done. Still can’t believe he could be so-so stupid!

He has always prided himself on his intellect but clearly it wasn’t as great as he always hoped. He knows; he knows one hundred percent that what he feels for Stanley is wrong. Stanley is his brother. His twin. His family. His blood. There are complete articles, paperwork, thick tomes – stacks upon stacks of them – that conclude that incest is immoral. Illogical.

And that’s the worst of it – it’s illogical. How could he, someone who values intelligence so highly, be so flawed? But he is flawed. He’s illogical and immoral and clearly not as smart as he wants to be. Because despite all the evidence, despite the long expanses of time and space between them, Ford still has these feelings for his brother.

And Stan has them for him.

That was how the portal had worked. He knows that. He hasn’t even conducted any tests to know it. He just knows. Knows it and hates it. Hates Stan. He snorts to himself. Yeah, sure. Hates Stan. Okay. Whatever he has to tell himself, right?
Ford slowly approaches his room and tries to remember how it even happened in the first place. All he wanted to do was explain himself; to try and bury the hatchet just a little bit – at least for the kids. Especially Mabel. She’s been so eager, so desperate for them to work it out and it’s hard to deny her anything. She’s so bright and shining, like a shooting star. And Dipper, while not as overt, clearly wants the same.

And Ford can admit he was an ass when he’d first arrived. He can still remember Stan telling him to stay away from the kids - that as far as he was concerned they were the only family he had left. Ford had had to look away, needed to look away to compose himself. To stop himself from doing something overly embarrassing. He just keeps reminding himself how his brother has turned his home into a tourist trap, stolen his name, and almost destroyed the world.

He even tries to drum up the anger he felt about the lost scholarship – although frankly he’s just playing that up for show. He is, and has been, over that for a long time. But it’s a good, easy excuse. Better to appear like someone who can’t let something stupid go than reveal himself as a pervert.

Ford gently turns the knob and peeks in. Stan is snoring – loud and obnoxious. His gray hair is mussed on the pillow and one of his arms hangs off the bed. His shirt has ridden up and reveals a little of his pudgy belly. He looks completely ridiculous.

And fucking perfect.

Ford feels his pulse race. His imagination goes wild with the idea of slipping into the room, crawling over top of Stan and resting one ear over his heart. Even in his later years he’s sure Stanley still has a strong heart. Sometimes he can remember hearing the deep; heavy beats of it, when he allows himself to reminisce. Reminisce about a time he knows he shouldn’t. A time when they were young and extremely stupid and Stan kept telling him over and over – it’s okay, it’s okay. No one knows. And frankly bro, I don’t care if they do. It’s just you and me. You and me until the end of the world.

And Ford wanted that.

He’d wanted it so damn much. He still wants it.

But he refused to let himself have it then and he refuses now. He refuses to pull Stanley down with him. Because he knows better. Because he is smarter. Because he is logical.

Ford shuts the door and goes back to his own room, security check complete. He draws in a deep breath and as he drifts back to sleep his mind can’t help but float back to when it began.
THEN

Fort Stan is erected and looking just as good as it did in the old days albeit with a higher ceiling. Ford has stuffed it with pillows and blankets as well as a couple of paperback sci-fi novels he wants to thumb through. For Stan he grabs some car magazines and one particular magazine from beneath his brother’s bed that makes him turn the color of a tomato, the girl on the cover wearing a smile and not much else. Ford changes into a plain shirt and pajamas before crawling inside the fort to wait for his brother.

Stan returns from the kitchen with a bowl of popcorn, several bags of toffee peanuts and a pack of beer. Ford’s eyes grow wide at the sight of the beer, “Where on earth did you get that?”

“Eh, Mike Ditko’s older brother owed me a favor. I knew Ma and Pop’s would be out of town so it seemed like the best time to cash it in.”

“So you cashed it in by having him get you beer?” Ford looks at the cans apprehensively, “Do you know how much trouble we’ll get in if-”

Stan rolls his eyes, “Man, do you ever shut off? All that energy you put towards anxiety could power a whole city!”

“Nice, Stanley.”

“Look, you don’t have to have one if you don’t want to. But I want one, beer is nature’s candy!”

“I…” Ford just trails off and pushes his glasses up to pinch at the bridge of his nose, “I don’t even know where to begin.”

“I take it you’ve never had one.”

“No, you have?”

“Yeah, had my first one with Carla. She knew some people.”

For some reason this news pricks at Ford and he stiffens, annoyed. He does his best to brush it off but when he speaks his voice is tart, “Of course she did.”

Stan’s eyes narrow at that but not wanting to fight with his brother, Ford quickly goes on, “Well, I’ve never had one. Why would I? When would I have had the chance to? Or have you forgotten we’re not of legal age?”

“Legal-schmegal. You want to try it or not?” Stan waggles a can at him and Ford eyes it as if it’s a live grenade. Still…the curiosity is inside of him. Ah, curiosity. Ever his downfall. Ford holds out one hand, “Fine. I’ll try it. Just one!”

“That’s my bro, ever the adventurer!” Stan beams as he hands one over.

Ford just makes a noncommittal sound at that as he opens the can. He sniffs at it, nose wrinkling. It doesn’t smell very good. Sort of…wheaty. He takes a tiny snip and his face scrunches up. Stan busts out laughing at that as he takes a heavy slug of his own beer, “Man, you should see your face! Hilarious!”
“Ugh, Stan! How can you drink this stuff? It tastes awful!”

“You get used to it. ‘Sides, after you’ve had a few, you can’t even really taste ‘em anymore.”

One of Ford’s eyebrows rise, “So, not only have you had alcohol before but you’ve also been intoxicated?”

His twin sighs, “Why do you always have to be so clinical? Yes, Stanford, I’ve been drunk before.”

Ford absorbs that with a tiny frown, “You never told me.”

“I’ve never told anybody. Again, it was with Carla. You didn’t seem too interested in what I was getting up to about that time.”

Ford flushes, embarrassed. He thought he had done a better job of hiding his feelings during that time. Stan sees him color and gives him a tiny grin, “Hey, it’s okay. I get it. You were jealous.”

“I was not!” the words burst out of him with more force than he intends but Stan doesn’t seem fazed, “Yeah, you were and I gotta admit, it was kinda nice. Usually I’m the one trailing behind you but I beat you when it came to girls.”

“You think it’ll still be that way when we get the Stan O’ War up and running?” Ford asks with a sly grin and Stan nods, “Absolutely. I’ll be the dashing treasure hunter and you’ll be, you know, the science guy.”

“Hey, maybe I’ll be both!” Ford offered, “You know, smart but also good in a fight.”

Stan lets out a snort, “You? Good in a fight?”

Ford glares at him but Stan continues undeterred, “Look - I got the punches, you got the brains. That’s how this works.”

“I could have a weapon! Like…a crossbow or a whip or something.”

“A whip? Who’s ever heard of some smart guy adventurer running around with a whip? That’s the stupidest idea I’ve ever heard!”

“Is it any more stupid than a football robot?”

“Hey! Don’t you go talking about my future robot son like that!” Stan mutters but with no true heat. He grabs a pillow and chucks it at Ford who chucks it right back. A pillow fight breaks out for a bit, both of them pelting one another before falling back into their separate corners, exhausted and laughing. Ford takes another chance on the beer. It still doesn’t taste great but he finds Stan is right, the more you drink it, the less you notice.

He looks through one of his books while Stan grabs the magazine with the suggestive woman on it. Every now and then Stan turns one of the pages towards Ford and waggles it back and forth, eyebrows jumping up and down as he goes, “Eh? Eh?”

And every time Ford looks he tries and fails at not blushing. Instead he just keeps burying his face deeper and deeper into his book until Stan literally brings it over and starts shoving it in his face, “C’mon, give her a kissssss!”

“You are such a jerk!” Ford laughs and shoves him away, “If you’re bored you should just say so!”

“I’m not bored. I just thought you’d like to get close with, uh,” Stan looks at the picture again,
“Grizella.”

“Her name is Grizella?”

“Uh, yeah! And she likes dictionaries and wheat toast. She’s completely your type of girl.”

“Grizella?” Ford repeats yet again and Stan is beyond amused as he tosses the magazine away, “What? You don’t like her name? And here I thought you’d be a gentleman!”

Stan leaves the fort for a moment before coming back with a deck of cards, “C’mon then. How about a game of Texas hold ‘em? War?”

“I don’t suppose I could talk you into chess?”

Stan levels him with a look, “If you don’t want to play, that’s fine.”

Ford puts his book aside, “No, I’ll play. I just thought I’d offer another option past cards.”

“You know I don’t understand that chess stuff. You’ve tried to teach me dozens of times and what always happens?”

“You knock the board over.” Ford says this in a tone that suggests they’ve had this conversation more than once, “Yes, I know. I’m still looking for some of the pieces from last time.”

“Well, I can tell you I hid one of the kings in the toilet tank so you’d stop asking me to play.”

“Wait, are you serious?”

Stan shuffles the deck, “Pops is the king of the throne, so I figured…”

Ford groans, “God, you are disgusting!”

As if to drive the point home Stan takes a big chug of his beer and then belches. Ford can’t help but laugh as he takes another sip of his own beer. He notices that the can has become a lot lighter and he’s thinking he might even try a second. Ford elects they play War and Stan deals the cards.

They play two rounds and Stan starts in on a bag of toffee peanuts. Ford doesn’t look up from the cards but he can hear Stan munching away, “I swear, I think you are the only one in Jersey who eats those repulsive things.”

“What’re you talking about? These things are freakin’ delicious!”

“If you say so. They taste like melted nightmares to me. Honestly, I don’t know how you can eat them.”

Ford feels something whiz past his ear but ignores it, thinking it might just be a bug. But then something hits his glasses and he rears back. Stan is chucking toffee peanuts at him and Ford barely manages to avoid the next one as he sputters, “What on earth-?”

“Just try one, Poindexter!” Stan says as he tosses another.

Ford raises his hands up to protect himself, “I told you! I have and they’re awful! Besides, how am I supposed to try one with you throwing them at me!”

“Catch it in your mouth!”
“What?”

“What?” Stan hands him the bag. “Toss me one.”

Ford eyes him speculatively but does as he asks, gently tossing one at him. His brother catches it in his mouth and Ford laughs. He tosses another and yet again Stan catches it. Ford looks at him with unrestrained affection, “You are such an ape.”

Stan makes ape sounds and pretends to scratch his head and under one armpit before gesturing towards his open mouth. Ford can’t help but smile as he tosses another toffee peanut and Stan yet again catches it. He pushes the bag back towards his brother and they start playing the game again. Their wins and losses are pretty well divide up before they move on to Texas hold ‘em and since this game takes a bit more thought than the other it gives Ford’s mind time to wander.

Wander back to Angie.

Which he had done such a good job on moving away from. But unfortunately Ford’s thoughts tend to run this way. He moves past a problem for a while but always, always returns to it. It’s always made him the more somber and thoughtful of the pair and Stan has always done his best to turn his persistent frown upside down. Which Stan seems determined to do now as he looks up and catches Ford’s expression, “What’s wrong now?”

“Nothing.”

“Bull, you got that pouty thing going on again.”

“I’m not pouting,” Ford argues with a little bit of heat and Stan looks a bit surprised at it. Ford doesn’t usually have much of a temper. That’s more Stan’s thing but clearly his brother is feeling it. Stan frowns, “Come on, Ford. You can talk to me.”

Ford finishes his beer and, much to Stan’s shock, grabs another. He takes a heavy swig and rubs at his bottom lip, “Can I? You and I’ve never done much talking about girls.”

Stan blinks, “This about Angie again? Or Carla?”

Ford looks disconsolately at his beer, “Both.”

“Why Carla?”

“I don’t know…it’s what you said earlier…it’s kind of nagging at me.”

“What is?”

“About how you drank your first beer with her and got drunk and…and I just thought we’d do that stuff together.”

Stan’s head rears back at this revelation, “You’re upset I did something without you? How’s that fair? You’re all the time saying we should go off and do our own thing!”

This is completely true. As they’ve grown up, Ford has been the one to push for their independence from one another. He’s always agreed with Stan that they are part of a dynamic duo and he’s never disabused the notion of going off on the Stan O’ War with him. But he’s also debated with his brother more than once about how they each need life experiences away from one another. He's always insisted that they can't spend every waking moment together and sometimes it's fun to do things separately than come back together to share their experiences.
However with the more important things they always gravitated back towards one another. And for some reason, Ford felt like their first shot at drinking should have been together. Or maybe it was because Stan had done it with Carla of all people. And it wasn’t like Ford hated Carla – she was a nice enough girl. But there is something about his brother’s whole relationship with her that bothers him. He can never place his finger on why and realizing he’s being a bit of jerk as he says quietly, “You’re right. I have. And we were bound to do things without one another someday, I’ve always said that. But now that it’s happened…I guess I just wasn’t as prepared for it as I thought.”

Stan gives him a light punch on the arm, “Ah, come on, Poindexter. It was no big deal. Just some drinks.”

“I know but I would have liked to hear about it. Even if you and me, I don’t know – end up living miles away from one another, I just…I want to know what’s going on in your life. Especially when it’s something new and amazing.”

“Okay, first off – you and I will never live miles away from one another. Stop talking crazy. Second, it wasn’t all that new or amazing. Like I said, it was just drinks. Besides, do you really want to hear about how I puked up everything I’ve ever eaten in my entire life? ’Cause that’s what happened after I got drunk.”

Ford looks at him in alarm, “You got sick?”

“Yup,” Stan drags out the ‘P’ as he looks at his cards, “I swear a boot came outta me. And like, twenty six corndogs.”

“Uh, ew.”

“Yeah. It was not pretty. It might’ve even been what led Carla astray. Bet that hippie’d never vomit like that. I mean it was a chunky waterfall.”

“Ah! Stop!”

“What? Why? You said you wanted to hear everything new and amazing. And this was some amazing throw up…”

“I hate you.”

“No, you don’t,” Stan chuckles as he puts down a card, “But seeing as I’ve just won, you will now.”

Ford looks at his cards and sighs in defeat, handing them over to Stan who deals another round, “So what about Angie? I thought we came to the conclusion she was no good.”

“Yeah, I was actually just thinking it was probably a good thing I didn’t get anywhere with her. I mean, I wouldn’t know what to do with a girl in the first place.”

Stan frowns, “What, like, at all? Didn’t Pops give you the sex talk?”

Ford winces, “Unfortunately.”

“Yeah, he gave me that too. Couldn’t sleep for weeks.”

“But’s that not what I meant. I mean, when I say I wouldn’t know what to do with a girl what I mean is…” Ford feels his face heating up, “I-I’ve never even kissed a girl.”

Stan stops shuffling the deck and looks at his brother, “Wait…you’ve never kissed a girl?”
“No.”

“Like, ever?”

“I said ‘never’, Stanley. What, do you need a hearing aid?” Ford snaps, embarrassed as he continues heatedly, “I’ve never kissed a girl! I don’t even know how! And yes, I know you have! There’s yet another thing you’ve done that I haven’t! And you didn’t even bother to tell me about! I just walked in on you and Carla-”

“Well,” Stan interrupts sharply, “Unlike you, I really am a gentleman. And a gentleman doesn’t kiss and tell!”

“Oh ho, you’re a gentleman?” Ford sneers.

“Yeah and if you knew anything you would have known what the sock on the doorknob meant and not come barging in that day!”

Ford pauses, anger knocked out of him by confusion, “Sock on the doorknob?”

“I put a sock on the doorknob and it meant…it means…”

Ford puts it together quickly, “I think I know.”

Both brothers look away from one another as an awkward air settles between them. Stan is the first to break it, “Look, I’m sorry you haven’t…ah…kissed anyone.”

“You don’t need to apologize for that,” Ford says softly, “And you don’t need to apologize for not getting into details about you and Carla. Honestly, I probably wouldn’t really want to know.”

There’s a pocket of hot silence before Ford and Stan break it at the same time. Ford asking, ‘Did you sleep with her?’ at the exact same time Stan says, ‘I could teach you’.

They both look at one another, confused as their words jumble together. Ford recovers first, “Wait…what did you say?”

Stan shrugs, “I could teach you.”

“Teach me what?”

“How to kiss.”

NOW

Dipper and Mabel laugh as they run around the Shack shooting at one another with water guns. Stan hears them from inside and decides to go out and watch them. He heads towards the porch, intending to sit on the couch only to find that Ford is already there.

His brother sits hunched over his journal, scribbling away. Stan watches him in silence. After their last interaction Stan isn’t entirely sure where they stand. Ford said they had made some progress which, as far as Stan could tell, implies he’s at least a little interested being friendlier with him. God knows the kissing was far more than friendly but he’s sure that his brother views that as a mistake.

That’s how Ford works, how he’s always worked. Stan is much, much simpler. They kissed and he (for one) liked it and he feels no shame in that. He has never felt shame about it. Apprehension
maybe, confusion certainly but shame isn’t necessarily something Stanley Pines has much association with. Mainly because he outright refuses to.

He’s been all over the country, sometimes outside of it, and he can say without a doubt that the world is an ugly place. Ugly and awful and if you’re lucky enough to find something good, something sweet, you should grab on to it with both hands and hold it tightly. Never let it go. And he won’t let Ford go, even if his brother wants him to.

With this in mind he takes a deep, steadying breath and sits down next to his brother. Ford doesn’t say a word but his hand hesitates for a moment over the page he’s working on. Stan sees his Adam’s apple bob and he opens his mouth to say something only to snap it back shut when he realizes he has no idea what to say. It’s kind of funny. He, Stanley Pines, Mr. Mystery, is at a loss for words.

Stan hears a distinctive click and looks up to see Soos standing in front of them with his phone raised. Soos lowers the phone and tugs on the brim of his cap, “I was just, uh, taking a picture of a squirrel. Not you two dudes.”

“Soos, you pointed the camera wrong.” Stan grumbles and Soos looks at his phone to realize, yes, he has just taken a picture of the front of his shirt. He frowns and turns the phone back around. The camera sounds again and is clearly pointing at both Stan and Ford. Soos grins, “There we go! There’s a good picture of that woodpecker.”

“You said it was a squirrel, Soos.”

“Huh? Oh!” Soos puts his phone away and rubs at the back of his neck, “That’s what I meant. I mean, it was a squirrel but then a woodpecker showed up so I took a picture of both of them and it certainly wasn’t something I’m going to keep forever and ever and pretend they’re both my Dads.”

Stan’s eyebrows rise and Ford, while not looking up from his book, performs the same action. Soos turns a little red, “The squirrel and the woodpecker, I mean.”

“Soos, don’t you have something better to do?”

“I, uh, yes! You’re right, Mr. Pines! I hear the portable toilets calling my name!” Soos leaves and Stan shakes his head. He looks over to see that Ford is scribbling away again. He clears his throat and tries to think of what to say when he notices that Ford isn’t writing but drawing instead. He inches a little closer and realizes with some pleasure that it’s a drawing of the kids.

The detail is very impressive. One page is for Dipper and another is for Mabel but in the center of them is the two of them. It’s clearly based off what they are currently doing, water guns at the ready, faces full of delight. He sees little scribbles and notions on either side. He just sees a note under Dipper’s drawing that says ‘make sure he does not make my mistakes’ when Ford asks, “Can I help you, Stan?”

Stan blinks and looks up. Ford is not looking at him, eyes still on his work as he shades in one of Mabel’s arms, “I can feel you breathing on me.”

“Well, excuse me for breathing,” Stan mutters and Ford shakes his head, “That’s not what I meant. I’m not trying to pick a fight.”

Stan relaxes, “Are you sure?”

“I thought we agreed that we had done enough of that.”

Stan merely grunts and looks back at the kids. Dipper gets a whole face full of water and sputters. Mabel laughs and Dipper glances not so covertly at Ford to see if he noticed. Ford meets his eyes for
a moment and for a second the two seem to have a silent conversation. Dipper visibly takes in a deep
breath and lets it out, shaking his head before returning his attention to Mabel.

Stan frowns, “What was all that about?”

Ford lifts one shoulder and lets it fall, eyes back on his work, “We agreed that I should stick to the
basement but I came up for some fresh air. I found the kids outside and when Dipper saw me he
had…questions.”

“Yeah, that kid is a walking talking question mark.”

Ford huffs, his expression melancholy. “Yes, I know the feeling. But as you and I discussed, I
shouldn’t be involved with the children so I…I requested that he keep his distance. I told him I
needed to focus on my research.”

Stan looks back at Dipper and then to Ford. He feels the tiniest twinge of guilt and it must show
because Ford shakes his head; “Don’t worry. I let him down as gently as possible. I even encouraged
him to play with his sister. Mabel is a very intuitive and she seemed more than eager to distract her
sibling for me.”

“Those two get along almost too well. It’s unnatural.”

“It’s good they have one another.”

_We had one another. We could have one another again._ Stan almost says but he holds his tongue.
Ford keeps talking, “You were right to tell me to keep my distance, Stan. This road I walk…I should
do it alone.”

_You don’t have to, you knucklehead!_ Stan almost shouts but again, he keeps quiet. He knows Ford is
right. Ford keeps poking his nose in business he shouldn’t, messing with forces he doesn’t really
understand. If he would just give it up…

But Stan knows he’ll never give it up. He’s stubborn. It’s a defining Pines family trait, for better or
worse. Stan looks back at the kids to see that Mabel has tossed her water gun aside. She rushes up to
Dipper and playfully punches him on the arm. She says something to him and he nods. They run out
of view and Ford watches them go with a little frown, shifting where he sits. He eyes his picture and
its clear he was hoping to watching them more so as to complete it.

Stan looks at the picture again, “I didn’t realize you were such a good artist.”

Ford looks over at him and shrugs, “It’s serviceable.”

“Serviceable’, he says. You ever see me draw something? I can’t even handle stick figures.”

“Maybe you need a cave wall to do it right.” Ford offers, still working on the journal but a suspicious
motion going on around his mouth. Like he’s trying to fight off a smile. Stan looks at him with
narrowed eyes, “Was that another joke?”

“It might have been.”

“Ugh, since when did you start trying to have a sense of humor?”

Ford’s starts working again, his eyes downcast as his pencil slowly moves, “I’ve been through a lot.”

Stan feels his heart drop. What is he supposed to do with that? He licks his lips and scratches at his
Ford shakes his head and keeps drawing. The silence returns and Stan watches as the kids come back. They’ve got a bucket full of fireworks and they start off with the sparklers. Ford sees they’re back and he eyes the bucket with some trepidation. He lightly shakes his head to himself and focuses back on his artwork.

Stan clears his throat, “Well, you know, jokes are more my thing.”

“Yes, I seem to recall you telling me that.”

“I’m just saying, you have your strengths and I have mine. I got my jokes and you got your doodles.”

Ford frowns at that, clearly taking a little affront to his artwork being called ‘doodles’. And Stan will admit, he is provoking his brother a little. Trying to see how dedicated he truly is to not fighting. Apparently he is true to his word, because he doesn’t take the bait. Stan decides to reward him for the action, “You know; you should draw me sometime.”

Ford merely hums but Stan presses on, “No, really. Draw me, Ford. Draw me like one of your French girls.”

He says this in a mock seductive tone and Ford stops to look at him, his expression clearly stating that Stan has just said the weirdest thing ever, “What French girls? I don’t know any French girls.”

Stan chuckles and smacks his forehead lightly, “Ah, nuts! No, it’s-it’s from a movie. See, Mabel made us watch it. It’s called Titanic.”

“Like the ship?”

“It was about the ship.”

“And…French women?”

“In a manner of speaking,” Stan says with warmth, happy to finally be having a nice conversation with his brother. Even if it is just about a movie, “It was a love story. Our girl Mabel’s into that sorta thing. Real boy crazy. Me, I saw it as film about wasted riches. I mean, real wasted riches. This old broad has a necklace worth billions and she just drops it into the ocean. Whatta waste!”

Ford looks completely lost, “I have so many questions…what does this have to do with the sinking of the Titanic? What necklace? What French women? Was it supposed to be historically accurate? What was the significance of-”

Stan cuts him off by waving his hands, “Look, it’s not important, alright? I was just trying to make a dumb joke. See, the main guy in the movie is an artist and the girl he likes wants him to draw her like these French women he drew who were naked so she gets naked so I’m, what I’m saying is-”

Ford’s eyes grow large, “You-you want me to draw you naked?”

Stan tugs at his collar, uncomfortably hot now and feeling ridiculously stupid for even starting this, “No! I…not really…”

Ford closes his book and looks like he’s about to get up when Stan reaches out and grabs the sleeve of his coat, “Wait! Wait, Ford…don’t-don’t go. Come on…”
“Stanley, I don’t think…”

“I want to keep talking to you,” Stan begs. And yes, he recognizes the tone. He’s begging. Begging his brother to stay with him, to talk to him, to not leave him again. And Ford must recognize the tone because he softens slightly and relaxes back to where he’s sitting. He does bury his face back in his book but he doesn’t leave and Stan takes that as a win.

Ford has flipped the page and he scribbles something very quickly. Much to Stan’s surprise he hands the journal over to him, smirking, “Here. Have a look.”

Stan looks at the page to see his brother has drawn a very bad stick figure of him holding a weird looking oblong stick. Next to the stick he’s written ‘baguette’. Stan laughs and feels a rush of elation run through him. Ford gingerly offers a little smile and for those precious few moments everything between them is right.

So naturally it is ruined.

Ruined as Mabel and Dipper set off a firework. It should have just been a harmless moment. The firework shoots high up into the sky and explodes in a burst of bright yellow sparks but a resounding sound fills the air. A snapping boom and Ford immediately leaps from the couch, journal tossed to one side. He ducks and rolls and looks around wildly. He reaches behind his back for something but since nothing is there he lets out an alarmed cry and looks around him.

He finds a heavy rock and picks it up, aims it in the direction of where the sound came from. Which happens to be where the kids are. Both Mabel and Dipper shrink back, scared as the older man looks at them with anger in his eyes, rock raised. Stan tackles Ford to the ground and the two of them roll over one another, each viciously cursing. Stan manages to pin Ford down and he shakes him hard, shouting, “Stanford! What are you doing? Are you outta of your mind?!”

Ford looks up at Stan and Stan can see that his eyes are unfocused, as if he isn’t even seeing him. Almost as if he isn’t even there. And he still has the rock clutched in his hand and he’s squeezing it so hard that his knuckles are a bloodless white, the jagged edges of it cutting into his skin.

But then Ford forcibly knocks his own head back against the ground. Hard. The sound of his skull meeting the earth is unpleasant and Stan lets out a cry of alarm, of pain, as if he felt it himself. He cups his brother’s head in his hands, trying to make sure he doesn’t do it again. Ford’s eyes squeeze shut and his breathing is all wrong and Stan is holding him, whispering his name.

Slowly Ford’s eyes open and he looks up at Stan. His eyes are no longer unfocused but they are filled with an enormous amount of humiliation. He swallows thickly and lets the rock go, the hand that was holding it bleeding. He gently covers Stan’s hands with his own, carefully taking them away. He sits up and looks over at Dipper and Mabel, who cling to one another, looking petrified.

Ford’s voice is hoarse as his eyes drop away from them, “I’m sorry.”

He gets to his feet and won’t look at anyone as he says, “I might be.”

He disappears as quiet as a shadow. Stan watches him go and wonders over what he said until it clicks.

*Are you outta your mind?!*

*I might be.*
Chapter 4

THEN

Ford blinks, “I know how it’s done, Stan. Logistically speaking. You don’t have to tell me-”

“I wasn’t suggesting I would tell you.” Stan hears himself say the words but can’t believe he said them. He couldn’t have possibly said that out loud. But he knows he has. He knows what he has just said, how he’s just offered to teach Ford how to kiss.

Ford, still dumbstruck, blinks rapidly. It’s clear that his brilliant mind is completely lost trying to comprehend what Stan is saying and in any other situation Stan would pat himself on the back. After all, it isn’t often that Ford is stumped. Normally Stan holds reign over that department. But Stan himself is just as confused. He’s not quite sure himself how he’s managed to open his yap and say these purely insane things.

And clearly he can’t stop as he continues, mouth detached from his brain, “It’s no big deal, Stanford.”

“No-?” Ford’s face contorts several times as if he is literally wrestling with what to say, “Stanley, maybe I’m…misunderstanding you?”

“What’s there to misunderstand? You’ve never been kissed; I’m offering to teach you how. There’s no mystery in it.” And Stan has to say, he’s impressed with how cool and simple he’s making this sound. Like he isn’t offering to completely annihilate a societal taboo. After all, Stanford is his brother and not just his brother, his twin. They’re tied by blood and he’s just suggesting nonchalantly that they lock lips as if it’s as normal as a handshake.

They have enough issues hugging and here he is, offering to press his mouth against Ford’s. And on that thought he looks at Ford’s mouth and feels his face heat. But the heat isn’t entirely unpleasant. It’s sort of…exciting? And he knows he should not feel that at all but there it is and no one can ever say that Stanley Pines isn’t determined. Once he’s made up his mind to do something he follows through. No matter how crazy and with that in mind he keeps right on going, “Come on, Ford. No one has to know. Besides, we’ve done way worse things.”

Ford scoffs loudly, “Like what?”

Stan thinks hard, then snaps his fingers, “Remember that time when we were six we convinced Dave Zimmerman that he had the invisibility flu and the only way he could cure it was if he dunked his head in the toilet and flushed it three times?”

“That-? You think that is worse than this?”

“Yeah, we were total butts to that kid. It served us right when Mom grounded us. This isn’t bad so much as…weird. It’s a weird but it’s okay.”

“How is you teaching me how to kiss okay? We’re brothers, Stanley! We’re related! It’s gross!”

“Oh, well! Thanks a lot!” Stan mutters, “Now I know how you really feel! Nice way to take a shot at my self-esteem!

“Your…huh?” Ford grapples.
Stan rushes on, “You’re saying I’m gross! And not in the cool way! Not like, ‘you’re so gross because you can burp the alphabet’ but in an ‘ew, you’re so gross I would never kiss you’ way.”

“Stanley, we’re twins. We pretty much have the same face!”

“So?”

“So?! So, you’re trying to say I don’t want to kiss you because I don’t find you attractive?”

He rubs at his face, “Yeah, you’re surprisingly shallow. I mean, I know I have some acne…”

“I’m not shallow, Stanley! This has nothing to do with your looks and everything to do with the fact that we’re family. I can’t practice kissing with you!”

“I don’t see why not. Yes, we’re family and yes, we’re brothers but like I said, no one has to know. It’ll just be me helping you. It’s not like I’m suggesting we get married or jump off a bridge or something. This isn’t life changing. It’s just kissing. Besides, you said we should do the important things together. Kissing is important, especially your first kiss.”

Ford starts vehemently jabbing one finger in his direction, “Okay, well, you see that – right there – that is a great reason why we can’t do this! I can’t have my first kiss be with my brother of all people!”

“Well, it wouldn’t be your real first kiss. Again, practice.”

Ford just responds with a deep groan, eyes rolling towards the ceiling and Stan finds he’s starting to have fun with this. He decides to provoke him further, “Is it because I’m a man?”

Ford’s eyes shift back down as he is thrown for a complete loop, “What?”

“No!” Ford snaps, “I don’t care that you’re a man! Yes, I’ve never considered kissing a man before but that doesn’t mean… I would never… argh! You’re impossible!”

“Thanks!” Stan chuckles and Ford lets out a huff, smiling a little, “Okay, so – you weren’t serious then? You were just messing with me?”

Stan thinks this over. Now would be the perfect out. He can completely say he was just joking. He can retract his offer no big deal. But he finds he really wants to go further down the rabbit hole as he grabs another beer and tosses it to his brother, “Here, drink that. It’ll loosen you up.”

Ford eyes him, “I haven’t finished the last one.”

“Great! Finish that off then move on to number three.”

“Why?”

“I already told you. Gotta get those inhibitions aside.”

Ford puts the third beer to one side and picks up his second. The can is still about half full and he takes a sip because his mouth is going dry at all this crazy talk, “Are you trying to ply me with alcohol?”

“Yeah, beer is a great seductive tool. Worked on Carla. Now chug, chug, chug!” Stan chants and shakes both fists, sure that Ford now thinks he was completely joking the whole time. His twin is
relaxing considerably and even does as his brother requests, still making funny faces as he finishes it off and moves on to the newest can.

It’s quiet for a while and Ford is nicely into his third drink before Stan decides to confess, “For the record, my offer still stands.”

“Offer?”

“To teach you how to kiss.”

“You…you were serious?”

“I honestly can’t believe people think you’re a genius,” Stan grins as he sits up and punches his brother’s shoulder, “Yes, Stanford, I was serious.”

Ford’s face flushes again and Stan knows it’s probably the height of narcissism to think this since Ford’s face is so similar to his own but – dammit, his brother is just so freakin’ cute right now. Ford’s eyes are a little glassy too, the beer finally helping to settle down his normally rigid overthinking. He shifts where he sits and scratches at the back of his head, “Stanley…this isn’t funny.”

“I never said it was.”

“I-I can’t kiss you.”

“Okay, well, let’s break it down, Mr. Science. First, you say it’s not because I’m a man - so, no problem there. Second, you’re not turned off by my face - you didn’t say I was the most attractive person you’ve ever seen but I honestly think that’s a given and you just don’t want to admit it. Again, no issue. Third - you argue that we’re family. That I can’t disagree with - we are family, we are brothers and twins and blood and blah, blah, blah but I would counter with the fact that it’s exactly because of that, that this makes sense.”

Ford’s head rears back, “How so?”

“Well, we’ve already seen each other at our worst. And if it’s the bodily fluids transfer you’re so worried about, I think swapping spit is the least repulsive thing we’ve done to one another. I mean, we’ve both bled on each other at one point or another, you totally barfed on me that one time on the Ferris wheel, and then you also peed on me when-”

His brother starts waving his hands like crazy as he interrupts, “Whoa, whoa, whoa! It was you who vomited on me after that Ferris wheel ride and it was because you downed three milkshakes, two hotdogs, a bag of fries, and a heap of cotton candy! And as for the-ah-other incident, I was three years old and I wet the bed! It was an accident!”

“Still, my point stands. Spit is pretty damn low on the exchange meter between you and I.” Stan’s has to admit he’s pretty proud of himself. He’s made some sound arguments. He’s certainly convinced himself that this isn’t a bad idea. And he just keeps pushing it home, feeling like he’s scoring touchdown after touchdown, “Besides, you supposedly love science and experiments and all that junk. Think of it like that, as an experiment. Detach yourself from the facts and be totally analytical about it.”

“Did you just say ‘analytical’?”

“Hey, you’re not the only one who knows big words, smart guy.”

Ford seems lost in thought and Stan can tell he’s almost won. He doesn’t know why winning this is
so important to him, but it is. He likes the idea of getting one over on his super accomplished sibling, even if the prize is something he most certainly should not want.

At all.

Yeah, okay, he really, really, really should not want Ford to kiss him right? He should not want his brother to lock lips with him. And he starts to realize he’s falling into Ford’s trap, thinking too much so to push himself out of it, he starts yammering on, “Or maybe it’s just that you’re scared.”

“Scared?” Ford’s voice cracks over the word and Stan can’t help the almost painful smile that takes his face at the sound of it. His brother really is cute, “Oh, yeah! I get it now. You’re scared. That’s cool, bro. I understand. People get scared. Not me, y’know, but some people – like you – the smart ones, get petrified of trying new things and being completely terrible at them and I wonder how you can ever hope to be a scientist or an adventurer or your own man when you can’t evenmmmpf!”

And the words morph into weird sound because Stan’s talking is cut off by his brother’s mouth. Ford lunges forward, lightning-quick as he mashes his lips to Stan’s. Not being at all prepared for this, the twin’s teeth clack together and Ford’s top lip aggressively brushes the bottom of Stan’s nose. It is not, by any means, a good kiss.

It’s super awkward and pretty terrible and Ford clearly wants to use his tongue but doesn’t know how to and he just kind of licks at Stan. Ford yanks himself away, face so hot he can probably cook an egg on it. Stan, for his part, is completely befuddled and his top teeth still hurt from where Ford’s teeth hit his own. His nose is also uncomfortably wet and he can only say the first thing that pops into his mind, “Man; that was horrible!”

Ford’s whole face wilts like a flower and seeing it makes Stan feel like someone has plunged a particularly sharp dagger deep into his chest. He starts talking rapid fire, “But that’s okay! I wasn’t ready! And neither were you! You shouldn’t just jump into something like that, Stanford. Especially when I’m still talking. I know they make it look romantic in the movies but most abrupt kisses don’t work out well. A majority of them end in disaster.”

Ford looks more and more miserable with each word and Stan feels like he’s drowning, “But we just won’t count that one! It was a fluke, Sixer! Not your first kiss, okay?”

Ford won’t look at him and it’s clear he’s trying to close himself off and Stan can’t stand it. He eases closer to his brother, puts one hand on his shoulder, “Look, don’t give up now! Besides, remember what we said? This is just practice! It doesn’t mean anything! I’m sure not all experiments are perfect on the first go, right? Even Einstein probably had some missteps when he was inventing the lightbulb!”

His brother’s lips twitch and a little of the misery leaves his expression, “Einstein didn’t invent the lightbulb, Stanley. That was Edison.”

“See? There you go! I made a mistake too! It happens. Come on, Ford. Let me teach you how to do this. Let’s try again. Together.”

His brother, who began fiddling with his can of beer at some point, takes another healthy swallow of it before setting it to one side. He gives the barest of nods and Stan beams and scooches closer, “Okay, so – I’m the teacher, you’re the student. You do what I say, alright?”

Another weak head bob in response and he continues, “Kissing is super easy but there are a million different ways to kiss. We’ll start with the basics. I’ll kiss you, okay? And you, you just sit there.”
Stan eases forward and his brother, who so far seems to be outright avoiding him, looks up and into his face. This stalls Stanley because he’s never actually had his face this close to his brother’s before. Up close like this he notices things he’s never noticed before. The thin flecks of gold in his brother’s eyes, tiny little moles and freckles. And eyelashes – somehow his brother has these insanely long eyelashes.

Carla’s eyelashes were nothing compared to these soft, dark fans that flutter nervously like butterfly wings. Stan licks his lips and feels as if his heart is riding an elevator up and down inside his body. Stan whispers; “Close your eyes.”

Ford does it so obediently that Stan feels like he’s going to swallow his own tongue. His brother is sitting there, eyes closed, looking so trusting and innocent…

Stan’s own eyelids lower but they don’t close. His plan had been on closing his eyes when he got closer. It had been a conscious decision, because he couldn’t see how he could possibly kiss his twin with his eyes open. But now that he’s here in the moment he finds his subconscious wants to see this. He tilts his head and brushes his lips across his brother’s.

Ford’s lips are still a little wet from the beer he drank earlier and softer than Stan thought a man’s lips could be. Stan feels his lips move, pushing gently against Ford’s. He lingers there, repeating the motion, little quiet kissing noises tickling his ears and he draws back, a shaky almost inaudible voice that he doesn’t recognize as his own leaves him, “Good, see…that’s a simple kiss.”

He gets a rumbling hum in response that somehow instantly makes the word ‘sexy’ flash across his mind like a neon sign. His throat feels tight but he manages, “Now I’ll show you a…y’know, a different kind of kiss. Just…open your mouth a little…”

Stan’s heart slams painfully hard against his ribs as Ford’s eyelashes tremble against his cheeks and his mouth drops open a tiny bit. Stan’s hands rise of their own accord and cup Ford’s face, fingertips tangling in his brother’s thick hair as he angels his head and lines their open mouths up, his tongue outlining each lip before gently entering.

His tongue brushes along Ford’s inert one, coaxing it gently, trying to get it to answer. When that doesn’t happen he licks around his teeth and along the inside of his cheeks before trying again. Still no response. Stan doesn’t pull back far, just enough to breathe, “Kiss me back.”

“Kiss-?”

“Touch your tongue to mine.”

The groan that leaves Ford is purely animalistic as he does as Stan asks. His tongue tangles with Stan’s and now Stan can taste him. Ford tastes like beer and something else – something dark and sweet and Stan’s mind grapples with it. Trying to remember what his brother last ate or wondering if this is just how he naturally is and Stan’s pretty sure he’s now brain dead as they just keep right on kissing.

Stan pulls away, just the right amount to say, “Okay…so, I kissed you. Now you kiss me.”

“I,” Ford’s eyes open and his pupils are blown, the apples of his cheeks pink, “I was.”

“No, I mean, you start this time. You start this kiss-.” The last word barely leaves Stan before Ford surges forward, locking their lips again. And to think, earlier he was remarking how abrupt kisses don’t work out. Ford – always the perfectionist – nails it this time. And as Ford’s body comes closer, Stan starts to realize with stark clarity how wrong he was.
He said this wouldn’t be life changing.

But it is.

It is.

**NOW**

Ford rubs at his eyes as he looks at his computer screen. He’s been awake how long now? Twenty four hours? No, more than that. He’s not sure anymore, nothing seems real. Nothing. Every now and then he catches himself falling into a micro sleep but then he snaps out of it. The memory of yellow firework sparks clinging to the air, their shape like a triangle – causes a chill to run down his spine. He reminds himself of that – reminds himself of the blank nothingness that hit him afterwards, the loss of consciousness he experienced until he heard Stan’s voice.

How he came to his senses with his brother on top of him, holding his face while he clutched a rock in one aching hand and the children, the children…

He would never forget the looks on their faces. Could never forgive himself for it. He doesn’t exactly know what he did or said but he knows he had to have slipped into one of his episodes. He had thought himself better than that. Ever since returning to this dimension he thought he had done such a good job as coming across as normal, as unaffected.

Unaffected. Yeah, that was a laugh. He might not be crawling around in a junkyard like Fiddleford but he was just as mentally scarred. And physically…well, there was a reason he was covered from head to toe in clothing. Still, he had hoped that once he settled in he would move past it. That being home would be the miracle cure to his…issues.

Hell, he hadn’t even really had an episode like that when he had been there. Not for a very, very long time anyway. After all, having lived thirty years over there he had…adapted. But now here he is, home at last and it’s like starting from scratch. It’s beyond frustrating. So much so that he refuses to give himself the luxury of sleep. He forces himself awake, forces himself to stay away from the others and focus on his work.

The expansion of technology while he was gone is astonishing. Especially the internet. Since becoming acquainted with it, he’s spent an exorbitant amount of time on this vast resource, trying to catch himself up with everything he’s missed. Luckily, being a fast learner, he’s absorbed a lot of what he’s read and he feels confident that if he left the Shack and went into town, if he mingled with others who did not know of his ‘unique’ situation, he wouldn’t make too many faux pas.

Not that he’s planning on going anywhere.

In fact, he’s pretty much planning the complete opposite as he types away at the computer, trying to discover all that he can about improvements in the science of multidimensional gateways. He’s so lost in it that he doesn’t even hear Stan come up behind him. Stan clears his throat several times before Ford picks up on it and he turns; eyes bleary, “Stanley?”

“Yeesh! You look awful!”

Ford answers with a grumble and returns his attention to the computer. Stan taps his shoulder and Ford turns again, “What?”

Stan holds out the third journal, “You left this upstairs.”
Ford blinks and tries to get his sludgy mind to work. He recalls watching the children play, drawing them and then there had been that flash of yellow. He takes the book from Stan and sets it to one side, “Thanks.”

“Wow. Never thought I’d hear that word come out of your mouth.”

He’s too exhausted to really get angry at those words, so he shrugs, “I’m perfectly capable of saying it. But as I’ve already told you, I’m not going to freely toss it out when you endanger yourself and the world.”

“Technically, you endangered the world when you built this damn thing,” Stan points at the portal with a scowl, “Want to tell me why you haven’t taken an axe to it yet?”

Ford ignores the question and tries yet again to return to his work, turning his face back to the computer. His brain feels overheated and he’s positive that the words on the screen are floating three dimensionally before him. He wants to reach out and touch them when he realizes that Stan is still down here with him. He looks out of the corner of his eyes to see that his brother is walking around, inspecting his surroundings. Ford hasn’t done much in the way of making the basement homey.

For all intents and purposes, it’s still a laboratory. He’s cleaned off some of the tables and straightened up some of the books but not much else. He managed to dig out an oversized mattress that he’s put on a rickety bedframe and it’s covered with a messy collection of old blankets and a single pillow but, honestly, he doesn’t use it much. And it’s not just because he’s having trouble sleeping.

For one thing, it’s far too big for him – the only reason it’s even down here is because he purchased it long ago for one of his experiments. What was it? Experiment Forty Two? Thirty Three? He can’t quite remember. Regardless – it’s weird having so much space on a cushy surface. After his travels, he’s far more used to sleeping on harder surfaces like the ground. And for another, he can’t (he just can’t) get comfortable in a home, a world, that’s no longer his own.

And that’s his biggest problem. He always feels like he’s on a slippery slope, like he’ll never get his footing and between that, his sleeplessness, and his other rampaging emotions he’s had a tough time of it. He’s been trying so hard to valiantly lose himself in his work but it’s not easy. Especially with Stanley poking around and he looks back over at his twin with a frown, “Something else you need?”

Stan looks around, “When’s the last time you ate?”

“What?”

“I don’t see any signs of food down here. No plates, no utensils. And I know the kids haven’t been down.”

“The children shouldn’t be down here, period. We agreed on that.”

“We did, but I think we both know you’ve done a lousy job of keeping your word on that.”

Ford breathes out of his nose loudly and it’s true, he can’t deny that Dipper has been down more than once – usually it’s been to bring him food but there have been other times where his great nephew’s unquenchable curiosity has led him here. Mabel too, has had her fair share of interactions with him, and he tilts his head in acknowledgement, “Yes, you are right. I…have not kept my end of the deal very well.”

“At all, Ford. You haven’t kept up your end of the deal at all.”
Ford tugs at his hair, a light pounding starting to form behind his eyes, “Am I to take it that you’re looking for a fight?”

“No,” Stan says dryly, “Not really. Just making sure we get our facts straight. And you didn’t answer my question. When’s the last time you ate?”

Ford waves a hand, “I had some granola bars.”

Stan sticks his tongue out, “Yuck! When was that?”

“What does it matter?”

“Just answer the freakin’ question!” His twin snaps and Ford wavers between anger and exhaustion before answering, “Look, I don’t remember, alright? Happy?”

Stan glares at him, arms crossed, before turning and leaving. Ford shakes his head to himself and goes back to his computer. Just as he’s close to being well and truly immersed in his work again he hears a loud clatter behind him. He jolts at the sound and turns to see that Stan has returned with a large tray of food that he has just unceremoniously dumped on a nearby table. He pulls up two chairs at either end of it. He sits in one of the chairs and waves to the other, “Come on.”

Ford doesn’t budge and Stan starts cursing under his breath before muttering, “Fine! You want to be difficult about it!”

He surges to his feet and comes over to Ford, grabbing one of his arms and tugging hard. Ford yanks away as if Stan’s touch burns him, “What are you doing?”

“What does it look like? I’m unplugging you! You need to eat, Ford.”

“I NEED TO WORK!” Ford shouts, leaping to his feet, his chair falling behind him with a loud bang. He shuts his eyes and swallows, trying to understand why he’s acting this way. He didn’t mean to be that loud. Or that theatrical. He rubs at his eyes and puts his hands on his hips, looking at Stan who appears unimpressed.

“You done?”

Ford just looks down at his feet.

“When’s the last time you slept,” Stan interrupts gruffly. Ford doesn’t answer and Stan pinches the bridge of his nose, “Come on, Ford. How long?”

He wearily shifts his weight, “I…don’t know…”

“Jesus Christ,” Stan breathes and takes Ford’s arm again, gentler this time, “Come on.”

Ford’s too tired to fight anymore and he lets Stan led him to the chair. The smell of macaroni and cheese wafts up to him and Stan puts a fork in his hand, voice firm, “Eat.”

Ford’s mouth waters and he grabs the plate. He takes one bite and is completely lost, his body suddenly aware of how hungry it is. He shovels the food into his mouth with little to zero grace and when he notices a tall glass of tea to one side he downs it quickly.

Stan doesn’t say a word but he retakes his seat and Ford can feel his brother’s eyes on him. He finishes his plate and barely manages to keep himself from licking it clean. He mumbles his thanks and Stan grunts, “Now if only you could manage that for my bringing you back.”
“I’ve told you…”

“Yeah, yeah. But considering what you…seem to have gone through, I would think coming back here would be something of a relief.”

Ford says nothing to this, instead closing his eyes. His mind feels so burned out. It’s hard to form logical thoughts. All he can currently do is feel. And currently he feels bittersweet. Stan making him food, asking when he slept last…he completely forgot how much he missed this. Missed someone caring about him, caring about his well-being. Missed someone taking care of him. Not having to do things on his own – all alone. And he especially missed Stan doing it.

He missed Stan.

For such a long, long time.

He still misses him.

Misses him because he knows better. He does his best to re-engage his inner sense of reason and he says, “I should get back to it.”

“Forget it. You’re going to sleep.”

“I-”

“No,” Stan cuts in, the word brokering no argument, “You need to rest, Stanford. You don’t want what happened upstairs to happen again, do you?”

He doesn’t know how to answer that and he notices that Stan is reaching out and taking one of his hands, specifically the one that had clutched the rock. He runs gentle fingertips over the cuts in his palms and Ford pulls away as Stan asks, “Did you treat these at all?”

“What do you mean?”

“Antiseptic, Genius.”

Ford shakes his head and Stan rolls his eyes, “You’re such a child.”

He bristles at that, “The cuts aren’t that deep, Stanley.”

“No. Those cuts aren’t. But I get the feeling you’ve got worse hurts going on.”

It’s not the most tactful way to put it but Ford knows what he means. He feels like he’s weaving back and forth in his seat and he knows his mind has to be slipping from lack of sleep because he actually says what he’s thinking aloud, “You have no idea.”

“You could tell me.”

“No.”

“You used to trust me, you know.” These words come out heavily weighted in sadness and Ford can only answer with a sound like broken laughter, “Oh, but don’t you get it, Stanley? That’s the funny part. I still do. I trust you more than anyone in the whole world. And that’s why I can’t tell you.”

He can see Stan’s Adam’s apple bob at that and he’s drunk enough with fatigue to continue, “You seem to think I like hurting you. When really – it’s the exact opposite. If I told you about-about there, about what I saw and did…it would give you nightmares,” and Ford feels completely foolish now as
his eyes mist up, hysteria gripping him, “And you would hate me, Stanley. Really and truly hate me. Hate me more than you already do and I can’t…I can’t…”

Stan rises from his seat and he looks ready to reach out, to hold his brother but Ford can’t have that. He’ll break. He knows it. So he draws away quickly, getting to his feet so he can turn his back on Stanley. He lumbers towards his bed, hovering near it and he knows Stan is behind him. He wants to find the strength to ask him to leave but that seems impossible and as he looks at the bed he feels a wave of fear wash over him. He can’t go to sleep. He can’t. If he goes to sleep, he’s vulnerable.

Vulnerable to so many things. Unspeakable things. Things that he’s tried so hard to bury deep in the darkest recesses of his mind so he can forget, please forget, please, please, please why can’t he please just forget…

Suddenly he feels a hand on his shoulder. He stiffens – he prepares for pain, for horror but instead he feels…calm. Better. The hand is reassuring – big and warm and it encourages him to collapse on the bed. It’s followed by a voice, tinny at first, but familiar and it takes him a moment to recognize it as Stan’s. It grows stronger to his ears - soothing and deep and he hears, “Go to sleep, Stanford. I’ll stay here with you. I’ll watch over you. Promise.”

Ford feels a weak smile take his face as he falls onto the bed, sleep finally swallowing him whole.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Important note: I HAVE changed the rating and tags on this fic - it is now explicit for mature audiences as it will now contain sexual situations. If this is not your cup of tea, I apologize but this is where my muse has led me. Also, in this chapter I will make references to the newest episode 'Dungeons, Dungeons, and More Dungeons'. While my fic in no way lines up perfectly with the actual canon of the show I liked a lot of aspects of that episode. So, I worked them into what I was writing. I mean, at the end of the day this is fan fiction and some episodes are probably going to come faster than I can write - so it'll just be it's own separate thing and the nit-picky person inside of me will just have to deal! Anyway, I hope you enjoy and thanks if you are still reading! ;)

THEN

Everything is quickly spiraling out of control. Ford knows this and yet he can’t seem to stop it. He’s been kissing his brother nonstop for…he honestly doesn’t remember how long it’s been. All he knows is that he’s breathless and hot and shivers keeping racing up and down his spine. And it pops into his mind, rather dimly, that they’re making out. He’s heard about make outs and he knows what they entail (in theory) but he’s certainly never thought he would be caught up in one, much less one like this.

One where it’s his brother’s tongue entwining with his own, moving slickly back and forth with calculated ease. And the sounds…there’s the wet sounds of mouths meeting but there’s also this constant panting escaping Stan and these pent up, hungry sounds ringing in his ears and Ford realizes with some shock that they’re coming from his own throat.

And Stan has really taken charge and Ford finds he likes it. He really, really likes it. Stan has pushed him down onto the fluffy pillows and blankets and he’s over top of him, crushing him down with his considerable bulk and Ford is dizzy with how much he enjoys it. He feels like Stan’s weight on top of him is something he should have been experiencing a long time ago, it feels so perfect. So right.

Stan’s hands are wonderfully big – they’re warm and rough as they brush up and down Ford’s sides, as his blunt fingers tangle in his thick mop of brown hair. Ford’s own, more slender hands can only dance along Stan’s strong back and he wonders vaguely if his glasses are fogging. He feels like they have to be because it’s so hot in here, the fort somehow becoming a perfect cocoon for their current activities.

Stan draws away just a little bit and Ford finally lets his eyes open, just a fraction. His twin’s face is a lovely shade of pink and he takes gentle hold of Ford’s glasses and tugs them off, setting them carefully to one side. His breath is coming out in shallow gasps and his pupils are so blown that his eyes look black. Stan quickly kisses him again before dragging his lips along Ford’s cheek; tongue trailing up to his left ear and Ford sucks in a sharp breath when Stan pulls his earlobe into his mouth.

Ford’s eyes squeeze shut again and his hips involuntarily jerk up a little as Stan sucks on his earlobe, teeth nipping and scraping it and Ford doesn’t want to say words, doesn’t want to talk and break the
spell of this moment but he finds he can’t help himself as he whimpers Stan’s name before adding, “That—that feels…funny.”

Stan’s tongue dips in and out of his ear and Ford lets out a choked noise before his sibling answers in an almost unrecognizable rumble, “Good or bad?”

“Wh-what?”

“This,” Stan punctuates the question as he switches sides and takes Ford’s other earlobe into his mouth and Ford answers with a strange squeak. It’s the kind of sound he’d normally be embarrassed about but for whatever reason it seems to be something that Stan enjoys. Because when Ford makes the sound Stan growls and his hips grind downwards and oh…oh!

Ford’s eyes pop wide open because he’s…he’s pretty sure he just felt his twin’s erection. That or something else hard and vaguely phallic shaped has come between them. And really, this is when the bucket of ice water should hit him. Should shut all this down. Instead Ford finds himself having the complete opposite reaction. He did that. He did that to Stan. He made his brother…and Ford rolls his head back, a lascivious moan escaping him.

And honestly, he never knew he was such a such a deviant! But then he’s never really experimented before. Sure, he’s touched himself and sure he’s orgasmed, but it’s just…not something he does often. He knows most boys his age are constantly finding time and excuses to pleasure themselves but frankly, it’s never been something he’s been very concerned with. To him, nothing has ever been as exciting as the unexplained, the unknown.

Physical desire is low on his list of priorities and he’s always been fine with that. When he’d been trying to connect with Angie, his end goal hadn’t been sex so much as friendship and possibly something romantic. He understood romance and frankly found that to be far more interesting than intercourse. After all, the science of intercourse was pretty well mapped but love, romance…those things were a little more mysterious.

But now he’s really starting to get a clear picture as to why people are so focused on sex. Especially when he feels Stan’s dick actually twitch against him. Is it…getting bigger? No, surely he’s imaging that. But then Stan shifts farther down his body and his hot breath is bathing one side of Ford’s neck as he asks in a husky whisper, “Ford…you want me to teach you another kind of kiss?”

Ford only manages a questioning hum as Stan elaborates, “This one isn’t on your mouth. It’s on your neck – ‘s called a hickey.”

A quiet laugh huffs out of him, “I know what a hickey is, Stanley.”

“You want one?” Stan asks softly and the very tip of his tongue traces the whole length of Ford’s neck, making his eyes roll upwards. Stan blows on the trail of saliva he’s left behind and Ford shivers, feeling his skin prick up with goosebumps. Stan repeats the action again and then again until Ford’s fingers rake through Stan’s own thick hair and he gasps, “Yes.”

“Yes?”

“Yeah, I…I want you to.”

“It’ll leave a mark.”

“I know.”

Stan looks into Ford’s eyes and Ford swallows thickly as Stan says with disturbing clarity, “It’s like
I’m marking you as mine.”

A fiery shaft of lust pulses through Ford and he turns his head to one side submissively, wordlessly offering up his neck, his actions speaking far louder than words. Stan latches on and he’s really showing no mercy, sucking and biting and Ford hears high pitched squeals escaping him but he finds he really doesn’t fucking care.

This feels amazing and he doesn’t want it to stop. And every time Stan’s mouth pulls on the skin of his neck, every time he feels the rigid scrape of his teeth Ford finds his hips are thrusting upwards and he can feel Stan’s hard length and he wants…he wants…god, he doesn’t even know what exactly he wants but he wants it and he needs it and his fingers are starting to dig into Stan’s skin like claws.

Stan draws back and he reaches down between them and Ford knows he’s adjusting himself in his boxer shorts and Ford finds himself mindlessly doing the same thing himself, making sure his dick isn’t in an uncomfortable position before Stan is back on top of him, grinding down as he locks their lips again. And Stan’s hips are…moving. Continuously. Sort of a rhythmic movement like dancing but not really, more thrusting, and Ford groans into the kiss as he answers. And there is the teeniest, tiniest part of him that feels ashamed at how they’re pretty much dry humping the hell out of one another.

But the rest of him wants it – wants even more. It wants naked flesh and the very idea of Stan’s bare cock rubbing against his own makes his whole body jerk and he knows he’s so, so close. And he’s never done this with someone around before and he’s so shy about it, so embarrassed, but he can’t stop and he doesn’t want to and Stan’s breathing is just getting heavier and more urgent as he gasps, “That’s it, that’s it…come on.”

“I-ahhn-…Sta-ah! L-Lee…”

And Stan’s motions sort of stutter at that, “Wh-what did you just call me?”

Ford’s head tosses back and forth because Stan is slowing down and that’s the last thing he wants so he answers in a quick cry, only managing the end of his brother’s name in his desperate state, “Lee! Lee!”

For some reason this causes his twin to lower his sweat-damped forehead against his own and he lets out a loud heated groan, “Fuck! That’s—that’s so fucking sexy! You—you can’t even say my full…”

“Lee,” Ford hisses, “Stop talking and just-just-!”

“You…you want this bad, don’t you? Want me to make you come?”

“C-come?” Ford thinks he’s heard this term in reference to orgasms before but he can’t recall because he’s too worked up to really think, which is saying something.

Stan’s hips have started moving again – not so much with speed as with pressure. Circling a little and pressing downwards as his lips brush his brother’s and they’re not really kissing, mouths just making wet contact as Stan breathes, “That’s right…gonna make you come, Ford. Make you come so hard.”

Ford lets out a tight sound – something like a whine – as Stan keeps up his new pace, the friction between them neigh unbearable, and then his hands…shit, they’re going up Ford’s shirt. Palms scrapping his bare stomach and then fingertips toying with his tight nipples and it’s too much, it’s too much and Ford sees fireworks explode behind his eyes as he bellows Stan’s name, his climax hitting him with the force of a freight train.
As he’s coming down from the high of his release he recognizes that Stan is getting more and more strung out above him, his breathing tight, body moving relentlessly. Dazedly Ford realizes that somehow he’s managed to orgasm first and that’s a surprise. Ford has enough trouble turning off his mind just to go to sleep and now, somehow, he’s managed to have his first sexual experience with another person without overthinking it. It’s like Stan’s actions clicked an ‘off’ switch in his mind.

Seeing his brother so desperately needing satisfaction Ford reaches up and capture’s Stan’s face in his hands. His brother looks almost pained with his need and Ford licks at his lips tenderly, whispering, “Your turn now…”

“Ford,” he gasps and Ford trails his hands down to Stan’s ass, grabbing it hard and encouraging his motions, rocking into him as he says, “That’s it, Lee…let go.”

Stanley lowers his head to Ford’s shoulder and practically roars as he does as his brother asks. Ford feels wet heat flood against his crotch and - oh, yes, he was already sort of damp down there, wasn’t he? And there’s something dizzying about knowing they both came in their pants and that those soiled pieces of clothing are pressed tightly together. It’s so-so filthy. Yet provocative.

And then Stan is showering Ford’s face in kisses. His forehead, his eyes lids, and cheeks and such pleasure blossoms in his heart at the action. It’s so sweet and kind of uncharacteristic but then, maybe it isn’t? Maybe Stanley is always this affectionate with his-

And this is when the bucket of ice water hits. Ford stiffens as reality floods back in, slapping him hard in the face. Yes, for all he knows, Stanley is always this affectionate with his partners. Stanley may have had sex before. He may have had sex with Carla. Ford doesn’t know for sure. But what he does know is that he, for all intents and purposes, shared some form of sex with Stanley. His brother. His brother. Sex with his brother.

Brother. Family. TWIN. Shit!

Stanley is still over top of him, dopey with afterglow, smiling and looking like he’s won the lottery. He’s about to give Ford more kisses when Ford tears himself away. He pushes Stan back with as much strength as he can muster, shaking his head, “Oh god, oh god…what did we-? How could we-? What have we just done?!”

NOW

So, here’s the thing: Stan isn’t getting any younger.

He doesn’t think about it much – honestly, inside he still feels like he’s in his twenties. But when he wakes up in the morning, bones aching and hearing aid waiting for him he remembers that he’s not young anymore. He’s well into the golden years but they sure as hell don’t feel golden.

They feel…exhausting. And underwhelming. As far as he can tell, the only good thing about getting older is that you reach a point where you just don’t give two shits about anything. Why should you? You’re not long for this world, right? Why worry and stress about things when the reaper is waiting around the corner. True, he doesn’t feel like the reaper is waiting for him. Honestly, he’s pretty damn sure he’s got a few more good years in him but he’s not going to lie to himself either.

To everything there is a season or whatever. He’s not going to be around forever. So, with this in mind he’s come to a pretty definite conclusion. He wants his brother. He wants him and he needs
him in every sense of those words. This means he’s going to have to be the bigger person. The very idea makes him gag in disgust but what else can he do? He has to talk to Ford and work it out come hell or high water.

The question is when. When is the best time to start this inevitably explosion conversation? The one that’ll have a lot of heated arguing and hurt feelings and stupid stuff he would rather avoid. Ugh. *Feelings*. They’re the worst. He’d literally rather do anything else. He’d rather visit Gideon in prison over this. He’d rather watch Toby tap dance over this. But he knows that this is what he’s going to do, what he has to do.

The last time he really had a conversation with his brother was over a week ago when he brought him dinner and made sure he went to sleep. He could never forget how strung out his twin looked, how broken. Ford is clearly internalizing a lot of what went on during his travels and you didn’t have to be a genius to know that that’s a bad thing. When Stan told him he would watch over him while he slept Ford had hit the bed and been out like a light.

Stan had stayed with him for hours but eventually he had had to go back upstairs to check on the kids. When he’d returned Ford had still been asleep. It was obvious that he had needed it and had been doing a pretty poor job of getting it. So Stan had popped in and out occasionally, just checking in on him. When Ford eventually did wake up he looked a lot healthier, less bags under his eyes – more color to his skin. He had come upstairs and had dinner with the family but he had been conspicuously silent.

And then the whole mess with the board game had happened. Next thing Stan knows, Ford and Dipper are bonding like crazy and Stan can’t find it in his heart to separate them. After all, he can admit to himself that he hasn’t exactly been the most receptive to Dipper out of the twins. Mabel is just…easier. Warmer. She’s creative and sweet and reminds him a lot of himself, her personality almost bursting at the seams.

Dipper is more thoughtful and quiet yet passionate about the wildest things. Like ghosts and goblins and the mysteries of the universe. Just like Ford. When the kids had first arrived, when he’d first gotten to know them, it had been almost impossible for him to be around Dipper. To be around someone who reminded him of the person he missed most in the world.

Especially since he had finally begun to reach a point of letting go. It had been thirty years. Thirty years. And he’d been no closer to finding the other journals, to opening the portal. When Mabel had made the wax figure of him, when it had ‘died’, it had almost been like a sign. It was like the universe telling him to give it up. To move on. So he had tried. He really had. He’d even had a funeral for fuck’s sake. A funeral for a friggin’ wax figure that looked like him because Ford looked like him and Jesus, in reflection it was so stupid but it was what it was.

And then Dipper had revealed he had the third journal and Gideon had had the second and everything fell into place. He had worked harder than ever to get the portal up and running and to get Ford back. And now he was here and Stan knew they had to get over all the bullshit. What was the point of all his hard work if he didn’t get some reward out of it?

Besides, the kids weren’t going to be around forever. The summer was getting shorter and shorter. They’d be gone soon and he’d be left alone. Even more so since Ford had told him that he was closing the Shack and, oh yes, they still had that to talk about because Stan had only initially acquiesced because it had been a long fucking day and he hadn’t really had time to think about it.

But now he had some words on that subject, oh yes he did. Just like he had words about his wants and his needs and he’d be damned if he’d let himself be as stubborn as his Dad. Bad enough Ford said he looked like him, he would not be him. He would not make the same mistakes. And he
wouldn’t let Ford do the same either, pride be damned.

First thing was first though and Stan tracks Dipper down. The kid is sitting in his armchair reading some book that Ford no doubt recommended, the title alone sounding as boring as a cardboard box. ‘Path Integrals and Quantum Anomalies’. Woof. Who would want to read that? Apparently Dipper, who is nose deep and looking like a kid in a candy store. Stan clears his throat, “Dipper, you got a minute?”


“I, uh, was just wondering…how you’re getting along with my brother?”

Dipper’s eyes practically glow, “Great! I’ve learned so much! Did you know that the eyebats are actually part of a larger family of mammalian anomalies? There are also nosesquirrels. And they’re actually-“

Stan waves his hands to interrupt him, “That’s great, kid, but I meant more along the lines of whether or not he’s told you anything about where he was.”

Dipper looks uncomfortable, “Oh. Um. Well,” he scratches at the back of his head, “Shouldn’t—shouldn’t you ask him that?”

“Believe me, I’ve tried. Dipper,” Stan bends down to his level, “I’m not asking you to tell me anything you don’t want to. I don’t expect you to betray your uncle’s trust. But I’m…worried about him. That’s all. I just want your perspective.”

Dipper’s eyes grow wide and Stan can tell he’s flattered as he stutters, “R-really?”

Stan nods and Dipper sits up, chewing on his bottom lip in contemplation, “Well, I mean, he is cool. Really cool. And smart. And awesome. And I really like spending time with him. We have a lot of similar interests and he doesn’t…”

Dipper trails off and looks like he doesn’t want to continue so Stan gently nudges him, “Go on.”

“He doesn’t pick on me,” he pauses before adding under his breath, “Like some people.”

Stan frowns and feels guilt nipping at him. He knows exactly who Dipper is talking about. He wants to apologize but doesn’t quite know how, so instead he lets out a heavy breath, “Anything else?”

“He,” Dipper starts then stops, eyes darting. He’s clearly thinking a lot about what to say next. Finally he says, “He hasn’t said much about where he was. Or what he did. And…honestly, I don’t think I would tell you if he did. I-I really think that’s something you should ask him directly.”

Stan nods, “I understand.”

Clearly happy with this answer, Dipper bends a little more, saying quietly, “But…he did mention a multiverse.”

“Multiverse?”

Dipper nods, “Yeah, so, I guess when he went through the portal he went to one dimension but then maybe he went to others? It sounded like he had and it…didn’t seem like it hurt him, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

Stan gives a little nod, “Yeah, yeah. I might have been.”
Dipper’s lips quirk a little, “Hey, I get it. It’s…awkward. I would feel the same way about Mabel if this had happened to us. Siblings, am I right?”

Stan grins, “You’re not wrong.”

Dipper shrugs and picks up his book again, “And after that day with the rock, I get why you’re wondering if there’s something going on with him. But he told me that that was just some knee jerk reaction to the fireworks. Apparently he really doesn’t like them.”

Stan absorbs this one with a grimace. Clearly Ford told Dipper this lie to protect him. Or himself. Either way, Stan knows for a fact that Ford doesn’t have any issues with fireworks. Hell, when they were kids they always ran to the boardwalk for the Fourth of July fireworks celebration. They’d both get sparklers and Ford would get into the science of how they worked while Stan would focus on drawing shapes in the air.

Still, Dipper has been helpful and Stan doesn’t want to pry too much. He’s happy that the two are getting along and he doesn’t want to create a wedge between them so he stands up and pats Dipper on the head. “Thanks a lot, Dipper. I appreciate you talking to me about this.”

“Yeah, any time.” Dipper says as he gets back to his book.

Stan turns everything Dipper told him over in his mind. A multiverse? Other dimensions? Stan remembers when Ford first showed him the portal. He had called it a trans-universal gateway. A punched hole between dimensions. For some reason, he had always thought it just led to one. True, when he had programmed the machine to locate his brother it had occurred to him that it might be covering a vast amount of distance but he hadn’t realized that that distance included numerous dimensions.

Hell, all he had been focused on had been finding Ford and pulling him out no matter where he was. He couldn’t imagine that wherever Ford was, it was a good place. That wherever it was, it was better than home. Nothing could possibly be better than being back with him, right? Yes, they had fought and yes, that was what had caused everything in the first place but Stan can still remember the desperation he had felt in those first few days.

The thought that if he could just fix the portal quickly, if he could just get Ford back as soon as possible that he’d make it up to him. That he’d tell him to his face that he didn’t mean it and that he was sorry and that he…he…

And a certain word floats around in his mind again and he squashes it because while he knows it’s going to come out eventually it still feels a too scary to think about. Instead he focuses on how his brother has apparently been to more dimensions than two and how that must have affected him. He mentioned a there and the way he had said it, spoken of it, had suggested it was terrifying. But there was obviously not the only place he had been.

He had been to other places – hopefully better places? Stan didn’t know, but he did know that if Ford had been to more than one maybe, just maybe, he had been trying to get home as much as Stan had been trying to find him. Ford had told him he never expected to come home but maybe that had been a lie as well – a lie that, much like the one he had told Dipper, had been intended to protect him in some way.

And if that was the case, Stan was going to punch him square in the face.

He didn’t need Ford to lie to him to protect him. He didn’t need Ford to baby him. He needed his twin to be brutally honest. And he had been – at least a little bit – when he’d been too tired to stop
himself. When he’d told him a little about there and admitted he did still trust him, even if that felt like a lie as well.

Not to mention that there was still the little matter of Ford admitting that it was their bond that had drawn him. Stan wanted to know how exactly. It wasn’t like he had programmed the computer with his longing or something silly like that. How had Ford known? How had he been drawn into the portal past the pull of electrical currents or whatever?

Ugh – science.

Thinking of it hurts Stan’s head and that’s the last thing he wants. He needs his mind to be sharp when he confronts his twin. He also needs to clear out some space. He can’t have the kids around when this no doubt epic confrontation takes place.

So, how to get them out of the way...

There’s a knock at the door and Stan answers it to see Wendy standing there, shoulders slouched, looking annoyed, “Hey, Mr. Pines. I know this is last minute notice but my Dad wants to take me camping tomorrow. I know the Shack hasn’t re-opened yet so is it okay if I…”

Wendy trails off as Stan starts to smile. The smile is growing bigger and bigger as she talks and frankly it’s starting to creep her out. So much so that she asks slowly, “What…is…happening?”

“Wendy, have I ever told you you’re my favorite employee?”

Wendy frowns, “Am I…getting fired?”

“No, no, no,” Stan waves his hands, “The exact opposite! In fact, I’m promoting you! To camp instructor! I’d like you to take Dipper and Mabel with you on your trip!”

She rubs at her chin, “Wellllll, actually, my Dad would probably like that. He’s pretty much taught me and my brothers everything he knows. So having some fresh blood to torture with his survivalist knowledge would probably be right up his alley. Not to mention it’d save me from it. And I do like spending time with Dipper and Mabel so-”

“Yeah, yeah,” Stan starts closing the door, “You tell him. Pick the kids up as soon as you can!”

Stan turns and leans against the door, still smiling. This couldn’t have been more perfect than if he had planned it. He loves when things inexplicable falling into place. Karma was finally paying up, laying this opportunity out for him on a convenient gold platter. He rubs his hands together. Tomorrow night’s the night! Time to start making some real progress.
Chapter 6

THEN

Stan rolls his eyes. Of course Ford is going to start flipping out about what happened. His twin is hotwired to agonize over each and every little thing. And yes, what they just did with one another is certainly more of a game changer than he initially thought it would be but Stan finds he’s really okay with it. Like, really okay. Honestly, part of him wonders why he isn’t freaking out as much as his twin is.

After all, they just got off with one another. And kissed. A lot. They pretty much went from zero to sixty as far as relationships go. And siblings don’t do what they just did. Well, okay, some probably do but it’s labeled with the big, ugly sinful ‘I’ word. Incest. They just committed incest. And Stan’s not going to lie to himself – he’s committed quite a lot of sins but he never thought this one would be added to the list. Frankly, he would have thought he’d add ‘murder’ before this.

Not that he has plans to kill anyone anytime soon but that just seems more likely than, well, this. Huh. Incest. It isn’t even a word that comes up often but here it is, glaring him in the face. And he… doesn’t care? He knows he should, but somehow he can’t work it up in himself to care. All he can think about is how good it all felt. How right. How everything that just happened with Ford is life changing but not because it’s bad. It’s life changing because it’s just…perfect. Beautiful.

He loved it. All of it. And he’s not ashamed even though he knows he should be. In fact, he finds he wants to explore this more. He just has to know what all of this means. He’s never felt this way with anyone and yes, it’s extremely strange that it’s with his brother of all people. How can someone so familiar feel so excitedly new? It’s like Stanford is a whole different person to him, someone he wants to get to know more. Logically he knows that he already knows everything. He knows Stanford. Inside and out.

And yet after this…it’s like he doesn’t even know him at all. And he wants to know. He wants to know why it’s so easy to wring sounds out of him, why he seems to enjoy being pinned down so much; he wants to know more about his taste, his scent, his…just…everything. It’s like Stanford has been in front of him this whole time, his entire life, but now he’s seeing him. Really seeing him.

So Stan knows he needs to shut this down and quick. If he lets him, Ford will get so worked up that he won’t be able to function. He’s seen it before, seen his brother completely shut down by his amazing ability to overthink. And yes, Stan knows that he should probably think more – that a lot of his problems in life come from the fact that he doesn’t slow down and think things through but damnit, he’s not going to lose out on this now. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

The last thought is a little daunting so he focuses on the much more comfortable now as he reaches out a hand and gently touches Ford’s shoulder, “Whoa, whoa – take it easy there, Sixer. It’s no big deal.”

“No big deal?” Ford’s voice cracks over the words and Stan has to resist snorting because, god, Ford’s voice cracks are always funny, “Yeah. Come on, man. Relax.”

“Relax? Stanley, have you lost your mind? Do you not understand what we just did? Kissing was bad enough but then we-we-” Ford can’t even get the words out and now his face is flushed more with embarrassment than with desire and Stan frowns, preferring the latter, “I’m not an idiot, Stanford. I know what we did. But it’s not like anyone knows. It’s just you and me, y’know? It’s us.”
Ford grabs his discarded glasses and put them on as he looks at his brother doubtfully, “Us?”

Stan lightly punches his arm, “Yes, bro, you and me! This is something just between us. Something special. A secret. And we have plenty of those, right?”

“I…guess.”

“Hey, no guessing, okay? We share a lot of secrets with one another and this is just another one.”

Ford doesn’t seem entirely convinced but Stan can see he’s relaxing marginally, his shoulders less tense, his face less tight. Stan has to tip toe carefully now. He could just let it drop but his needs are too strong and that has always over powered his better judgement, “So, with that in mind, I say we just keep on, keepin’ on.”

“What?”

“We have the whole place to ourselves tonight. I say we see what else we can get up to.”

“Are you-? You can’t be serious!”

“Why not?” Stan shrugs, “We’ve already jumped off the bridge. I say we swim.”

“Stan, we-we can’t…do that again.”

Stan feels his stomach drop but he continues, “Sure we can. Who’s to know?”

“I’ll know,” Ford insists, “I’ll know and I’ll-I’ll feel terrible.”

“Wow.” Stan pouts, crossing his arms, “Way to make me feel special.”

“Stanley…”

“No, no. It’s okay. I teach you how to kiss, I give you a little more and this is how you thank me. Talk about making me feel cheap.”

Ford rubs at his eyes, groaning in frustration, “Oh my god! You can’t be serious!”

“Serious as a heart attack.”

“Stan, what exactly do you expect me to do?”

“Give me a chance. Give me tonight.” Stan takes one of Ford’s hands in his, “Come on, Ford. Just one night. One night of discovery. We’re planning on being treasure hunters, right? Well, we found some treasure together, so-”

A hysterical laugh leaves Ford, “God, that’s so corny!”

Stan waggles his eyebrows, “But did it work?”

“Psh. No!” Ford says but his cheeks color a little and Stan knows it did. Yes, it was a silly thing to say but beneath all the science and smarts Ford is an incurable romantic. Stan knows this for a fact. It’s actually one of the secrets they share.

One time Stan came home early from boxing practice and found Ford nose deep in one of their mother’s bodice rippers. He can’t quite remember the title – something like ‘Prisoner of My Desire’ or whatever and Ford had looked up from the book, all tongue tied, insisting that he just needed a
break from his textbook and that he certainly wasn’t a fan of paperback romance novels. This assertion held no water once Stan found even more of his mother’s books squirreled away on Ford’s side of the room. But being the great sibling he was, he promised to keep his brother’s secret and not overly tease him.

“One night, Ford.”

Ford shifts where he’s sitting and Stan is mentally congratulating himself on everything he’s managed to pull off so far. It’s not often he manages to win his brother over to his way of thinking and he’s done it not once, but twice tonight. Or at least he’s pretty damn sure he has. Ford currently has that expression that says he’s waffling pretty close to Stan’s side.

“One night?” Ford questions, voice quiet, bordering on shy and it takes all of Stan’s will power not to pump one of his arms in victory.

“Yeah, Sixer. One night.”

Ford bites at his lips, both top and bottom separately as he thinks and then Stan has an epiphany, “How’s about this, we’ll play pretend.”

This is met with raised eyebrows, “Pretend? Stanley, we’re not six.”

“Hey, you don’t have to be six to pretend! I mean, think of this like your boring as dirt nerd game. You know; the one with the graph paper that is zero fun and looks more exciting on the box.”

“I take it you are talking about D and D and More D.”

Stan waves a dismissive hand, “Whatever, look, you play pretend in that, right?”

“Well, not exactly. You see you have character sheets-”

Ford’s explanation is interrupted as Stan lets out a huge groan, eyes rolling upwards, “Oh my god, I’m sorry I even brought it up! Look, forget that and just focus on the idea, alright?”

“What-what are we pretending exactly?”

Stan shrugs, “Just pretend we’re not brothers.”

Ford scoffs, “How on earth am I supposed to do that?”

“Use your imagination, genius!” Stan encourages but Ford looks doubtful. Stan wracks his brain for more and when it comes to him he snaps his fingers, “Here, I got it! I’ll help. You called me Lee earlier, so we’ll go with that. Tonight just call me Lee. Lee Pines…bury.”

He adds the end as an afterthought and nods to himself in approval, “Yes, I’m Lee Pinesbury.”

“Lee Pinesbury?” Ford repeats dubiously.

Stan nods and holds out his hand, “And you are?”

Ford scratches at the back of his head before shaking his hand, “Stanford Pines.”

“Oh, Stanford! I like that name. Is it okay if I call you Ford?”

“Stan, this is ridiculous.”
“Who’s Stan? I told you, my name’s Lee.”

Ford makes a funny face and Stan has to resist laughing. However, the expression eventually drops away as Ford says, “Okay, fine. Well then, Lee, tell me a little about yourself.”

“Ah, thanks, I’m so glad you asked! I’m from Texas-”

“Texas?” Ford interrupts with a laugh.

“Yes, Texas born and raised,” Stan says and is surprised at how easily the lies roll off his tongue, his mind whirring away with the thrill of creation, “My Dad worked the rodeo and my Ma was Miss Texas three years running. I moved up here to Jersey to take care of my ailing Grandpa and help him run his shop. You may of heard of it, it’s called ‘Hunk of Junk’, because I’m the hunk who sells you junk.”

This causes both of them to erupt with laughter but Stan – no, wait – Lee, presses on, “Yeah, it’s mostly old car parts. But with my dashing good looks I once had to chase off a broad who wanted to buy me, if you know what I’m saying.”

“I think I do,” Ford mutters, his tone warm with affection and Lee loves this so he models his face into a more smoldering look, “Yeah, I’ll bet you do. But she wasn’t my type. I’m more into the nerdy sort.”

Lee reaches out and brushes his fingers along the collar of Ford’s shirt. Ford visibly gulps and Lee grins, “You know, you’re kinda nerdy.”

“I’m-I’m not a nerd.”

“Oh? You telling me you don’t know how to use an abscess?”

Ford frowns, confused, then chuckles, “Do you mean an abacus?”

“Correcting me, already?” Lee purrs, his fingers curling into Ford’s shirt as he draws him closer, “Such a turn on.”

Lee covers Ford’s mouth with his own, parting his lips smoothly with the tip of his tongue. Ford lets out a little startled whimper but quickly melts into the kiss. They do this for a while, just quietly kissing one another until Lee draws back, eyes smoky, “We should go get cleaned up.”

“C-Cleaned-?”

Lee rises to his feet and exits the tent. Ford pokes his head out and watches as Lee removes his shirt and throws it at him, the lump of clothing bouncing off his head. Lee gives him a bright grin, “Meet you in the shower.”

Lee quietly closes the door behind him. Ford looks at the door, stumped. He can’t do this. Right? This is- this is madness. Slowly he realizes that he’s clutching Lee’s discarded shirt in his hands. He looks at it, then at the door, then at the shirt again. He swallows and carefully rises to his feet. He bunches the shirt in his hands a couple of times, his heart feeling like a trapped hummingbird in his chest. He takes in a deep breath; tosses the shirt aside, and starts walking to the door.

NOW
Ford exits from behind the vending machine and looks around surreptitiously. It looks like the Mystery Shack is closed up for the night but no one called him up for dinner, which is strange because Mabel seems to relish shouting down to him. Usually it’s something like, ‘BURRITOS!’ or ‘HOT STUFF COMING UP!’ and one time it was, ‘EAT IT, BEFORE IT EATS US ALL!’ but tonight it was nothing.

Nothing but a quiet that was far too quiet for his comfort. So he risks coming up to see what’s going on. He walks cautiously into the kitchen and is surprised to see Stanley sitting there. Usually when he’s done being Mr. Mystery for the day he quickly changes into striped boxer shorts, white tank top and slippers. But tonight he’s still wearing the black suit and red tie, fez firmly in place as he waves to an open chair in front of him, “Stanford.”

Ford eyes the chair suspiciously then looks around, “Stanley. Where are the children?”

“They’re gone for the night. It’s just you and me.”

“I…see.”

“Way I see it, gives us a chance to talk.”

Ford frowns, “You want to talk? About what exactly?”

“The current weather in Boca Raton. What do you think; genius?”

“Stanley…”

“Look,” Stan stands up from his chair and puts both of his hands on the table, “It’s been thirty years. The least you can do is give me five minutes.”

His brother smirks sardonically, “You think we can hash all this out in five minutes?”

“No, but I’m hoping if I hook you in the first five, you’ll stick around for more.”

Ford eases closer to the empty chair Stan has left for him, looking at it thoughtfully, “Ever the slick salesman, I see.”

Stan retakes his own seat, “Old habits die hard.”

Ford rolls his head about his shoulders than shrugs, sitting down; “Well, why not? After all, I can’t deny that this is a surprisingly mature move on your part.”

“Hey, I didn’t work hard for thirty years to get you back just for us to not talk this shit out.”

“Well, there’s a lot of shit to talk out and you said all I had to give you was five minutes so…”

“Don’t be a smart ass!”

“That’s funny coming from you,” Ford returns tartly, then folds his arms, looking ever the picture of someone shutting themselves off, “Well, go on then.”

Stan scowls, “You know, you don’t have to make this so difficult!”

Ford shifts in his seat a little and has the good decency to look a little contrite, “You’re right. It’s just…there is a lot of bad blood between us, Stanley. Not to mention I am mad with myself over my own behavior these last few days. When I came to see you in your room and I…and we…”
“You talking about when you confessed your undying devotion for me?”

“That’s not what I did!”

“Hmm, your mouth said differently. Y’know – when it was pressed to mine.”

Stan watches with amusement as Ford blushes. It’s almost like looking through a window and seeing into the past. He remembers this look. This shy, nervous look that screams that he is a bumbling bookworm who doesn’t know how to deal with flirting. Ford clears his throat, obviously trying to get a hold of himself as he says, “Yes, well. There was that and then the incident with the children and the one in which you visited me downstairs and I was…ashamedly more candid due to my exhaustion.”

“I don’t know. I rather liked that. Sure, you were a bit melodramatic but it was nice to finally get some truth out of you.”

“Tru-?” Ford sputters, “I’ve been nothing but honest since I’ve arrived here!”

“Oh yeah, sure. Mr. Honesty, that’s you! Telling Dipper that you’re scared of fireworks and not telling me about those other dimensions you were in but yeah, you’re right. You’ve been nothing but an open book since I brought you home.”

“You never asked about my travels. Not directly. If you had, I would have considered telling you. As for that and the fireworks, I see Dipper has told you much.”

“Hey!” Stan starts in sharply, “Don’t take this out on the kid, alright? I just asked him a couple of questions and he answered them as best as he could. You don’t have to worry about anything he might have said, your trust in him is well placed.”

Ford does worries over how he told Dipper about the inter-dimensional rift but since Stan hasn’t mentioned it, he decides his secret is safe. Besides, even if Dipper had somehow let it slip, Ford would have found a way around the situation. The insinuation that he’s mad at his nephew strikes him hard and he points a finger at his brother, “I would never take anything out on him, Stanley! I may not have known him long, but I know he’s a good kid. I have faith in him and know he would never be malicious or untrustworthy. If anything, it makes me question you.”

“Me?”

“Clearly you coerced him in some way in order to make him-”

Stan pounds one fist loudly on the table, making it shake violently; “I did no such thing!”

“How?! How can I ask you?!” Stan bellowed, standing up to tower over him, “You think I like going to Dipper for updates on how you’re doing? You used to talk to me, Stanford! About everything! About nothing! But I make one mistake, one stupid mistake, and I have to pay for it for the rest of my life?! Tell me, Ford! Tell me! What can I do? Is there anything, anything, I can do that will make you fucking forgive me?”

Ford swallows thickly and looks away. His silence is answer enough and Stan curses under his breath. He goes to leave, muttering under his breath, “This was such a mistake! Such a goddamn waste of time – so stupid-”

But Ford stops him, one hand reaching out to take a firm hold of his wrist. Stan stops and turns to
look at him, still fuming. Ford’s eyes are closed and when he speaks next his voice is very quiet, “Don’t go.”

Stan just looks at him.

They stay that way for several minutes. Frozen in time.

Then Ford whispers, the words almost inaudible, “Please.”

Stan’s rigid body slowly unwinds and he gives a curt nod. He returns to his seat and Ford uncrosses his arms. He doesn’t look at Stan. He can’t look at Stan. His voice has no emotion as he talks, “I don’t know what to tell you. I know you can’t turn back time. But I’ve been through a lot—”

“And I haven’t?” Stan can’t help but interject, “You’re not the only one whose had it rough, Ford. I sacrificed so much to bring you back, for thirty years—”

“I didn’t ask you to sacrifice anything!” Ford interrupts sternly but Stan continues on as if he hasn’t spoken, “—I did everything I could to bring you home! And DON’T! Just fucking DON’T tell me you didn’t ask for it! ‘Cause you did! ‘Stanley, help me! Stanley, do something!’ That’s what you said to me, right before you got sucked into that portal. Do you know how many nights I went to bed, those words echoing in my mind? Do you know how many dreams I had where I saved you and then I’d wake up the next day and have to remember you were gone? Do you know how many nightmares I had of what might’ve happened to you?”

Stan runs his hands through his hair, knocking off his fez as he clutches at his skull, “It damn near killed me those first couple of weeks. The guilt… I was sick with it. I couldn’t stand it. And I just kept thinking if I could get you back that we’d fix this, that’d we make it better and instead what do I get? What’s my reward? I lose my name, my house, and the Shack.”

“Stanford was never your name,” Ford returns quietly, not ready to tackle everything else he said. The rest of it floats before him, too big and all-encompassing to think about, so he tries to address the simpler issues, “And neither is this house and as for that Shack monstrosity, it’s pretty much a monument of you laughing in my face!”

Stan looks stunned, “What are you talking about?”

“You supported me, Stanley. You always supported me. You always went out of your way to make me not feel like-like the freak that I am and now here you are peddling mockeries of anomalies. Where’s the stuffed six fingered hand, huh?”

“You…you really think I would do that to you?” the pain in Stan’s voice is so raw that Ford flinches and he looks away, “I don’t know. Maybe. Why not?”

“How…how can you think so little of me?” Stan breathes and Ford lets out a heavy sigh, “I-I don’t…”

“But you think I would make a display like that? Of my own brother?”

“I don’t know what goes on in that head of yours.”

“You used to know,” Stan murmurs sadly, “And I used to know what was going on in yours. And now…now it’s like we’re complete strangers.”

They both sit there in stony silence, absorbing this revelation. Each of them wondering whose move is next and, what’s more, if there is even a point in continuing this conversation at all.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Updated the tags again - as this is a work in progress (in all sense of the words) sometimes what happens during my writing is different than I initially envisioned. Basically, the characters and plot take me places where I didn't expect to go. But with this in mind, know that this particular chapter has very explicit sexual content and references to both prostitution and pornography for those triggered by these things. I will add such notes to the beginning of each chapter as I see fit - don't want anyone stumbling into anything they are not prepared for!

THEN

Ford chews on one of his thumbnails as he eyes the bathroom door. He hears the shower click on and he feels his heart leap into his throat. Stan – or Lee – or whatever – he was serious. Ford’s mind is completely divided into two firm camps. The first camp is deadly against this – pointing out all the obvious, logical reasons as to why this is a terrible, horrible, no good idea. The second camp is a jittery, nervous mess made of energy and barely restrained excitement. That camp is hooting and hollering and running around in circles, roaring at him to just go inside, just go inside and take a chance.

He’s shocked to find himself more compelled by the second camp. There’s just something so oddly irresistible about the unknown. If he goes back to their bedroom, if he pretends this never happened, he knows a small part of him will always boil with the insatiable curiosity of what if. What if he had gone in? What if he had let himself pretend for one night?

And while Ford has never thought of himself as particularly courageous he certainly feels so now as he opens the door. Lee stands there totally naked and it’s as if someone’s just dumped a full can of red paint over Ford’s head as he turns that blazing color from head to toe. He wheels around; his whole body on fire. Lee snorts at the reaction, “You’re blushing so bright I bet they can see you from space.”

“Y-you’re naked.”

“You know, I’m really starting to think somehow you’ve tricked everyone into thinkin’ your some kinda genius.”

“I just,” Ford’s words come out haltingly, “I wasn’t…ready.”

“It’s not that big a deal. We’ve seen one another naked before.”

“Yes, when we were three.”

“There that much of a difference now?”

“Please tell me you’re joking.”

Lee shrugs even though Ford has yet to turn around and thus can’t see the action, “Well, you’re a lot...
more awkward and sweaty. And we certainly got a lot of hair in new spots but other than that…”

“Stan…”

“Hey, it’s Lee. I told you. Say it with me, ‘Lee’.” Lee drags out the name and Ford finally drums up the nerve to turn and face him again only to see Lee’s back as he has one hand past the shower curtain, testing the water temperature. This gives Ford a better opportunity to just outright stare at his twin’s nude form.

Lee has broad shoulders that give way to big arms, they aren’t overly muscular but they look strong. His spine has a perfect curve that leads down to dimpled hips and his ass - and really, once Ford’s eyes are there he can’t seem to take them away. Lee’s ass is…he can’t even properly describe it. In fact, he doesn’t want to. He just wants to touch it, his palms tingling at the very idea and then he thinks about squeezing it and he’s not sure but he think his face might actually be on fire. It feels too hot to be normal. It’s like it’s melting off into jelly or something and he touches it quickly just to make sure he doesn’t feel actual flames.

Then Lee turns and okay, there it is. ALL of it. Ford thought his brother’s backside was impressive but now here’s the front side of him. Stan’s chest is covered in dark, wiry chest hair and Ford is pretty sure that this should turn him off instead of making him wonder what it might feel like between his fingers. His nipples are pale pink discs with tiny, tight points and now Ford’s tongue has joined the ‘I’d like to touch that’ parade so he pushes it up against the back of his teeth to try and calm down.

Lee’s chest hair tapers down to a decent set of abs. They’re not a perfect, chiseled six pack or anything but they have decent definition that shows he does work out a good deal albeit not enough to make him an ideally muscled specimen. And then the hair continues its path down to his…and Ford doesn’t know which word he wants to use.

‘Penis’ is far too technical a term. A penis makes him think of anatomy drawings and uncomfortable sexual education courses. ‘Shaft’ makes him think of the books he’s taken from his mother and frankly, he’s always found that term too asinine to use. Maybe ‘member’? He decides on that because he’s looking at it and he has to think of it as something and ‘looking’ is a very kind way to describe what he’s currently doing because honestly, he’s outright staring at it.

Lee’s member isn’t fully aroused but it has some heft to it. It’s darker than he thought it would be and his sack is heavier and it all looks…healthy and he feels completely idiotic. For everything he’s thinking and how he’s staring and he looks away when suddenly he feels Lee’s hands on his waist. He doesn’t meet his brother’s eyes as he softly asks, “You okay?”

Ford can’t manage words so he nods. Lee’s eyebrows rise, “You sure? You look pretty freaked out.”

“I…I’m not.”

Lee takes Ford’s face in his hands, “Hey…look at me.”

Ford does.

“We can stop if you want. You can say no. At any time. No matter what.”

Ford feels a dopey smile take his face and he wants to tell Lee how sweet he is, how wonderful and important he makes him feel. Instead he darts his head forward and gives him a couple of quick, tender kisses, “Thank you.”

“Okay, so…do you want to stop?”
“I don’t want to stop. I want to keep going.”

“So, you want this?”

“I said yes.”

“I know, but I like hearing you say it. You should say it a lot.”

Ford chuckles, “Yes, yes, yes…”

“Oh, so sexy,” Lee laughs and they share a few more kisses before he starts gently tugging at the end of Ford’s shirt. “You want to take this off? Or you want me to take it off for you?”

Ford sucks in a shuddering breath. He needs to get it together. Lee is clearly having no problems. But then, Lee is so much braver than he is. Always has been. It was Lee who stood up to bullies. Lee who convinced him to go on park rides. Lee who would run out, fists raised, ready to face monsters. And now he’s facing this moment with the same daring and Ford wishes he could mirror it.

Well, Lee had told him to use his imagination, hadn’t he? To pretend? So, Ford decides to pretend. He decides to pretend he’s brave as he speaks, his voice coming out in an unexpected husk, “You. I want you to undress me.”

The words come across as more of a command than he expected but something sparks in Lee’s eyes. He looks… turned on. Lee’s fingers curl into the material of his shirt and he slowly starts raising it inch by inch as he breathes, “How’m I doing?”

Ford’s glasses have started fogging as the heat from the shower fills the room with a decent amount of steam and he finds his hands covering Lee’s, “Here. Let me help.”

They both work together to tug Ford’s shirt over his head. Then they both go for his bottoms, tugging them and his underwear down until they fall to the floor in a puddle at his feet. Ford steps out of them and removes his glasses, carefully setting them to one side. He averts his eyes as he gets into the shower first, keeping his focus straight ahead as his pulse continues to jump.

He can’t look at Lee. He knows his brother has to have inspected him now, inspected him in the same way Ford inspected him and that’s only fair, really, but there’s no way he looks half as good. He has no strength in his arms, no definition to his chest or abs. And his own, ah, member is already far more aroused and probably embarrassing in comparison.

Not that he’s ever thought about it much. His dick has always just been his dick. He’s never really looked at it or contemplated it. It’s just a body part. Like his ears or his nose. It’s there and that’s that. Frankly, the only part of his whole body he’s ever given any extra thought to is his fingers because he has (and deeply loathes) the extra one.

But now all he can think of is his entire naked body as a whole and how utterly disappointing a package it must be. He never gave much thought to his being in a sexual situation where one would peruse his nudity. And now he’s thinking over himself, thinking of how slight and ghastly pale he is. How his shoulders are too curved and his arms too thin and noodle like. How his hips are bony and his ribs stick out and how he doesn’t have much in the way of chest hair. In fact, his chest is almost distressingly smooth.

He doesn’t know why he hasn’t grown a lot of hair there but he bets it looks like a blinding patch of white snow and then his nipples – something he’s really never thought about ever—he can’t even remember what exactly they look like and he doesn’t want to look down at them because he’s afraid
that maybe they’re discolored or misshapen or weird or…

He hears Lee get into the shower behind him. And the water that is coming down is warm but it’s almost hard to tell because the temperature of the whole room is indefinitely spiked. Ford chews into his bottom lip so hard he thinks he might cut it with his teeth so he quickly sticks his head under the showerhead, soaking himself because maybe he should just hurry up and shower and get out because there’s no way Lee can possibly want to do anything else.

Surely he was just fooling himself. Maybe Lee suggested they should shower together to save on water or something. Maybe it wasn’t anything sexual at all and, okay, it might seem sexual and he knows people can do sexual things in the shower because he’s not a child but that doesn’t mean that this-

He jumps a little when Lee touches his back and Lee chuckles, “You trying to drown yourself?”

Ford brushes his wet hair back and he coughs, “No. Sorry. Thinking.”

“Overthinking, more like,” Lee answers astutely and Ford can’t deny it. He can almost see his twin’s smile and then that hand on his back moves, fingertips dancing along his shoulder. Ford’s throat feels tight and it squeezes reflexively when something cold slides along his spine, the air taken with the fresh scent of soap. He relaxes marginally as Lee rubs the bar along his back, voice ringing out in a gentle echo, “I wash your back, you wash mine?”

“My back isn’t what needs cleaning,” Ford hears himself say the words but is stunned they left him. He’s not the kind to just…blurt things out like that. That’s more Stan’s arena. Stan, who is Lee, who is behind him and takes in a loud huff of air. And it sounds like he’s just as surprised as Ford is by what he’s said and then Lee’s arms move around him, tugging him closer until Ford is away from the showerhead, until his back side is pressed up to Lee’s front and – oh!

Okay.

So.

Earlier, Lee was not aroused.

Now, he is.

Very much so.

Lee’s impressive erection is brushing against the end of his spine and right along his ass and at one point just the tip presses between his cheeks and Ford feels like he’s going to swallow his own tongue because he isn’t even sure how this possible. They have barely touched. Lee has only seen him naked and there’s no way the sight of his body could have caused such a reaction.

There must be some other explanation. And Ford’s mind starts ticking away, trying to think up the possible answers to this riddle, trying to remember what stimuli could cause a young man to grow erect so quickly when Lee’s mouth latches onto Ford’s shoulder and all thought completely flies out of his mind.

His whole brain shuts down as Ford lets out a startled moan. Lee’s lips and tongue linger over his shoulder and move up to his neck, they grace over a sensitive spot and Ford recalls Lee putting a hickey there and then Lee’s sucking at that spot again and Ford’s moan extends, growing into a full whine. He feels the harsh brush of stubble and it’s like the sensation is hot wired to his cock.

He feels himself growing harder, fuller, the appendage filling and curling up towards his bellybutton
as Lee’s hands creep around to his front, soap bar still in hand, skating the slippery bar along his
chest, his nipples and then lower, lower and oh god, oh god…

“Lee,” Ford pants as Lee’s soapy hands start slipping up and down his aching length. This is the first
time a hand that is not his own has touched him here. It’s so…odd. But good. Electric. Lee’s hand is
firm and slightly calloused and it slows, much to Ford’s frustration.

“Is this okay? Do you like this?” Lee asks, “I can stop if you want.”

“Stop and I’ll kill you!”

“I’ll take that as a ‘yes’ but I would rather hear it.”

“Yes,” Ford rasps, “Yes, yes, god yes, please keep touching me, Lee!”

And he does. He starts moving his hand again; at first he works Ford’s cock gingerly, clearly testing
himself. After all, as far as Ford knows, this is Lee’s first time touching another man. But Lee seems
to get the hang of it quickly, almost intuitively knowing how best to stroke him and Ford’s head falls
forward, eyes closing tight as he gives himself over to the sensation of being touched, of having
someone else work him.

Lee’s mouth buries into the nape of his soaked, curling hair and he’s breathing heavily as he uses his
free hand to cup Ford’s straining sack, giving it the gentlest squeeze and Ford can’t help himself as
he cries out, “Fuck!”

Lee’s hands immediately draw away and he turns Ford to face him, “What did you just say?”

Ford doesn’t know. He’s never felt so blindly dumb in all his life. He’s has no brain right now. He’s
all jumbled nerves and hormones and he doesn’t understand why they’re not still touching. He
misses the feel of Lee’s hands on him and Lee’s erection against his back but now he sees it hovering
before him and it’s…big. And impressive.

And he finds himself almost crying with how much he wants it. He doesn’t even know how he
wants it – in his hands? His mouth? He didn’t even think he was the kind of person who would be so
excited at the idea of touching someone else’s dick but here he is, out of his mind with wanting and
why is Lee trying to ruin it by talking?

He’s the talker – the thinker. Not Lee. And he just shakes his head and Lee asks, “Did you just
curse? You never curse.”

And it’s true. Ford tries not to swear. It’s not because he’s prudish about that sort of thing. It’s just
that he’s always thought it shows the limits of one’s vocabulary. There were other words that could
be tossed about just as easily as those four letter descriptives but right now that doesn’t matter.
Nothing should matter but more of what they were doing and Lee must get back with the program
because he takes Ford’s cock in one hand again and tenderly pumps it, his voice soft, “Say it again. I
want to hear it.”

“Fuck,” Ford breathes, dizzy with desire and Lee, seeing it in his expression, growls, “God, I love
this. Love hearing you talk like that. Hear you talking with that dirty mouth.”

“D-Dirty?”

“You think cursing is dirty, don’t you?”

“N-No…not-not exactly…”
“What if I use it in a dirty way?” Lee encourages, his hand returning to Ford’s cock as he draws closer, lips brushing his ear as he whispers, “Like, what if I tell you to fuck my hand?”

The sound that leaves Ford is inhuman. It’s a tight, injured noise as he does as Lee suggests, hips stuttering at the suggestion. And Lee lets him. Lets him fuck the slick cradle of his hand. And Ford can’t seem to shut up and, what’s more (worse), is that the bathroom has a pretty damn good echo and he can hear himself and he is loud.

He keeps moaning and gasping and words keep tumbling out of his mouth like ‘More’ and ‘Fuck’ and ‘Mmmhingod, yes, yes, please!’ and some of it is muffled by their lips meeting or his mouth on Lee’s shoulder because it’s hard to not gravitate towards his twin. He’s damn near falling on top of him, knees weak from what’s happening because between Lee’s touch and the water caressing him he’s close to a sensory overload.

But Lee just groans in response and he mutters something about how they should take their time, how they have all night but Ford doesn’t feel that way. He’s impatient and he needs this and he needs it all and he needs it now. He wants this, he does, and he feels like he could come at any minute but there’s this small part of him that’s growing louder, telling him that Lee should be part of it so he takes in a deep, heavy breath, trying to calm himself, slow down and he pushes gently on Lee’s shoulders, shaking his head, “Together.”

Lee slows and pulls his hands away and Ford moans at the loss but when he looks up he sees that Lee is confused, “Together?”

Ford looks around and finds that Lee returned the bar of soap to its dish. He grabs it and lathers up both of his hands and then, for the first time in his entire life, finds he’s grateful for his extra digit and the bigger grip it gives him as he takes his cock and Lee’s and starts stroking them together in unison as he gasps, “Together.”

And now it’s Lee who lets out an unearthly whine and Ford stops it as he crushes their mouths together, teeth clacking and tongues dueling and it’s sloppy but hot and immaculate. Lee’s hands clutch at Ford’s arms and his hair and his hips are jerking awkwardly and so are Ford’s and their breathing one another in, their sounds mingling and it’s almost as much a competition as it is an act of unity as they work against one another, climaxes so mingled it’s hard to tell who comes first.

Ford feels as if he’s floating, hot wet jets of come coating his hands and his chest and he didn’t even know he could shoot like this or maybe it’s Lee and it’s so filthy and wonderful. He’s mumbling incoherent curses under his breath as he slowly returns to earth and the idea behind the shower had been to clean up but if anything they’re dirtier now more than ever.

And Ford finds he wouldn’t want it any other way.

**NOW**

Stan wants to give up.

He envisions it. Just getting up from the table and leaving the room. How could he have thought this was a good idea? It’s almost like he enjoys getting dumped on. He should have invited more people to this bash Stan Pines affair. Hmm, who else would just love to make him feel like shit? Carla? Lazy Susan? Various rubes he’s sucker? Hey, maybe he can pull out a Ouija board and they can summon Pops. It’s Gravity Falls; after all, the old man would probably show up easy.
But then he finds that no one else’s opinions of him matter. He doesn’t care about them. He doesn’t care what any of them think. It’s how he’s always managed to do things he knows are less than nice. It’s hard to feel guilt when you don’t feel any sort of attachment to the person you’re being less than charitable to. But Ford – goddamn it. He’s always cared about Ford. It’s like a vital component to who he is as a person.

And he wishes to hell it wasn’t. He wishes he could hate his brother. He wishes he could toss him out on the street. He doesn’t care what kind of badass, multidimensional training Ford may have had – Stan is still fairly confident he could kick his brother’s ass if he wanted to. He could manhandle him outside and tell him to get lost, tell him he never wants to see him again. He could become the very image of the man he dreads becoming – their father. He could toss Ford out to the wolves - homeless, penniless, alone.

For a split second he sees it in his mind’s eye then immediately casts it aside and shudders because he could never, ever do that. And not just because he has valiantly vowed to be nothing like Pops. It’s because this jackass sitting across from him is more than his brother. And he should really just tell him that, but he can’t. And not just because he outright refuses to, but because he…can’t.

Stan Pines is not an emotional person.

He’s not warm or fuzzy or sentimental in any way.

He would rather die than say certain words aloud and while he could just let this all go and wait for Ford to leave the room and end this no doubt useless roundabout conversation he stays because he is man enough to recognize that there are some things that are more important than himself. That’s right. He can be selfless. It happens.

“You know, the Shack isn’t important to just me. I have employees, Stanford. Maybe you’ve heard of ‘em? Soos and Wendy?”

Ford rubs at his eyes, “Yes. I am aware.”

“So, what? Since you don’t know them you don’t give two fucks if they become unemployed?”

His brother scowls at him, “I do care. They seem like decent people. That said, I’m sure they could find more gainful employment elsewhere. I might even be able to provide them with some means of income myself.”

Stan lets out a laugh that has no humor to it, “You’re going to give them jobs?”

Ford shrugs, “Soos is a handyman. There is a lot around this house that needs to be fixed. And I take it that you didn’t pay him to do so in order to save a dollar here or there. For example, the broken stair on the stairwell?”

Stan can’t deny that this is true.

“And as for Wendy - she seems like a bright, fearless young woman. I could have use for an assistant.”

“Hey! I’m not having you drag her into something dangerous just so you can continue your research on all the supernatural weirdness that goes on around here!”

Ford rolls his eyes, “I would never put her in a dangerous situation, Stanley. I have grown considerably more conscientious in my time. I recognize now that the way I treated Fiddleford was a disservice. Even more so since I’ve seen his…deterioration. I was thinking of something much more
“I could do that for you, you know,” Stan spits the words out and wishes he hadn’t. They express a vulnerability he doesn’t want to show. But he can’t take back what he’s said and, much to his surprise, Ford’s features soften, “That’s not something you would enjoy, Stan. It would no doubt bore you. It might, in fact, bore Wendy but I would be willing to make the offer. Also, were she interested in learning more about the supernatural I would not be completely opposed to showing her. Just as I’ve shown things to Dipper. Even Mabel.”

“Wait, what have you shown Mabel?”

Ford shifts in his seat and he looks oddly shy, “I discovered a hybrid species, one that is a cross between a feline and a pig. Her sweaters suggest she likes cats and then there is her pet, Waddles, so I figured she would be interested.”

Stan hates to admit that he’s interested, “What do you call it?”

“He’s interested, “What-do you call it?”

“I let her name it.”

“Really?”

He nods, “I stuck to the scientific nature – classifying its kingdom, phylum, class and so forth but it’s actual title I allowed her to bequeath. They are now known as Piggypurrs.”

A genuine laugh leaves Stan this time, “What?”

“Yes. I wrote it up in my journal. I even let her make some notations.”

There’s a warm glow in Stan’s chest at this and he sighs, “Well, ain’t that something.”

“Not all supernatural ‘weirdness’ as you put it, is dangerous. The Piggypurrs are actually quite docile. Especially since they sleep more than half the time. They’re pretty much stuffed toys that occasionally animate themselves. Mostly to eat – and their diets are very eclectic. Absolutely fascinating creatures.”

Stan crosses his arms, “Okay, so you’ve taken care of Soos and Wendy but what the hell about me? What am I supposed to do when you kick me out? Kick me out like Pops, I might add. Nice to know the apple didn’t fall far from the tree.”

Ford leans back in his seat, “What are you talking about?”

“What do you think? Summer ends, kids go home, you get your name back, your house back, Shack closes and I – what? Live in my car again?”

“You lived in your car?”

“I told you that.”

“No, you didn’t.”

Stan thinks back over what he told Ford and the kids and then he remembers that the kids were there so…

He rubs at the back of his neck, “Okay, right, well – when you came back I told the truth but not the whole truth. Didn’t really want Dipper and Mabel to know their great uncle Stan was living out of
“I didn’t realize-”

“No, of course you didn’t,” Stan snaps as the old wounds fester, “I bet you never even thought about me once, did you? Pops tosses me out on the street and I’m dead to you.”

“That’s not-”

“Still talking!” Stan hisses, “You never reached out to me, Ford! And god knows; Pops didn’t! Only Mom managed to give me the time of day and she gave me very fucking little. She gave me your phone number and told me what you were up to and I tried to call you – hundreds of times! But each time I hung up because I knew it was friggin’ pointless! If you really wanted me, you would have reached out to me. But you didn’t!”

Finally finding his opening, Ford speaks up hotly, “That’s not true! I did reach out to you, Stanley! Don’t you remember? Thirty years ago, I reached out to you and it was you who threw a hissy fit! I reached out to you when it was the most important, when I needed you more than anyone in the world because you were the only person I felt I could trust. I asked you to come here to help me, I asked you to take the journal away and hide it and you! You were the one who immediately became irrational! Became defensive!”

“Oh, like I shouldn’t be that way when you only called me out here to hurt me! AGAIN. You wanted me to come so you could send me as far away from you as possible when I thought maybe, just maybe, you wanted me back!”

Ford stiffens at the words, “Wanted you…?”

“As your brother, Stanford! As your friend!” the volume and heat fade from Stan’s voice as a profound sadness takes him, “It was like I told you then – it was supposed to be the two of us! And when you called, I had hoped that maybe I’d served my penance, that you might have finally forgiven me; and that we would fix this. That we would go back to what we were.”

“What we were? Stan,” Ford swallows, “What we were was…wrong.”

Stan shakes his head, “I’m not talking about that. Don’t get me wrong – I-I want that too. I do. But if I can’t have that, the least I can get is my family. You’re my family, Stanford. More than Mom and Pops ever were. More than anyone ever was. I’ve connected with the kids and I’m grateful for it, but you…”

Stan drops off, beyond miserable. He doesn’t do this. He doesn’t talk about his deep, dark feelings. He doesn’t do mushy stuff. He never has. And now here he is - trying - and Ford must actually recognize it because he takes in a loud lungful of air and says with obvious discomfort, “It…wasn’t my intention to hurt you. Not then. Not now.”

“You’ve got a funny way of showing it. Especially considering your plans for my future. Now I’m gonna be one of those homeless guys living under a bridge.”

“You’re not going to be homeless,” Ford insists, “I never said I was kicking you out.”

“You said-”

For shakes his head, “No, what I said was I wanted my name and house back. I wanted the Shack closed. I said nothing about you leaving. And if you want to go off of what exactly we said – YOU said that as far as you were concerned the kids were the only family you have left. So, what? You
“care nothing for their parents?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Precisely!” Ford returns smugly, folding his arms, “At least we’ve gotten that squared away.”

“Yeah, one thing out of a hundred. Goody.” Stan mutters, “Still doesn’t answer my question though. What the hell am I supposed to do at the end of the summer? Even if I’m staying here, I’ve got nothing without the Shack! It’s my job! The one thing I’m good at! You got any ideas as to what I can do for employment?”

The question hangs between them, unanswered, and Stan feels it like it’s an axe waiting above him to drop. Ford finally answers, “Well…I…don’t know.”

Stan gives him a bitter smirk, “Wow. What do you know? I’ve found a question Mr. Science can’t answer.”

“It’s not like you don’t have any options.”

“Okay then, what are my options, smart guy? I can’t go back to what I did when Pops first tossed me out. Well, some of it, maybe. Once a criminal always a criminal, right? Not like it’ll be hard for a senior citizen to get a job as a smuggler and a dealer. As for theft, that’s pretty much what I still do, isn’t it? At least I bet that’s the way you look at it.”

Ford opens his mouth to protest but Stan just rushes on, “But my best commodity is long since gone. I mean, it’s not like I can stand up to the punishment I used to take in fights. Young punks now would just chew me up and spit me out in the ring and as for selling my body, there’s nobody who’s going to want to pay for this now. Not in my prime anymore, gotten pretty fat and hairy and nowhere near as visually appealing as I used to be and sure, you don’t always have to have that to sell yourself but, y’know, it sure as hell helps.”

“Sell…your…” Ford says each word slowly as if he must have misheard, “Stanley, what are you talking about?”

Stan glares at him, “What do you think?”

“You-you…you’re saying you…”

Stan crosses his arms and looks away, sniffing loudly, “Well, guess it goes to show, you actually don’t know everything about everything, do you?”

There’s a tangible silence and it makes Stan’s whole body itch so he keeps on talking, “I was on my own. I was living out of my car. And sometimes you can’t find jobs; at least not ones that involve you keeping all your clothes on. So, I did what I had to do. I had to eat, okay? I mean it wasn’t a great time, but it wasn’t about me having a great time. None of the guys ever treated me too rough and occasionally there would be a woman and there was this one cheap as dirt film but it was all fine.”

He shoots his brother a sidelong glance, just to see how he’s doing and Ford looks absolutely devastated. It’s like Stan’s words have just eviscerated him and for some reason this ticks Stan off, so he looks away once more, tone heated. “Look, it wasn’t that big a deal, alright? It was my decision. My choice. Sometimes you do what you have to do to get by. And I won’t have you judge me for it. I won’t have anyone judge me for it.”

Ford doesn’t really speak so much as breath Stan’s name and he does it with such heartbreak that
Stan can’t help but snap, “Christ, stop sniveling, will ya? I already told you, nothing terrible happened! It was only a few times, and it wasn’t great, but it wasn’t a fucking patch on some other shit I went through around that time and-”

Stan is cut off by an injured gasp leaving Ford and he looks at his brother again to see his face is the definition of wrecked. He realizes that he’s really not making this much better so he changes tack, “Look, it’s no big deal! Bad stuff happened and good stuff happened. Stuff just – happened.”

“I didn’t know it had…I never thought…” Ford rests his face in his hands, “You’re right. I really am a fucking idiot!”

The language jolts Stan a little and he shakes his head, “You don’t get to blame yourself for this, Ford.”

He huffs out an incredulous breath, “Oh, I don’t?”

“No. Everything that happened…it wasn’t your fault. Not all of it. Not really. And especially not this. I told you, I made the choice. No one pointed a gun to my head or something.”

“But you would have never been put in that position, would never have gotten to such dire straits if you had felt comfortable contacting me! I would have helped you, Stanley! I really would have if you had told me it had gotten to that point. But you didn’t because you couldn’t trust me enough to contact me because you got kicked out because of what I-”

“NO! I got kicked out because of Pops,” Stan cuts in vehemently, “And yeah, some support from you back then would’a been great. It would have been nice if you’d told the old man he was being crazy but honestly, we both know it wouldn’t have helped! He had my bag packed, Stanford. He threw it at me when he threw me onto the street. He had been prepared; he had been waiting for that moment.”

There’s a tight break here as they both absorb this, this unspoken thing that has hung between them since they were children and somehow Stan finds the mettle to keep going, “And you know as well as I do that he was going to toss you out right alongside me if you hadn’t proved your financial worth. It wasn’t until that Principal told him you could be a potentially millionaire that he showed any interest.”

“That’s…not true.”

“Oh, it’s not?” Stan asks cruelly.

“No! He was our father, he loved us.”

“Bullshit! He gave us the same damn name because he couldn’t be bothered to think of anything else. At least Ma bothered to change them slightly or it would have been confusing as hell. Pops thought I was a weak loser and he just wanted to get rid of me. Hell, when everything happened it was probably the best day of his life. Everything laid out on big golden platter for him.”

Stan can tell Ford doesn’t want to believe him. He’s lifts his face from his hands and he’s shaking his head but it doesn’t matter. He knows Ford believes him. How can he not? It’s the truth. And yes, Filbrick Pines wasn’t a complete monster. He could be nice and fair and honest but as a father…

And Stan doesn’t hate him. Okay, yes, sometimes he does but Pops did help build him into the person he is today. In both good and bad ways. It’s funny to think of it, but this conversation with Ford, while painful, is actually a hell of a lot easier than any conversation with his old man would be. Or would have been, since he’s long since gone.
But Stan doesn’t want to think about him and he certainly doesn’t want to think about how he was once engaged in the world’s oldest profession. No, instead he wants to finally resolve things with his twin and he opens his mouth to do so, to really get back to the whole point of this horror show only for the sound of thunder to ring out. This is followed by the lights in the house shutting off and Stan looks upwards, “Huh. Of course. How freakin’ perfect.”
Chapter 8

THEN

They exit the shower together with wobbly knees and big grins. They get dressed and end up on the couch watching television. They fight for a little bit over what to watch – Ford wants to see the late night news and Lee’s up for anything else. They find an old sci-fi movie on and watch that. Ford makes popcorn and sits it on the floor between them. Lee is in a cuddly mood and immediately snuggles up to Ford’s side before eventually slouching down, resting his head on his brother’s lap.

And at first Ford is stiff but he slowly relaxes and even starts playing with Lee’s hair and Lee can admit it – he’s kinda in heaven right now. He had had no idea the night would go this way but he’s happy it did. He’s enjoying himself and flush with the release of two amazingly good sexual encounters. Everything he did with Carla pales in comparison to what took place between him and Ford.

Looking up at Ford now it’s hard to believe that this Poindexter of all people can make him feel this way. But he has. He still is, especially when he looks down into his face now and then and gets this goofy look on his face, like he’s bashful. And he probably is. Even after everything they’ve already done, he’s bashful. Ford has always been awkward when it comes to…okay, well, Lee’s not a girl so, maybe the better way to put it would be to say that Ford has always been awkward when it comes to someone he’s attracted to.

At least Lee is pretty damn sure Ford is attracted to him. Or at least interested. Maybe even crushing? The very idea of his brother having a ‘crush’ on him makes his smile grow bigger and honestly, his face is starting to hurt from all this smiling. But he doesn’t care. He’s just too keyed up to feel anything but pure bliss.

The sound of thunder booms in the distance and they both jump a little. Ford lets out a breath, “Guess a storm’s coming in.”

Stan just hums in agreement. Storms come and go in Glass Shard. It’s one of the things about living in a coastal town. He thinks of how the ocean probably looks right now – all choppy waves. It’s probably really pretty and then Ford says, ‘Yeah’ and Lee realizes with a start he said that aloud.

“How about we go check tomorrow.”

Ford grins, “Yeah, bet you would just love that.”

“Or a mermaid.”

Ford just laughs and shakes his head, “Well, we can go check tomorrow.”
Lee feels his heart sink, “Yeah. Tomorrow.”

Ford’s fingers slow and Lee knows he’s thinking the same thing. Tomorrow this will all be over. There won’t be a ‘Lee Pinesbury’ anymore. They’ll just be Stanley Pines, brother and twin to Stanford Pines. They’ll just be two siblings who certainly never, ever kissed or touched one another or cuddled on the couch or…

Lee turns over and buries his face into Ford’s stomach. He breathes in his scent. Even past the shower, Ford always smells so clean. But with this underlying wood smoke smell – probably some chemicals from his various science experiments. Or maybe it’s just him. Lee wonders what he smells like – probably salt water taffy or peanuts or something nowhere near as classy.

He feels Ford’s six fingers start combing through his curls again and his lips twitch and his eyes becoming suspiciously (and annoyingly) wet. Christ, why is he acting so fucking touchy? It’s no big deal. It was just one night. It was one night and it was awesome and he should just enjoy that. He shouldn’t get his panties in a bunch just because after tonight it will be all about how they have to pretend this never happened.

Or maybe it won’t even be pretend. Maybe Ford will just choose to forget. Ford will probably want to forget. And why wouldn’t he? Stanley – and let’s face it, he might as well just go ahead and drop the ‘Lee’ now because he’ll have to eventually and the sooner the better, right? – Stanley doesn’t have much to offer. As a person he doesn’t have anything particularly great going for him. He’s not very smart, he’s not very creative – he’s not even that strong.

Yeah, he’s taken boxing lessons but it’s not like it’s a career he’s seriously considered pursuing. In fact, he hasn’t thought about a career at all. And college? Yeah. That’s a laugh. He’s barely made it through the schooling he’s done so far. No way in hell he’s going to elect to do more. All he’s ever really thought about is getting the Stan O’ War up and running and just sailing off with his brother.

He can find something to do out there. Out in the big, vast world far away from Jersey. He can explore new exotic places; uncover different cultures and who knows? Maybe he’ll finally – finally – find something he’s actually good at. And best of all, he’ll be with Stanford. He’ll be with his brother and they’ll be together forever and…

A treacherous tear somehow manages to escape and Stan is shocked and embarrassed by it. He doesn’t cry. He’s not a crier. He even broke his arm once and didn’t cry…okay, maybe a little, but that’s beside the point. He’d broken a friggin’ bone. That’s what it took to get him to cry. And now here he is, sniveling over – over what? This night ending? This…new layer of his relationship with Ford ending?

It should end anyway, right? It’s wrong and stupid and sick and…

And another tear is trying to join the first and he prays Ford doesn’t feel it, prays it doesn’t leave a mark on his shirt and he sucks in a breath and tries to get a grip on himself when suddenly he feels Ford start to move. It takes an amazing amount of willpower not to try and overpower him, not to cling to him tightly but he mentally commands himself to relax and let go. He’s not going to let himself dissolve into hysterics. He has some pride.

Ford gets up and walks over to turn the television off. Stan’s insides grow cold. This is it then. It’s all over now. Or is it? Ford hasn’t left the room. Instead he moves over to their father’s record player. He shifts through some of the records and, finding one he likes, he puts it on. Soft, slow music starts to play and he recognizes it as The Flamingos ‘I Only Have Eyes For You’. Ford turns to look at him. His brother is clearly nervous and his hands tap at his legs before one of them goes to scratch at the back of his head.
He clears his throat and when he speaks his voice is sort of a wavering, stuttering mess, “So, uh, we-went to the dance but we never actually, you know…danced with anyone and I was thinking…maybe if you-you…you know, if, if you wa-wanted…”

Ford holds out a hand and Stan just stares at it. Ford is asking him to dance. With him. Ford wants to dance with him. The cold inside melts away and he feels warm from head to toe. He looks at that hand and, much to his supreme humiliation, he feels like more than just two tears are going to escape him. He sniffs and hope the action doesn’t loudly declare what he’s trying to fight off.

The reaction he gets tells him that Ford took it a completely different way as his brother looks disappointed, “I mean, I guess it’s dumb.”

“No!” Stan tosses out quickly and takes Ford’s hand, “No, Stanford. It’s not dumb. Not at all.”

He receives the world’s cutest crooked smile and Stan feels his heart swell and there’s the tiniest part of him that is teasing him relentlessly for being so friggin’ sappy about all of this. The rest of him shouts that part down because he’ll be damned if he lets this moment get ruined. He wants to enjoy it, so sue him.

Stan gets up and he looks into his brother’s eyes and he can’t help himself. He gives him a kiss because he’s beyond addicted to kissing him already and when he draws away he asks, “Who’s leading, you or me?”

“Oh, I…hadn’t thought of that…”

“You lead,” Stan decides and Ford nods, pulling him close. They dance together, swaying back and forth, slow and sweet. And Stan’s stupid mouth can’t help himself, “So, you chose this song, huh?”

“It…seemed fitting.”

“Always thought it sounded kinda eerie.”

“I can turn it off-”

“Don’t you dare!” Stan cuts in, tightening his grip on his brother, “It’s our song now.”

Ford returns the grip, “Our song?”

“Yeah, it works. It has a kind of…I dunno, a mysterious sound to it. And you like that sort of thing.”

“You don’t.”

Stan shrugs a little, “I’m not against mysteries or sci-fi weirdness or whatever. I’m just more into adventurous stuff – like punching.”

“I don’t know too many adventurous, punching slow songs.” Ford chuckles and the sound is warm and deep and makes Stan’s heart skip a beat so he gives him a quick kiss before resting his head on his shoulder, “Exactly. So this is better. Much better.”

“Well,” Ford whispers, “It is our song.”

Stan squeezes his eyes shut tightly as they continue to dance, the music floating around them. Outside the storm rages, loud and boisterous and a terrible harbinger of things to come but for right now, they ignore it. For right now it’s just the two of them, together.
NOW

The unexpected darkness makes Ford’s throat squeeze and one of his hands goes straight for the gun he keeps on his belt. After the fireworks debacle he decided it would be best to keep at least one small firearm on him at any given time. Not that it had helped him much versus Probabilitor but just having it around improves his state of mind immensely. He knows half the reason he flipped out as much as he did in regards to the fireworks had been his mind’s discovery that he lacked a weapon.

It isn’t safe for him not to have that kind of security blanket. You always need to be armed. Always. It was when you weren’t armed that…things happened. Terrible, horrible things that better remained unnamed and forgotten. Not that he can forget. He can never, ever forget. That’s his problem, that’s his curse.

Honestly, he even considered borrowing the memory ray from Dipper and using it on himself. But he knows better. He’s witnessed firsthand the side effects, the addictive qualities. No, better to just deal with the memories as best as he can, no matter how awful they might be. Besides, some of the dimensions he visited were wondrous and worth remembering.

He can still recall his first taste of Elysium honey in the Religus Dimension or the multi-colored skies he witnessed at Dimension 3, D-28. Not every place he went to was…there. There, the dimension he refuses to name. To even just think of its name causes him to break out in a cold sweat, causes his skin to crawl and he refuses to let that fear take hold.

Instead he touches the gun and steadies himself. It’s just the storm. The lights went out because of the storm. But as he relaxes from this, he sinks back into the misery of what Stan revealed. His brother had had to sell himself to survive. He had had to be a…

And he can’t even think the word. Any of the words that define what Stanley had to do. Had to do because Ford had been too self-centered, too focused on his work to think of his brother. There was a time where Stan had been all he had thought about it. He had been consumed by it, by his feelings. But in his panic to get away from them, from what he viewed as his own personal failings, he had gone out of his way to irrevocably alter his relationship with his twin.

He had worked so hard to push Stanley away, to somehow try to save Stan from following him down a path of depravity that he had completely lost sight of his sole purpose in life. To protect his brother. He had failed. He had failed Stanley so completely and so utterly that he’s finding it difficult to breathe.

Ford just keeps thinking about all those nameless, faceless people who had touched his brother. Who had paid him to let them put their filthy hands on him. And he finds he’s burning with rage. He wants to find them. All of them. And he wants to kill them. He wants to torture them – he wants to do to them the unspeakable things that were done to him in his travels.

He knows how to do it. All of it. He learned firsthand, hadn’t he? But can he inflict the horrors he suffered on someone else? He looks at Stan and even though he can’t see his features well in the darkness of the room he knows he could. He would do it without hesitation. And all because they dared to touch the person he…

And that word floats in his mind. That very, very, very dangerous word. The one he has never said aloud before and he’s thought it but for only the briefest of moments because he can’t, he can’t - he just can’t feel that for his brother. At least, not outside of a familial way. He can’t feel it in any passionate sort of way. In any romantic sort of way. If he does that, then he is well and truly lost.

After everything he’s gone through and everything he’s endured, he can’t let that be what breaks
him. He refuses to. But god knows, sometimes he gets close to falling apart. Like when he visited Stan in his room and kissed him. He shouldn’t have done that. Thank god Stan had tried to remove his shirt and snapped him out of it. But now there’s this conversation happening between them and there’s no way on earth that they can resolve decades of discontent and miscommunication in one evening but what little that has come to light has started to crack at the careful shield he’s spent years constructing around himself.

And this admission from Stan causes the biggest chink yet. It takes all of his willpower not to grab his brother and cling to him, not to run his hands through his hair and hold him and tell him everything will be all right. He knows that he would go through everything that he had had to bear over there a million times over if it meant that he could somehow go back in time and erase what had happened to Stan.

If it meant that Stan had never had to sell himself, he would go back there in an instant. He would let them do whatever they wanted to him, for however long they wanted if it meant he could take any of the pain or humiliation Stan had had to endure. Christ, why hadn’t he thought of Stan? Why hadn’t he thought of what might have happened to him when their father threw him out?

He knows why. He knows exactly why. And he loathes himself for it. Because he knows that once their father had thrown him out he had spent years – years – trying to repress what they had done. And he had done it in some misguided attempt to protect them both. He had convinced himself that Stan would be fine – that Stan would bounce back.

Sure, their father had tossed Stan out but Stan was so resilient, so smart. And yes, Stan didn’t think he was smart but Ford knew better. There was a difference between education and intellect. And while Stan always had trouble with educational schooling he had plenty of street smarts, he was savvy and charismatic.

Stan had had friends outside of Ford. True, none of them had been particularly close friends – more like acquaintances but that was still better than what Ford had. Ford had had no one but Stanley. Not until college and Fiddleford. And that was all due to Fiddleford. He had been the one to approach Ford, he had been the one to offer friendship and look what that had cost him. The poor man would have been better off not coming within miles of him. Maybe if Fiddleford had just steered clear of Ford he’d be a happy, stable man today instead of a half crazed wreck.

Yes, Fiddleford was a perfect example of what Ford offered people, what an involvement with him was worth. Stan could have gone the same route and in many ways, he still had. Ford did nothing but leave destruction in his wake. He infected everything and everyone he touched. And now he was back in this dimension, now he was back to potentially harm Stanley more and the children…god, if anything happens to the children because of him…

He’s startled by the sound of low cursing as Stan rises from the table they are sitting at. He bumped into the table in his attempts to stand and Ford is pretty sure he’s rubbing at his knee. Ford gets up much more smoothly, his voice low, “You stay there. I’ll go check the circuit breaker.”

“Eh, won’t help,” Stan mutters, “Remember when you said there was plenty around here that needs fixing? Things I won’t pay Soos to do? Well, the breaker’s one of ‘em. We’re better off with candles.”

“Then I’ll go find some candles.”

“Like you know where they are.”

Ford lets out a heavy sigh, “Well, it’s not like you can find them. I have no doubt you’re as blind as a
bat in this environment. I, however, spent a great amount of time in the Nero Veil.”

“What the hell is that? Some sort of rock group?”

“No, it was a dimension primarily dominated by darkness and shadows. As such, I’ve developed very excellent night vision.”

“Well, la dee da, aren’t you fancy?”

“Shut up,” Ford returns curtly. He checks a couple of kitchen cabinets and each time Stan adds a ‘not there’ after his search proves fruitless. It takes until the fifth cabinet before he snaps, “Where the hell are they, then?!”

“Temper, temper,” Stan says and he starts walking forward carefully only to hit his shin on the chair Ford had been sitting in. He lets out a vicious yelp and rubs at this newest pain. Ford rolls his eyes and walks over, he takes a gentle hold of Stan’s elbow and he can see his brother turn his head to look at him. Ford clears his throat, “I can lead you.”

“Blind leading the blind, huh?”

“Just tell me where to go.”

“My office. I’ve got flashlights in there and then we can go get some candles.”

Ford guides Stan to the office as the storm makes itself known. The wind starts howling and the thunder booms boisterously. Lightning flashes actually help illuminate their path at one point and Ford can’t help but say, “I hope the children are safe.”

“They’re fine. They’re with Wendy’s dad. You might remember him, Manly Dan?”

“Oh, yes! He helped build this place.”

“Yeah, well, he’s the one who took them camping and I don’t think he took them too far from his cabin. They should be fine. Might be a little wet, but he’ll take good care of them.”

Ford’s relieved to hear this as they enter the office. Stan manages to pull away and take over, knowing the layout well. He goes to his desk and fishes out two flashlights. He hands one to Ford before turning his own on and waving it around, “Ah, much better.”

“You don’t have to bounce it around like that.”

“Why not? It’s like we’re at a rave.”

“A what?”

“Never mind,” Stan chuckles, “Something you missed while you were gone.”

“It sounds vaguely familiar. Was it important?”

“Not really. It became a bit of the fad in the 90s.”

“Dipper told me those were dark times.”

Stan laughs, “He’s not kidding. Come on.”

He leads his brother into the gift shop and finds a shelf full of candles. He goes over to the counter
and grabs a pack of matches and starts lighting several of them. Ford frowns, “Aren’t those part of your inventory?”

“According to you this place’ll be closed by the end of summer. So what does it matter if I light a few of these?”

As Stan is lighting candles Ford puts his flashlight down on the counter so he can rub at his face with both hands, frustration dripping off of him, “You’re still don’t understand why I don’t like this place, do you?”

“No, I got your point and, as I recall, it was a very insulting one where you suggested I would try to profit off of one of your best features.”

Ford can’t even describe the sound that leaves him at this. It’s something between a laugh and a gasp, “Your trying to claim that my being polydactyl is one of my best features?”

“I’m not claiming it; I’m outright saying it.”

“Yes, of course, how silly of me. How could I forget how great having six fingers has been for me? It’s been swell.”

Stan finishes lighting his seventh candle and the gift shop is well lit as he turns on Ford to scowl, “The only one who’s ever really had a problem with you having that extra finger is you, Stanford.”

“Okay, you make sure to tell all those people who teased me about it growing up that. Or, hey, how about you go back in time and tell our father? Or better yet, tell the various miscreants I met when I was bouncing through dimensions who wanted that extra part to sell because it was so damned fascinating!”

“You know what’s really fascinating?” Stan crosses his arms and leans back against the front counter as he faces his brother, “How you were in more than one dimension. Because that says to me you were trying to get home!”

Ford doesn’t say a word and he doesn’t meet Stan’s eyes. He can feel them on him though and eventually Stan asks, “Well?”

“Well, what?”

“Were you?”

“Was I what?”

“Christ! Don’t pull that shit on me! Were you trying to get home or not?”

Ford closes his eyes and breathes in through his nose loudly, “Yes.”

“Ah ha!” Stan crows triumphantly but before he can say more about it Ford continues, “At first! At first, I was trying to get home but after a few years of that it merely became about finding a place where I could…settle.”

“Settle? Wait…you were going to-?”

“I didn’t lie to you, Stanley. I never expected to come home. Not really. Yes, when I first discovered that I could jump from one dimension to another, when I discovered the whole of the multiverse, I did try to get home. I tried several times. But so much time passed and eventually I made peace with
the fact that I was never coming back. So I was looking for a place to stay, a place to call home.”

“This is your home, Stanford!” Stan hisses, clearly outraged at the idea of his twin giving up but Ford just shakes his head sadly, “Is it?”

“How can you ask that?”

“For god’s sake! Look around you, Stanley!” Ford gestures all around him, “This is not the way I left my house. And it’s been decades, decades since I’ve been here!”

“So, what? You’re telling me you didn’t want to come home? You’re telling me I did all that, all of it, for NOTHING.” The last word comes out with particularly loud vehemence and Stan looks ready to explode. And Ford is just as angry but for completely different reasons, so he tries his best to keep his voice level, “I’ve told you time and time again…you shouldn’t have opened the portal! That it was reckless thing to do!”

Stan breathes heavily for several seconds, clearly furious; he paces around, eyes roving the room. And then he just sort of…deflates. His whole body sags and he can’t even look at Ford, turning his back to him as he whispers, “Did you find it? Is that it?”

“Did I find what?”

“A…a home,” Stan says and his voice is dead, cold, “Some place you could be…happy. Some place without me.”

And it’s the last bit that’s like a knife to the gut. Ford immediately stiffens, “No.”

“I’m sorry.”

Ford’s eyebrows knit together, “What?”

“I’m sorry,” Stan replies, still not looking at him, voice still emotionless, “I’m sorry you couldn’t find what you were looking for. I’m-I’m sorry I brought you back.”

The words hang between them and Ford feels like Stan has turned and twisted the knife and plunged his hand into Ford’s chest. That he’s pulled out Ford’s still beating heart and crushed it beneath his heel and Ford can’t stand it, so he starts talking quickly, desperately, “Stan, you don’t understand.”

“No, hey, no. I do. It’s…it’s okay. I get it now.”

Ford charges over to him and goes to touch his shoulder, “Stanley-”

Stan jerks away from him, “Don’t you touch me!”

Stan just shakes his head and turns. He snatches up his flashlight and he’s walking away fast, faster than Ford would have thought possible and Ford’s having a hard time keeping up. Stan charges towards his bedroom and Ford knows he’s going to lose him, he’s going to lose him the moment Stan shuts the door behind him so he darts forward and catches him and Stan struggles in his grip but Ford holds tight, a sort of crazed hysteria filling him, “Wait! Wait, Stanley, wait!”

Stan whirls on him, tears in his eyes as he bellows, “I DID WAIT!”

Ford breath catches in his throat.
And Stan’s lips tremble and suddenly he looks so beaten and so very, very old, “I…waited, Stanford. I waited for you…god, I waited so long. For years…and you don’t even—you don’t even—!”

Ford can’t stand it. He just can’t stand it. And everything in him dissolves, it breaks and his hands dart forward, taking Stan’s face in his hands and he kisses him. Stan lets out a weak whimper and Ford swallows it, absorbs it into himself. And he can feel Stan’s face and it’s wet. It’s wet from tears. Tears Ford caused and Ford feels like something in him is crumbling to pieces.

He’s broken.

And awful.

Terrible.

He’s a sinner and an abomination and a disgusting piece of trash. He’s a waste of breath. Of life.

And Stanley deserves better.

He deserves so much better.

But…Stanley is crying. Stanley. Is. Crying. And Ford just can’t have that. He can’t. It’s like someone is killing him and he’s been tortured, he’s been hurt, and it all pales in comparison to this. So he kisses Stan with all the ferocity he can muster. And Stan kisses him back. He drops the flashlight and it rolls into the room, casting its light at odd angels. With his hands now free, Stan clings to Ford, claws at him and Ford draws away just enough to breathe, “Don’t. Please, don’t…Stanley, please, Stanley…”

“Ford.” Stan says his name as if it hurts him, as if he’s injured and Ford kisses him again and again and he runs his hands through his hair and he kisses his forehead, mumbling against it, “I’m sorry.”

A sort of choked hiccup leaves Stan as he shakes his head, “You don’t have to be—”

“No! I do! I do,” Ford cuts in sharply and he kisses his brother’s tear stained mouth again, “I do. I didn’t mean it! I didn’t!”

“But you did,” Stan moans weakly, “You were never going to come back. You were going to leave me here. All alone.”

“No, no,” Ford denies but Stan just keeps going, too worked up to stop, “I’m not an idiot, Stanford. I knew opening the portal was dangerous. But I didn’t care. Don’t you see? I didn’t care if it endangered me, if it endangered the town, the whole world – fuck, I didn’t even care if it endangered the kids, did I?”

He says the last part as if it’s a revelation even to himself; and when he continues he sounds even more wretched, “I didn’t think of them. I didn’t think of anybody but myself because I needed you, Stanford. I still need you. I’ll always need you and I couldn’t let you go. I would have torn the whole universe apart if it meant getting you back. And if you’d come out of that portal only a skeleton, I swear to god, I would have finished out the summer with the kids and then I would have eaten my gun rather than—"

“Stop! Stop, stop, stop,” Ford pleads because he can’t hear anymore. He can’t stand to hear anymore and he kisses Stan to make him stop. And Stan kisses him back but it’s sort of weak as if he’s given up and Ford can’t have that so he pushes him back into the bedroom, pushes him down on the bed and covers his body with his own, still kissing him, still running his hands gently all over him as if he’s the most tender, most precious thing in the whole multiverse.
Because he is.

Because he always has been.

At least to Stanford.

Ford presses him down softly as he kisses him and he pulls away just enough to remove Stan’s jacket, to start unbuttoning his shirt because he needs skin, he needs flesh; he needs to just touch Stanley, to feel him. His hand graces over his chest where his heart lies beneath and he presses his palm against it, feels the strong beat beneath and he lets out a breath he didn’t even know he was holding.

Stan is here and he’s alive and Ford is with him. Ford starts kissing him again and Stan reaches for his sweater but Ford shakes his head, “No. Not that.”

“But I want to see you…” Stan whispers.

“Trust me. You don’t.”

“Ford…”

“Let me do this for you, Stan,” Ford says and he shucks off his trench coat. He removes his boots and pushes them aside. Then he eases Stan up and pushes away his jacket and his shirt, he takes off his tie and his gold chain necklace and he tosses all of it off the bed and away from them, letting it fall to the floor in heaps.

Stan crosses his arms over himself, “I’m…ah, not what I used to be.”

“You’re fine.”

“No. I, y’know, disgustingly hairy. Like, Mabel tried to shave it all off once and it grew back almost instantly. And I’ve gotten fat, so…I mean, bodies change…”

“Your body’s perfect,” Ford reassures him as he kisses him, as he traces his fingertips all over him, “Glorious.”

Stan looks like he wants to protest more but Ford won’t let him. He covers his mouth with his own, swallowing any arguments, his tongue tangling with Stan’s and it feels like forever since they’ve done this. Honestly, it wasn’t that long ago that they were kissing in this very same room but somehow now it’s different. It’s almost…better.

Ford doesn’t want to examine why, he just wants to keep going. He drags off Stan’s pants and his underwear and even in the darkness of the room he knows his twin is blushing. Stan almost never blushes and Ford finds himself feeling incredibly moved by it. In knowing that he can cause this reaction. Stan’s voice is hushed, “I’m telling you…I haven’t aged well. Mean, it’s kind of…you know…excited but I don’t know if ahhhn!”

And the words dissolve into a heated moan because Ford is going down on him and he can’t make words anymore. Only sounds. Stan isn’t completely erect but it doesn’t matter. Ford licks and sucks at him and Stan’s cock slowly stirs to life, growing thicker and fuller in the hot cavern of Ford’s mouth. Stan’s fingers tangle in Ford’s thick hair, tugging at his scalp as he groans his name.

And Ford works so diligently, hands and lips working together in tandem, teasing and touching and his jaw aches and he’s drooling a little but he doesn’t care. He doesn’t care and he won’t stop. He can’t stop. Not with this wonderful thick weight on his tongue. The tip of his tongue teases the slit
and circles the soft head and Stan is gasping and writhing beneath him, begging him to keep going and warning him that it won’t be long and that he’s close and Jesus, he didn’t know at this age he could get so close so quickly and oh god, Ford, Ford! I’m coming, I’m coming!

Salty, sticky heat fills Ford’s mouth and he gulps it all down. He’s never been so hungry for this in all his life. He drinks down Stan’s release and doesn’t stop, even when it subsides, even when Stan is just a twitching, quivering mess beneath him. He cleans him, licks away every last drop before he lets him go. And his lips feel bruised and his mouth wonderfully used.

He looks at Stan and sees that he has an arm over his eyes and his chest is rising and falling erratically as he catches his breath. And Ford feels his heart mend a little at the sight. He rises up and covers Stan again and he hovers over his lips, “Is it okay if I kiss you?”

Stan moves his arm and his eyes are glassy with afterglow as he nods dumbly. Ford gives him gentle kisses. He blankets Stan’s body and cuddles him close, hugging him and when he releases Stan’s lips, Stan remarks dryly, “Funny you should ask my permission after all that.”

Ford stiffens; suddenly worried he overstepped a line, thinking he should have been more insistent about consent when Stan, sensing it, shakes his head, “Don’t get worked up. I wanted that. Trust me.”

“You…you liked it?”

“Well, I came in your mouth. You tell me.”

Ford snorts, “Crude.”

“But true.”

Ford only hums in agreement, too busy kissing Stan again, too busy touching him. He just wants this. This is all he’s ever wanted. Forever. But slowly everything starts to seep back in, reality starts to rear its ugly head and he knows he should draw away. He starts to do so only for Stan to grab the bottom of his sweater and tug it up, tug it up quicker than Ford had anticipated and Ford gasps, “No! Don’t!”

But it’s too late.

The flashlight that fell on the floor does an absolutely excellent job of highlighting the tangled mess of scars on Ford’s flesh. Stan inhales sharply at the sight and Ford tries to pull away, tries to yank his sweater back down to cover the travesty that is his body but Stan won’t let him, his voice a ragged whisper, “My god! Ford…what happened to you?”
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

**WARNING:** This chapter contains mentions of torture, gore, and abuse (mental, physical, possibly sexual). It's a rough read.

**THEN**

The next day was understandably uncomfortable for the twins. Neither one knew exactly how the other felt about everything that had happened and since the agreement had been to stick with one night and one night only, neither felt like they could talk about it. Instead they went through the motions, speaking to one another stiffly, formally, politely. It was torture. They both did their best to pretend as if everything was normal – as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened yesterday.

Ford, in particular, tried his hardest. He made dry small talk and bad jokes but at one point he went to punch Stan’s arm and hesitated. Hesitated because he wasn’t sure he could touch him. And this realization made him immediately miserable. And guilty. This was his fault. All of this. Sure, Stan may have made the suggestions but Ford certainly hadn’t had to go along with them.

And there was no way Stan could possibly feel as deeply about it as Ford did. After all, Stan had had a girlfriend. And a variety of different girls he had jokingly remarked as being ‘the one’. He was flirty and open and far more likely to just get over all of this. Sure, right now he was just as awkward as Ford but eventually he would move on. It would be easy for him to.

But Ford didn’t think he could move on. The day wasn’t even over and he already wanted to break down and beg Stan for a kiss. What was wrong with him? How could he be so-so dysfunctional? So deranged? He’s sitting at the kitchen table, mulling this over while staring at his physics book. He’s read the same sentence six times while Stan sits in the living room playing with his paddle ball.

The rhythmic sound of the ball meeting the wood lulls Ford into fantasy and he imagines getting up, going into the living room and looking at Stan. Just looking at him. Stan is nice to look at. Ford knows that now. Stan has a strong jaw and a nice nose and warm eyes and his lips are so full and soft and they feel great on his own, feel great on his body and he’s seen Stan without his clothes on-

“We’re home!”

Ford’s imagination snaps and he sits up straight as his mother breezes into the room. She’s carrying big bags of Chinese take-out. His father comes in behind her, newspaper in hand. He gives his son a curt nod in greeting before sitting down and burying his face in the paper.

Mrs. Pines puts the bags down and starts pulling out plates, “You boys were lucky you stayed home. The traffic on the way back was terrible. I was cursing a blue streak.”

Ford clears his throat and tries to get a hold on himself. His parents don’t know. There’s no reason to be nervous. They don’t know and there’s no way they can know. So, he does his best to keep his voice normal as he asks, “Were you driving?”
His mother snorts, “Of course not! You know your father won’t let anyone behind the wheel of that car but himself. What a silly question!”

It’s not a silly question – it’s a stupid one. Ford knows better. He gives a light cough, “Oh, yeah. No, I know. I just…you noticed the traffic so, I-I guess I just wondered…”

Mrs. Pines doesn’t seem fazed by Ford’s stumbling, “Well, it’s not like your father’s going to react to the yutzes on the road and honestly, someone should. Not that I didn’t predict it. I told him before we left, ‘Filbrick’, I says, ‘Filbrick, there’s gonna be traffic on the nine, better to take the backroads but, you know how he gets.”

Mr. Pines answers with a huff and flips a page of the paper.

Mrs. Pines rolls her eyes but looks at her husband with affection, “Still, his horoscope said that he should give himself a pat on the back today and he really does deserve it for keepin’ his cool.”

“Oh, um, good job, Dad.”

Mr. Pines’ only response that he even heard Ford is a slight shift of the paper in his hands, almost as if he’s tipping it towards him in a thank you. Mrs. Pines is dishing up food and talking again, “I got you boys some sweet and sour chicken and some beef and broccoli. I think it’s important you get your vegetables. Especially Stanley, because I had a vision he-”

Her words cut off in a sharp gasp and she charges over to Ford. He startles as she takes a grip of his shirt collar with one hand and with the other pushes his head to one side, “My god! Stanford Pines! What happened to you?”

At first Ford has no idea what she is talking about and then suddenly he remembers the mark. The very visible mark Stan gave him last night. He turns crimson as he realizes his mother is seeing, and currently poking at, his hickey. His voice cracks in his haste to answer, “Oh! That! Ah, that’s-ah-

“It’s a hickey, Ma,” Stan says as he walks into the room. He gives Ford a wink and sits at the table next to their father, “No reason to have a coronary.”

“I can have whatever I like, thank you very much, Stanley! I just can’t believe-Filbrick! Have you seen this? Have you seen what’s happened to your son?”

Filbrick looks up from the paper for but a second. He eyes Ford’s neck then grunts and goes back to the paper. Mrs. Pines huffs and throws her hands up in the air, “I can’t believe I’m the only one who’s surprised by this! It looks like a vampire bit you! Did this happen at the dance last night?”

Ford feels close to passing out, his nerves running at an all-time high, “W-well, you see…the-the thing is…what ha-happened is…”

“Was it that girl you mentioned? What’s her name? Angie?”

“No, ah-ac-actually…”

“Lee,” Stan says and Ford freezes. His heart feels like it’s going to explode. But Stanley, goddamn him, looks cool as a cucumber as he says, “Name was Lee.”

“Lee?” Mrs. Pines repeats.

Mr. Pines lowers the paper slightly, one eyebrow raised above his dark glasses, “Lee? That’s a girl’s
Mrs. Pines glares at him, “Psh! Of course it is, Filbrick! Don’t be absurd! Probably short for Ashley, right sweetheart?”

She’s looking at Ford as she asks and Ford can’t speak. He’s too livid. He doesn’t understand what’s happening right now. He doesn’t understand what Stanley’s doing. And he really, really doesn’t understand why the earth won’t just open up and swallow him whole.

And Stan just keeps talking.

“Oh yeah, Lee’s a real fox. I was totally jealous. You shouldea seen your baby boy, Ma. Ford was unbelievably good at, well, I mean – you see?” he waves a hand at the hickey and the look Ford is shooting him would shrivel most people. But not Stan. If anything, Stan looks like he’s having the time of his life.

Mrs. Pines lets out a sigh, hands on her hips, “Hmm, I guess it’s okay. Just don’t want her moving too fast.”

“So, she is a girl.” Filbrick decides and, clearly having been appeased, returns to the paper, “Well, that’s a relief.”

Ford’s eyes narrow as he looks at his father in confusion, “I-I’m sorry…how-how is that a relief?”

Mrs. Pines brings over full plates of food, setting them down in front of each of her boys and letting out an overly exaggerated breath, “Nothing, Stanford, honey. Your father just had some…radical ideas about you, that’s all. He was just worried.”

“So what?”

“Nothing. Doesn’t matter. It wouldn’t have mattered either way, right Filbrick?”

But Mr. Pines doesn’t answer. Instead he puts the paper down and starts diligently eating his food. Mrs. Pines takes her seat but looks Ford up and down, “I better check your horoscope. Just in case.”

She snatches the paper from where their father had set it and she flips through it quickly, muttering under her breath, “It’s my fault, honestly. I usually check you boys every morning but I didn’t think to do it today and-ah ha! Here it is!”

She flicks her wrists so the paper settles in her hands better before reading aloud, “Says here ‘It takes energy to repress and bottle up your feelings. Without realizing it you may be suffering a great deal of emotion inside while trying to ignore it. Express these feelings – they will energize and free you.’”

“How, wow. You don’t say,” Stan returns, eyes on his food, “That sounds pretty accurate, Ford. You should probably do what the horoscope says.”

How Ford hasn’t killed Stan yet is a mystery. His hands are literally hurting from the fists they’ve balled up into. He just envisions strangling his brother. Mrs. Pines, completely oblivious to his struggles, merely beams, “I agree. According to this you should let your feelings flow. Seems like your relationship with Lee is smiled upon by the stars. Just…you know,” she eyes the hickey worriedly, “Take it easy.”

The rest of the dinner is a relatively normal affair but afterwards the twins go to their room and the moment the door is shut Ford immediately turns on his brother, hissing, “Are you out of your mind?”
Apparently he is, because Stan locks the door (a big no-no in the Pines household as Filbrick has a firm ‘no locked doors in my house’ rule) and roughly pushes Ford back against it. He covers Ford’s mouth with his own and Ford lets out a muffled noise of shock as Stan’s tongue plunges deeply into his mouth. Ford struggles for a moment, hands pushing on Stan’s shoulders, trying to push him away. But then they change tactics completely, curling into the material of his shirt, tugging it hard, practically tearing at the fabric as he pulls him closer, closer, closer.

The room is filled with the muted sounds of their panting, their kissing terribly audible and Ford feels a wild variety of conflicting emotions. The strongest one being desire and he lets out a particular fervent sound of pleasure. Stan draws back and covers his mouth with a firm hand, “Shhh! Jesus, Sixer! Stop being so friggin’ noisy!”

Ford glares at him but Stan tilts his head to one side, mouth going to Ford’s neck, tongue tracing the mark he left as he whispers against his skin, “I mean, not that I don’t like it but someone could hear you.”

Ford shivers and Stan chuckles, lightly sucking at the already bruised flesh, “And I don’t want anyone to hear you. Not here. But, y’know, maybe we could go somewhere else sometime…”

Stan’s free hand brushes along Ford’s quivering stomach and goes down to rest between his legs, cupping him through his pants and Ford lets out an embarrassingly sharp squeak against his brother’s palm as Stan continues, “…and you could be as loud as you’d like. Would you like that? I bet you would. I know I would – I’d love to hear you – every moan, every gasp, every fucking scream.”

Ford’s eyes roll into the back of his head and his whole body trembles. He does want that. He really, really does. And Stan is still palming him as he uncovers Ford’s mouth just so he can kiss him again. Ford’s hips stutter up into Stan’s touch as he devours his mouth and Ford tries to concentrate on being quiet. But it’s hard. This feels so good. And he’s been denying himself this all day.

But then Ford hears a sound behind the door and he jumps, effectively halting Stan’s actions. Stan lets out a heavy breath and draws back. Ford uses the door to keep himself upright, palms flat against the wood, knees shaking as he whispers, “I-I thought we agreed on one night.”

Stan bites the inside of his cheek, “Yeah. I know.”

“So-so…why-why did you-?”

Stan shrugs and does his best to look cool, “Well, I mean,” he rubs at the back of his neck, “Maybe we could have one more night.”

“One…more?”

“Yeah.” Stan reaches out a hand and his fingers float near Ford’s face, almost as if he’s afraid to touch him but eventually he does, just gently stroking his cheek before cupping it, “Just…just one more. Just one.”

“T-tonight?”


Hearing the reference to his parents reminds Ford he has parents. Both of them have parents. And they’re the same parents. Ford takes in a hefty gulp of air and turns. He looks at the locked door. He closes his eyes, “We shouldn’t.”

The words don’t have much conviction behind them.
“But…do you want to?”

Ford thinks that’s one of the most idiotic questions he’s ever heard in his entire life.

Still, he answers it in a puff of air, “Yes.”

And then Stan is up behind him, holding him, arms wrapped around him tight and the action is so comforting, so warm, that Ford feels his eyes foolishly heat with unshed tears. Stan nuzzles one side of his face, “I want to, too.”

“No one…no one can ever know…”

“No one ever will.”

“And just…just one more night, right?”

“Yes, I promise. Just one more.”

Both hear the lie and both try their damndest to believe it.

THERE

“I think it passed out again.” A thin high voice remarks.

A deeper voice responds, “‘He’ it’s a ‘he’."

“What is?”

“The thing you called an ‘it’.”

“Why ‘he’?”

“That’s how they classify things where he’s from. His dimension is a real freak show.”

“Is that it’s-he’s-name?”

“It’s ‘his’ and no, his name is Stanford.”

“Psh. That’s a dumb name.”

“Agreed.”

“Still, I think he’s passed out again.”

The deeper voice chuckles, “Maybe that’s because you removed all his teeth.”

“I put them back!” the high voice returns as if it’s silly for Ford to pass out from this.

Ford himself is floating on the edge of reality. Pain. There’s so much pain. There’s nothing but pain. He can barely hear the voices or understand them because of the unending, unceasing pain. His eyes don’t seem to be working – it’s like he’s blind but instead of darkness he’s seeing nothing but an all-encompassing white. And it’s so bright it hurts.

But things are starting to come into focus and he sees…red. And pink. And dark blue and purple and all of it looks…wet. And he thinks it’s…his insides. But they’re outside. They’re outside of his body
and strewn about everywhere but he’s still alive somehow, still breathing. And there’s something else — something sharp and jagged and it’s… a bone? His bone – curved and close and a… part of his ribcage? But it’s bent, forced into an angle it shouldn’t be in.

His throat convulses and he sort of gurgles. He tastes copper and something else, bile maybe? He can’t move, can’t speak. Can only feel and it hurts, it hurts, it hurts…

The thin voice continues, completely unaware of Ford’s terrible return to consciousness, “Besides, teeth are overrated.”

“Hmm and pedestrian. You could do so much better. Be so much more imaginative.”

“Well… he does have veins. Lots and lots of veins. I wonder how easy it would be to pull them out one by one. Separate them from the rest.”

“How about his skin? Did you know it has layers.”

“Like a cake?!”

The deeper voice lets out a sigh, “Sort of. You could peel them back. But you’d have to return him to mint condition when you’re done. No toy is fun when it’s broken.”

“Please, you’re not telling me anything I don’t know.” The high voice sounds closer, “Oh! I think he’s coming around!”

“That’s good. More fun when they’re conscious.”

Something jabs Ford and he lets out a wail of agony. The one who touched him, the one with the high voice, seems unmoved and instead continues to talk to the unseen, deeper voiced other, “Hey, do you know a ‘Stanley’?”

“No. Why?”

“Eh, he was muttering it at one point. And crying. Why do they cry so much?”

“I have no idea. But, hey! There’s another idea! Eyes!”

There’s a clapping noise, “Oh, you’re right! How could I have forgotten eyes! And they have veins too, right? Or at least blood vessels and I bet those’d be fun to mess around with.”

Ford tries not to make a sound, tries not to think, tries not to exist but it’s too late – he feels sharp pain all over and he hears a loud cracking, breaking noise like something shattering and agony engulfs him. He's out of his mind - all his thoughts screaming for it to stop, please make it stop, he'll do anything – anything at all - if it will just STOP. And he's choking on something – blood? And there are other sounds – worse sounds – whirring and ripping and tearing and this unending high pitched noise that he eventually realizes is his own screams.

N O W

Stan reaches out to Ford but his twin tears himself away, tugging at his sweater. He’s running his hands all over his body and pressing, as if somehow trying to cover himself up more. His eyes dart about as he mumbles, “You shouldn’t have done that. I didn’t want you to see that.”

Stan sits up and he doesn’t know what to say. Ford paces around the room and Stan keeps his voice
level, “Hey, it’s okay. Easy, just-just relax.”

“Relax?” Ford stops and looks at him as if he’s nuts to suggest that, “How can I relax when-when you saw…”

“Ford, I barely saw anything.”

“You saw enough.”

“Stanford…”

“I should-I should go,” Ford mutters and he looks at the open door but he doesn’t go through it. He just stares at it and repeats himself, “I should go. I should go.”

Stan gets up and walks over to him. He puts a gentle hand on his shoulder and Ford nearly jumps out of his skin. Stan holds up both hands, “Shhh, it’s alright. Okay? I won’t hurt you.”

Ford looks sort of lost. And wild. Almost like he did when he nearly attacked the kids. Stan isn’t exactly sure what caused it this time. There was no explosion but apparently his witnessing Ford’s scarred body is enough to set him off. Stan licks his lips and remembers that platitudes are a bad idea at a time like this so instead he whispers, “Stanford, I’m here. If you want to talk, I’ll listen and if not, that’s fine too and if you want to go downstairs because you need some time, I’ll understand.”

“So many options,” Ford gasps and Stan feels like even more of an idiot. God, why is he so bad at this? But Ford’s hands reflexively clench and unclench several times and he looks down at the floor, “No. No, you’ve-you’ve already seen some of it. Should just…just see all of it. Get it over with.”

“Hey, you don’t-” but Stan doesn’t get to say more, his word cut off as Ford takes a vicious hold of his sweater and practically rips it off his body. Ford breaths heavily, not looking at him as he says in a huff, “Go ahead. Look.”

And Stan does. Because he can’t not. Because Ford asked him too. And what he sees…now that he can see all of it…it’s beyond tragic. Ford’s body looks like a ravaged jigsaw puzzle. The skin is razed in places – scars over top of scars, the flesh stretched, thin and pale. Parts of him look almost as if someone (or something) carved into him; the flesh punched in and altered as if didn’t heal properly. There are bumps and ridges, strange imprints and what looks like searing. Ford’s continues in an unemotional tone, “Spared my face. My Hands. They liked those. Wanted those to remain…pure.”

Ford’s words just die off as if he can’t continue. Or, more likely, he doesn’t want to. And Stan is torn. Logically he knows that it would probably help Ford to talk about it. Emotionally he doesn’t want to hear any more. He can’t stand the thought of what Ford had to go through, can’t stand the thought of Ford suffering. Ford’s made him angry, made him furious, he’s fought with Ford – both
verbally and physically – but he would never, ever wish this on him.

And he feels so responsible for it. For all of it. If he had just been calm when Ford had talked to him thirty years ago – if he had just kept his cool and explained to Ford why leaving with the journal and sailing off to edge of the earth wasn’t what he wanted, that it was a bad idea, he could have prevented all of this.

Ford had been right.

He had thrown a stupid, petty hissy fit and now look what it had cost him. Both of them. When Ford had first come out of the portal he questioned Stan asking him for a thank you. In fact, his exact words had been ‘you really think I'm gonna thank you after what you did thirty years ago?’ and now Stan understands why he said that.

Because thirty years ago Stan had been a hotheaded fool who had fought with his brother, activated the portal, and inadvertently pushed him through it. He had sent Ford to…to wherever this had happened to him. And yes, Stan had gotten him out but he hadn’t done so until decades later. Decades…it was possible Ford had been tortured for decades.

Every mark on his skin – every scar, every line – Stan might as well have put those there himself. And yeah, Ford could be held responsible for the brand on Stan’s shoulder but that was one – just one – in comparison to what appeared to be hundreds on Ford’s flesh. And Stan wants to find who’s responsible for this and tear them apart. He wants to destroy them – crush them into dust. He wants it so badly his fists ache and that’s when he realizes his hands have formed into fists. He relaxes them slightly, a seething fury still in his veins.

He lets out a breath and tries to calm himself. He can’t get whoever did this. Not now. Not yet. But he swears to himself that he will find them and make them pay. But first he has to think of Ford. He has to think of Ford who is standing there shirtless, covered in scars. He looks at them and wants to touch them, wants to somehow magically wipe them all away with his hands and he reaches out but immediately stops himself, remembering his brother’s reaction earlier.

So instead, he quietly asks, “Stanford…can I touch you?”

Ford lets out a jittery laugh, “Why are you asking?”

“Because…” Stan trails off helplessly before admitting, “I don’t want to make things worse.”

“You won’t…I don’t think…I don’t…” Ford blinks and his eyes are unfocused. Stan steps back a few paces, wanting to give his brother room to breathe. Ford shakes his head and he slowly seems to come around. He looks at Stan and his lips twitch, “You should see yourself…you look so scared.”

“I’m not scared.”

Ford asks in a hiss “What are you then? Hmm? How do you feel?” His anger immediately drops away, morphing in an instant into something more hopeless sounding, “Are you…disgusted with me?”

“No.”

“I-I wouldn’t blame you. If you are…I mean…look at me.”

“I am looking at you, Stanford. And I’m not disgusted.”

“Pity then? You-you feel pity for me?”
“No.”

“What do you feel then?”

Stan struggles for a few moments on how to answer. He doesn’t want to fuck this up. Oh god, he really, really, really does not want to fuck this up. Finally he just decides to settle for the truth, “Sad. I feel sad.”

Ford’s mouth quivers and his voice comes out with such fragility, “Yeah. I’m sad too.”

“Ford, if it’s okay with you, I’d like to…hold you.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re shaking.”

Stan watches as Ford looks over himself and he seems surprised by how much he’s trembling. And he is. He’s trembling like a leaf on the wind. Ford closes his eyes and when he opens them they look much more focused. He looks at Stan and gives a feeble nod. Stan reaches out carefully, making sure Ford sees his movements, making sure they’re very deliberate. He gathers his brother close and Ford shudders violently in his grip. Once. Twice. Then he settles. He buries his face into Stan’s neck and breathes in deeply.

Stan cuddles him close and kisses his head and Ford snorts, “I’m not a child, Stanley.”

“I know.”

They stay that way for a long while. The only sounds in the room that of the storm outside. The thunder has grown less in strength and the rain has become much more of a gentle patter. Ford pulls away and walks over to Stan’s bed, he eyes it then frowns; “We…both wouldn’t fit here very well, would we?”

“No. Probably not.”

Ford scratches at the back of his head, “Would…would you like to-to come downstairs. Spend the night with me? My bed’s bigger.”

Stan feels his heart skip a beat. Yet again, it’s like looking back in time. Suddenly Ford is just like he was years ago, when they were in their teens. Awkward and bumbling and too fucking precious for words. Stan nods, “Yeah. Yeah, I’d like that a lot.”

Ford gives a little grin and looks around, “We should probably get you some clothes then.”

Stan looks down and lets out a laugh, “Oh wow; totally forgot I was naked.”

He runs a hand over his belly and gives it a pat, “Woof.”

“Hey,” Ford chastises, hands full of Stan’s discarded clothes as he comes over, “I thought I already told you, I like that.”

“You like that I’ve got a gut now?”

“It’s not a gut,” Ford argues, “It’s a healthy belly.”

“Well, I do feed it.”
Ford’s face screws up, “Oh god. Please, please, please tell me you don’t still do that weird thing where you feed your bellybutton snacks and make it talk.”

Stan puts one hand down on his belly and squeezes his bellybutton a couple of times like it’s a mouth, saying in a squeaky, silly voice, “Hey Mr.Ford! Do you have some crackers for me? Yum yum yum!”

Ford just scoffs, "Eww! What is wrong with you?"

Stan laughs, the mood of the room considerably lightened as he finds a robe and pulls it on to cover himself. Ford puts his sweater back on while he eyes Stan’s dresser. Once dressed he clears his throat to ask, “Do you…ah, do you happen to have, ah…you know.”

He points at the top drawer and Stan frowns, lost, “Do I happen to have what?”

“You know.”

“I don’t.”

“Stan,” Ford stresses as if this is embarrassing and Stan shrugs, “Stanford, I honestly don’t know what you’re talking about.”

His brother’s mouth shifts from side to side on his face, “When we lived at home you always kept it in your top drawer.”

Stan’s eyebrows knit together as he tries to figure out what his brother means and he tries to remember what in the world he-

Oh.

OH.

Stan’s eyes go wide, “You’re asking if I have lube?”

Ford waves his hands and makes shushing noises as if someone is going to hear them and Stan can’t help but laugh, “Hey, Poindexter, nobody’s home but us, remember?”

“I know! But, it’s just…” Ford kicks one foot out at the floor and puts his hands behind his back. Stan beams because this used to be one of his favorite positions to see Ford in. The one where he’s beyond embarrassed. He’s just too adorable for words when he’s like this. And yeah, it’s weird that Stan would think something is adorable. That’s more up Mabel’s alley but – well, goddamn it, his brother is adorable when he does this. No other word fits.

“Yeah, I have some in there. Don’t use it much.”

“Much?” Ford asks and Stan gives him a sinful smile and a wink. Ford visibly gulps and turns away. He reaches into the top drawer, pulls out the tube and quickly pockets it. He also sees a couple of foil packets and takes those as well, doing it just as quickly as he can as if he’ll be caught at any moment. Stan shakes his head at the action. That’s his brother, ever shy. Still, “You know, we don’t have to do anything else tonight.”

“I know. But I...want to.”

Stan gives him assessing look, “You do?”

“Yes.”
“You sure?”

Ford lets out an aggravated sigh, “Stanley, remember earlier when I told you I wasn’t a child?”

“Oh, okay. Just… I don’t want you to feel pressured.”

“I’m not.” Ford assures him, “And I have a bigger bed and I’d like you in that bigger bed and I’d… I’d like to be in it with you. And-and if you think you’re up for it and you won’t… you know, be violently ill, I’d… like you to see me up close and… I’d… like you to touch me. You know. Without my clothes on.”

Stan knows this took a lot for him to say, so he can only warmly reply with, “Of course, Stanford. Absolutely.”
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

SUPER SIZE UPDATE. This took a long time but it is long, so that's good (if you like that sort of thing).

Reminder that this story is sexual explicit - ESPECIALLY in this chapter. Also - very, very, very light references to previous attempted/possible non-con - so be warned for that.

Last, the point of view in here does change a little now and again. While the 'Then' part is mostly Stan's point of view there is a moment where we get to peek in Ford's head. The same goes for the 'Now' part, where it's almost all Ford's point of view save for a brief peek into Stan's mind. I normally try not to do this but I think these bits still fit well within the body of work and it still flowed so, there you go! Hope you all enjoy!

THEN

One more night. It almost became a joke. They said it to one another so many times. And there were variations of it – like, just this once. Just this once, you can sleep in my bed. Just this once, we can hold hands. Just this once, we’ll make out in your car. It was almost like a game they were playing. The only rule being that no one could see and no one could know.

It was like they were spies, acting as covertly as possible, every action a highly prized secret that only the two of them were privy too. And Stan found he wouldn’t want it any other way. In fact, he was loving it. There was something so incredibly thrilling about it all. The forbidden nature, the risk – it was like a heady drug to him. Stanford himself was a heady drug. One he was fantastically (fatalistically?) addicted too.

He couldn’t get enough of the nerd. And how he got so hooked on this egghead was beyond him. They virtually had nothing in common. None of their tastes matched up – music, food, activities. They were as different as night and day and yet somehow they complemented one another beautifully. Ford managed to smooth out all of Stan’s rough edges and Stan managed to shake his tightly laced sibling.

And yes – Ford was his sibling. He was his brother and his twin but somehow he had become so much more than that. Stan was actually surprised at himself, surprised with how well he was able to compartmentalize all of this. He could easily separate Ford his relative from Ford the person he was romantically attached to and yes, that word was highly dangerous.

Ah, romance. Romance was pretty much gift wrapped with another word and Stan was doing his best to avoid that word because it was a virtual minefield. So, instead he decided to focus on the fun of everything else – all the other words and actions that were easy and simple and didn’t have to have drama attached to them.

Like erection. He liked that word. And that reaction. Not so much when he had one himself but when he gave one to Ford – oh, and that was hilarious! He discovered that there was nothing so
much fun as getting Ford worked up in a place where he shouldn’t be. And it was so, so easy to give Ford an erection. To get him aroused.

His favorite thus far still had to have been in their fourth period science class last Wednesday. Their teacher had been droning on and on about something or other and the majority of the class looked brain dead. But not Ford – of course not, he was diligently writing notes and flipping through the text and while the teacher clearly wasn’t challenging him, Ford was making up his own theories and being generally as dorky as possible.

And Stan sat next to him because they shared a lab table. They always sat next to one another and this particular table was at the back of the room. They had an agreement they had held since they were kids. Every other class they would switch locations – so, for example, in their first class – math, they sat at the front of the class like Ford wanted. But in their second period – English, they sat in the back like Stan wanted.

This was one of the classes where they sat firmly in the back and no one else was back there, so no one else could see. Naturally this meant that Stan had to have his fun and he sidled a hand under their table, dancing it up Ford’s leg. Ford’s posture damn near shot up and he turned to glare at Stan, shaking his head.

But Stan ignored him, looking down at his book, acting for all the world as if he was reading, hand still playing along Ford’s leg and rising higher, higher. Ford hissed and tried to pull away but Stan just tightened his grip on his upper thigh, squeezing it, thumb curving up near the fly of Ford’s pants. He let his thumb just dance there and Ford gave him a withering look even as he, just slightly, just barely, pushed up into that lightest of touches.

Happily encouraged, Stan outright cupped him and Ford let out a squeak. The teacher, hearing it and being completely oblivious, just asked Ford if he was all right. Ford did his best to answer even though Stan’s hand was still on him and once the teacher was mollified he turned to Stan. It was murderous glare after murderous glare but he didn’t pull away. He never pulled away. Because he liked it just as much as Stan did and Stan knew it.

Which is what led Stan to come to a bold decision. He knows he needs to play his cards right for this to work, so as he’s finishing up dinner with his family that night, he clears his throat and looks at his father, “Hey Pops, I was wondering if Ford and me could go up to New York next weekend.”

Ford’s fork clatters on his dish as he drops it and shoots Stan a wide-eyed, questioning look. Stan ignores him. Mr. Pines’s crosses his arm and looks at his son assessingly, “Why?”

Stan shrugs, “Well, we’re reaching the end of our senior year and I thought it might be good for the two of us to go out and explore the world a bit by ourselves. And New York’s not that far from here and it’d just be for the weekend. I can drive us.”

Mrs. Pines frowns, “I don’t know if I like the idea of you two boys alone in the big city.”

Stan rolls his eyes, “We’re almost adults, Ma.”

“Well, you’ll always be my babies.”

“Ugh, Ma,” Stan mutters and Mr. Pines looks at his wife, mustache twitching, “He’s right. You shouldn’t baby them.”

Pumping his arm a little in pre-victory, Stan asks, “So, we can go?”

“Hmm,” Mr. Pines eyes Stan and then Ford, then Stan again, “Just for the weekend?”
“Yeah, we can get a motel room.”

“Just the two of you?” Mr. Pines stresses and suddenly Stan starts to sweat a little. This does not improve as Mr. Pines looks at his wife, saying, “I think it’ll be fine. But you should give me a moment alone with the boys.”

Mrs. Pines scowls at her husband but does as he asks. Once she leaves the room, Mr. Pines sits up straighter and eyes his sons, “I think I understand why you two want to go to the city and I didn’t want to upset your mother.”

Both brothers pale. Stan had not anticipated this and just as he’s starting to regret opening his big dumb mouth, his father continues, “But I understand your need for discretion. So, which one of you is it?”

Stan and Ford look at one another, lost and terrified.

Mr. Pines adds softly, “Come on, tell me the truth. Which one of you wants to go to New York to get laid and who’s the girl in question.”

A loud whoosh of air leaves Stan as he nearly deflates. Oh thank god! His Pops got the right idea but in the wrong way. Ford’s head falls back, eyes closing as he lets out a relived moan. Stan immediately pipes up, “Wow! Okay, yeah, you-ah-you caught us! There is a girl and it’s-it’s Ford’s.”

Ford’s head jerks back up and he stares at Stan bug eyed as Stan rolls on, “You remember Lee?”

Mr. Pines’ eyebrows rise and he looks at Ford, “Really?”

“I…” Ford sounds like he’s choking as he answers, “I…yeah.”

Mr. Pines nods his head, “That’s good to hear, Stanford.”

He reaches out a hand and pats his son’s shoulder, “I’m glad to hear you have it in you,” his hand tightens a little, “Lee is Ashley, right?”

“Yes.” Ford returns automatically.

Mr. Pines’s hand relaxes and he pats him again, “It’s good you found yourself a girl. And one that doesn’t mind…,” his eyes shift down to his son’s hands, “You know.”

Ford looks down at his hands on the kitchen table and quickly retracts them, sticking them behind his back. Stan shoots his Dad a dirty look but Mr. Pines draws away, unaffected, “Frankly, I told your mother we should get that fixed when you were a baby but she was against it - was worried there’d be complications. I’ve grown to accept it as much as I’m sure you yourself have, but I wouldn’t be surprised if some people are taken aback. Girls especially.”

Ford frowns, “Why girls especially?”

“Well, you’ll be touching them,” Mr. Pines says simply as if this isn’t rocket science. Ford just looks down and Stan is doing his best not to clock his father in the face. He just keeps reminding himself that he’s almost got what he’s wanted and he just has to keep it together for a little while longer.

Mr. Pines continues, “But clearly Lee is a more gracious sort. Like your mother. She overlooked my shortcomings, so it’s good to know you’ve found someone who can do the same. You’re a good kid, Ford. You deserve this.”
“Oh, uh, thanks?”

“And as for you, Stanley, you have your own problems but I am pleased to see you helping out your brother like this. It takes a real man to look out for another, to have his back. Especially when it comes to women. I take it you were the one who came up with this little plan to get your brother out of state so that he can sow his wild oats?”

“Yup.” Stan makes sure the ‘p’ has a pop sound to it and he looks at Ford knowingly. Ford just looks back, half part confused and half part horrified. Stan hasn’t explained anything, so this is all news to him.

“And there’s no girl for you?”

Stan shrugs, “Well, Linda Hartley was flirting with me. So, she’s a possibility.”

He doesn’t look at Ford but Stan knows this news upsets his brother. He seems to shrink in on himself. Stan wants to tell him the truth but knows now is not the time. Better to keep up the act, mask firmly in place. Mr. Pines certainly seems happy with this answer and he bobs his head, “That’s good to hear. It’d be good for both of you to settle down as soon as you can. Get good jobs, good wives – I’d like that.”

He rises from the table and looks at each of his sons, “I’ll talk with your mother but as far as I am concerned you have my permission to go. If both of you do some extra work down in the shop this week,” he pauses for a moment but it’s rare for Filbrick Pines to be thoughtful, when he finally does speak it’s almost with obvious reluctance, “I suppose I can give you an extra stipend before you go. I would rather you take these young ladies to a nice hotel rather than a motel. Especially for the activities you have in mind.”

“Wow! Thanks, Pops!” Stan says, all bright smiles and he nudges a sullen Ford who mutters his own thanks. Mr. Pines eyes Ford, “Is there a problem?”

Ford looks up and tries to drum up a happier expression, “No. I’m…I’m looking forward to this. Thanks, really.”

“Ah, come on, Pops! It’s just performance anxiety, that’s all! And you gotta admit, this is kind of an awkward conversation to have with your father.” Stan genially replies, doing his best to have his brother’s back.

Mr. Pines gives a quick nod, “True. And just so we’re clear – you two should take the proper precautions.”

“We know the drill,” Stan promises, “We promise no one’ll get knocked up.”

“Hey! You watch your mouth!” Mr. Pines mutters, pointing a finger at Stan warningly and Stan holds up his hands in apology. Still, it’s clear that this is what he wants to hear as he leaves the room, his general attitude that of someone well placated.

Stan and Ford go to their room and as soon as the door is shut, Stan locks it. Ford sits on his bed, looking bereft and Stan makes sure to dart over to him quickly. He sits next to him but Ford scooches away. Stan rolls his eyes, whispering, “Aw, come on, Ford! Aren’t you excited! We get to spend a whole weekend in New York together!”

“Yeah, this is news to me. As is Linda Hartley.”

Stan blows a loud raspberry, “Bro, you didn’t honestly believe me about that did you?”
Ford looks at him doubtfully and he sighs, “Look, I had to tell Pops something, okay? And Linda was the first girl that came to mind.”

“Why?”

And this is where things get sort of tricky. Stan shifts where he’s sitting, picking at lint on Ford’s blanket, “Well, uh, she kinda…hit on me today.”

“Oh.” Ford says quietly and Stan punches his arm, “I didn’t take her up on it, you knucklehead! Heck, I didn’t even notice she was hitting on me! Daniel Bechuck had to point it out to me!”

Ford’s expression is one of complete skepticism but Stan is telling the truth. He had been coming out of gym class when Linda waltzed up to him and asked if he liked root beer floats. He told her he liked them okay and then she mentioned Ricky’s had some of the best. He thanked her for the tip and walked off only for Daniel to run up and point out that Linda was pretty much asking him to ask her out. And Stan hadn’t noticed. Like, at all. And it wasn’t because he was bad at picking up signals – which, admittedly, yes – usually he is, but that wasn’t it this time.

This time it had been because he had been too busy thinking about Ford. He’d been thinking about seeing if Ford wanted to go see a movie. Movies were a great place for them to go, because it was dark and they could hold hands and share popcorn and sort of cuddle up against one another and no one would say a word. Not to mention the theater had just gotten a scary flick in and Stan loved the idea of a scared Ford clinging to him, crawling all over him for protection. It made Stan feel good – no, scratch that – it made him feel wonderful. Invincible.

So he hadn’t been paying much attention when Linda hit on him. All he had been thinking about was Ford and being with him as soon as possible. Stan wants to tell Ford this but doesn’t. It seems a bit…too much. He worries if he tells Ford the exact nature of what happened, Ford will get spooked. After all, there’s no way Ford is as interested in Stan as Stan is in Ford.

Ford’s a genius. He has a bright future ahead of him. One that no doubt will not include Stan and Stan’s idea for them. The one where they’re on the Stan-O-War with nothing but beaches, babes, and international treasure hunting and – okay, so, maybe lately he’s been subtracting the babes part because the very idea of Ford touching someone else, kissing someone else, makes him sick to his stomach. And not sick to his stomach because Ford’s his brother – oh no.

Sick with jealousy, sick with fear – fear that Ford will get over him, be better off without him and who is he kidding? He knows Ford would be better off without him. He knows this can’t last forever but he has to believe it can – he needs to believe it can and sometimes he needs to believe it’s possible that Ford can feel for him as much as he feels for Ford.

As such, he’s not going to give his brother an opportunity to burst his bubble. He’s not going to tell him how deep his feelings go, how he could never date Linda because he wants to date him. He doesn’t want to date anyone else – not ever. Just Ford. Only Ford. He wants Ford forever.

He swallows thickly and breathes in and he puts on the same show he did for his father albeit this one a little different as he continues, “Look, Ford, I’m not into Linda. I came up with this idea ‘cause I was thinking it’d be kinda fun for you and me to get away. We wouldn’t have to sneak around, you know?”

Ford levels him with a look, “Stanley, we’re identical twins. And we’re both male to boot.”

“I’m not suggesting we kiss in the middle of Times Square!” Stan huffs, “I’m saying we can go and have fun and maybe…maybe…”
“Maybe what?”

Stanley stalls here, oddly shy and he feels the tips of his ears burning as he blurts out, “Maybe we could do it.”

“Do it?”

“Yeah. You know…it.” Stan puts an emphasis on the last word, hoping it will sink in. When it does Ford’s face is priceless. He gets up from the bed and paces around. He ruffles his hair and the curls are tossed so artfully that Stan just wants to jump up and run his fingers through them. Instead he clutches at the blanket he was toying with earlier. Finally Ford looks at him, “Are you...are you sure?”

“Yes.” Stan says firmly, “I’m sure. I want to.”

“You...you are talking about about full blown, ah,” Ford looks at the door as if at any moment someone will barge in. Once he’s satisfied no one will, he mouths the word ‘intercourse’ and Stan’s eyebrows knit together, “I have no idea what you just said.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“Yeah, I know! You mouthed it but I have no idea-”

Stan is cut off by Ford as he quickly hisses, “Intercourse!”

“Oh! Yes! I’m talking about full blown sex.”

It’s hilarious to Stan that Ford can say intercourse and not feel shy but the word ‘sex’ comes out and he looks like he’s seconds away from seizing. Stan can’t help but chuckle, “So, how about you? Do you want to?”

Ford picks up pacing again, “I...I don’t know. So many variables to consider. I mean, we’ve done things. Clearly. But we’ve never...and it would take some research. I don’t even know how this will work, what positions would be most applicable, if any equipment is required and then there’s the question of health and safety and what would actually need to be done on my part to-”

Stan has risen from the bed and he takes a gentle hold of Ford’s shoulders, effectively halting his movements. He draws him close and he can see Ford’s throat working as Stan tilts his head, his lips floating near his twin’s as he whispers, “Do you want to?”

Ford’s eyelids droop, his breathing deepens, and all he can manage is a soft, “Mmhmm.”

Stan kisses him and they’re old hats at this now. Ford’s lips part easily and Stan’s tongue ducks inside to meet Ford’s. They do this for quite a while until Stan finally draws back, smiling, “So, next weekend. Gives you plenty of time to do your research, right?”

Ford breathes out of his nose loudly, “I suppose.”

“Awesome! High six!” Stan says brightly, holding up one hand.

Ford can’t help but laugh as he claps his hand to his brother’s, “High six!”
New York is everything Stan thought it would be. Tall skyscrapers, seas of people, lots of lights and best of all – a relaxed, energetic Ford. Apparently taking his brother out of Jersey was an even better idea than he thought. Ford is almost always smiling and best of all he is surprisingly, openly affectionate. Nothing big but certainly more than anything he does at home. He touches Stan’s arm and occasionally clings to it when he points out famous sights to see.

The best is when he completely forgets himself and holds hands with him. Granted, this is when they are in what Stan considers to be one of the most boring places in the world – the New York Hall Of Science – but considering no one is really there (because honestly – why would they be, when they could be at a better attraction) and Ford is on the nerd equivalent of cloud nine, Stan is willing to bumble through it.

Especially when their hands fit so well together, fingers linked save for whenever Ford feels the need to play the perfect tourist – snapping pictures and talking excitedly about every exhibit. Stan doesn’t get it himself but it makes his brother happy and that’s all that really matters to him. And, again, hand holding. And Stan squeezes Ford’s hand now and again and Ford squeezes back and Stan should really hate himself for being so friggin’ sappy.

But he can’t.

Because he likes it and that’s that.

They get to do fun stuff too. Or what Stan considers fun stuff. They ride on the ferry, go to Rockefeller Center and get to see Lady Liberty, which leads to an interesting conversation:

Stan: That’s one big, hot broad.

Ford: She’s a statue, Stanley.

Stan: Hey, don’t judge – nothing wrong with a man finding an inanimate object attractive.

Ford: Well, at least she’s humanoid.

Stan: She’s a what now? What does that mean? That mean she’s kinky?

Ford: I…really can’t take you anywhere, can I?

And then of course there’s Broadway. And Stan insists he doesn’t want to go – especially since the musical in question is about some Duchess or other but Ford insists and when they leave Stan completely denies singing the Duchess’s solo under his breath. The long and short of it is; they have a great time.

Until they end up in their hotel room. They used the extra money their father gave them for two rooms to go shopping and eat and what have you, so naturally there’s just the one room and the one big bed. The big, intimidating bed. The king sized bed that sits before them and they both look at it and at one another and then away again, blushing like mad.

Stan finds the courage to speak first, “So…this is a nice room.”

“Yeah, it is.”

“Much better than the motel I had in mind.”
“Yeah.”

“Real classy,” Stan murmurs and he goes to the window and throws back the curtains, “And look at that view. We…we really lucked out. It looks like Christmas out there…all those lights. I mean, what floor are we even on? The people down there are like, ant sized.”

Ford walks up next to Stan and looks at him, “Stanley…”

Stan breathes in deeply and lets out that same breath with just as much force before he turns to his brother. Ford offers a weak smile, “We-we don’t have to do this if you don’t want to.”

“Hey! I want to!” Stan argues, then offers softly, “I just…I don’t…want it to be terrible.”

“Well, it’s-it’s our first time. Together, I mean,” Ford adds the last bit quickly, clearly not wanting to be presumptuous, “And statistically speaking, first times aren’t great.”

“Way to boost my confidence there, Sixer.”

Ford pushes his glasses up, “No, I just…what I mean is, is…we should take our time. It might not be perfect but we’ll…learn together. And…we’ve got plenty of time.”

“Alright, but what if we…y’know, and it’s so bad that not only do you never want to do it again but you don’t…you don’t want anything to do with me. I mean, I could take you not wanting to be physical but if this makes you hate me I don’t think-”

Stan is cut off by Ford putting a gentle hand on his shoulder, “I could never hate you, Stanley.”

“You sure about that?”

“Positive.” Ford says and then he looks down and to the side, “If anything, I should be the one who’s worried.”

“Why?”

“Well…I mean, you heard Dad,” Ford holds up his hands quickly, then tucks them away just as fast, “I got these. I mean, they’ve never bothered you before but now I’ll be touching you all over and-”

Stan takes Ford’s face in his hand, “Hey, look at me.”

Ford does as Stan asks and Stan lets his face go, he trails his hands down Ford’s arms and takes a good grip on his hands, “You’ve touched me with these hands before. Remember the shower?”

The pink that rises into Ford’s cheeks confirm that he does indeed remember that. Stan grins, “See? And I liked it then. Scratch that, I loved it. And I’m gonna love this too. I love…”

The word hovers there and Stan’s grin fades. Ford’s eyes are wide. Stan clears his throat and he switches gears, “Besides, Pops’s a jackass.”

“Stan!”

“What? He’s not here!”

“Still…” Ford adds chastisingly and Stan shakes his head, drawing Ford’s hands up towards his mouth, “Look, he’s our Dad and I respect ‘im and he’s been good to us but we can admit that sometimes the man’s a jackass. And he was a jackass when he said that crap about your hands. I like your hands, Stanford. I’m looking forward to you touching me with them. In fact…”
Stan’s lips grace Ford’s hands and Ford draws in a sharp breath. Stan kisses each of Ford’s fingers tenderly, gently and he makes sure to make eye contact with Ford as he does. Ford visibly gulps and he lets out a nervous giggle, “Th-that tickles…”

Stan draws his mouth off, “Want me to stop?”

Ford shakes his head, the pink in his face turning a deeper red. Stan smiles against him and then, much to Ford’s shock and delight, he draws one of Ford’s fingers into his mouth.

He sucks it softly and Ford’s lips drop open, a tiny moan leaving him as Stan sucks first on one finger then another and then another and then suddenly he’s drawing more than one finger into his mouth at a time and he’s pretty much making love to Ford’s hands. His tongue curving and flicking against the pads of his fingers, then his knuckles, down to the spaces between each and over the inside of his palms and Stan didn’t even know it was possible to get someone worked up this way but it’s very clear that Ford is getting aroused.

And what do you know – so is Stan. His pants are starting to become uncomfortably tight and he pushes Ford closer to the bed. He releases Ford’s hands and takes hold of his face again, kissing him deeply before drawing back, asking huskily, “Can I take your glasses off?”

Ford gives him an almost imperceptible nod and Stan gently draws Ford’s glasses off. He sets them on the nearby night stand and then looks into Ford’s eyes, “You know…I don’t think I’ve ever said this but…it’s nice to look into your eyes, you know? Without the glasses. I can really see them like this.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, they’re…nice,” Stan offers this lamely, not sure how else to proceed. He’s not the best when it comes to this romance stuff. Talking all sweet and fancy like. But Ford smiles and Stan feels successful as he asks, “Now can I take your shirt off?”

Another nod and Stan takes handfuls of Ford’s burnt orange sweater. He tugs it up over his head to reveal the thin, button up white shirt beneath. He kisses Ford and works steadily through each button – until he reaches a point where the buttons are giving him too much trouble and with a grunt he yanks it, sending the last three buttons flying off. Ford lets out a choked noise in between their kissing and he clutches at Stan’s hair.

There is something about Stan displaying strength that Ford is drawn to. Stan doesn’t think he’s particularly strong but when he’s with Ford it’s like he becomes Superman. He feels a spark of adrenaline rush through his veins and as Ford is finally shirtless Stan reaches down and grabs Ford’s hips lifting him up and damn near tossing him on the bed.

He covers Ford’s body with his own and the room is filled with the sounds of their heavy panting as they continue kissing one another. Eventually Ford drags his mouth away, gasping, “Wait! Stan, Stan – wait!”

Stan does as his brother asks, worried something is wrong when Ford whispers, “We-we have to figure out how…how we’re going to do it.”

“What’re you talking about? We are doing it.”

“No, no – I mean, we-we have to know who’s going to be on top and who’s going to be on the bottom and which position is best and I have a list in my-”

The groan that leaves Stan is legendary, effectively cutting Ford off, “Oh god, Poindexter! Please tell
me you didn’t make one of your overcomplicated lists for this!”

“It’s not overcomplicated! It’s well thought out and planned.”

Stan’s whole body collapses heavily on Ford and he buries his face into Ford’s neck as he lets out a world weary sigh. Ford goes on, unmoved, “It’s important we do this right! It took a lot of work for me to get into the restricted section at the library. Thankfully Phyllis didn’t question why I wanted to look through the books there.

“Phyllis?”

“The head librarian.”

“Huh. Figures you’d know the head librarian by her first name.”

Ford ignores this and continues, “Now, I read a lot about the ways we could go about this and I think-”

“I think you’re killing the mood,” Stan grumbles, “Lil’ Stan is wilting away while you yammer on.”

“You…you don’t actually call it ‘Lil’ Stan’, do you?”

“I will call it whatever you want if you stop talking and we go back to what we were doing!”

“Stanley! This is serious! Homosexual intercourse is different from heterosexual intercourse. Not by much, I mean, most actions are quite similar and it’s really very fascinating-”

“God, please, stop talking!”

Ford frowns, “Well, you at least need to get the required items out of my bag.”

Stan rises off of him at this, meeting his eyes with a perplexed expression, “Wait…items? Did you bring sex toys?”

Ford sputters, “Certainly not! But I…I swiped your lubricant from the top dresser of your bureau. I also, ah, acquired condoms.”

“Why were you snooping through my bureau?”

“You hid my calculator last week until I agreed to make out with you, remember?”

“Oh yeah,” Stan chuckles, “Totally worth it.”

“Oh, okay, I still needed my calculator and you hadn’t given it back so I had to search for it. And when I did I found your, ah, paraphernalia. And my reading suggested we would need it so I brought it.”

With a reluctant huff Stan gets up and goes through Ford’s bags. He fishes around for a while, finding the lube and the condoms as well as some suggestive books and even a magazine. Stan draws out the magazine with his eyebrows raised. He waves it at Ford who looks away shyly, “I-I got that from Barney Henderson.”

“Wait…Barney Henderson from the school Basketball team Barney Henderson?”

Ford shrugs, “They were going to drop him from the team unless his grades improved. I helped tutor him and he, ah, told me he owed me.”
“Why did Barney have this?”

Ford levels Stan with a look and Stan’s eyes widen, “Really?”

“Yes. So, you don’t have to worry about him saying anything. He has just as much to lose as we do.”

“Holy crap! You didn’t tell him about-”

Ford waves his hands, “No, no of course not. He doesn’t know anything about us. He just…knows I’m interested in same sex relations.”

Stan eyes rove over him, “Okay, well, how interested was he in how interested you were?”

“Are you, in a very roundabout way, trying to ask if he’s interested in me?”

Stan answers by tossing the lube and the condoms on the bed near Ford. Ford picks it all up and puts it on the night stand while Stan turns his attention back to the magazine. He flips through the pages, playing it all very casually, “Maybe.”

“Am I to take it you’re jealous?”

Stan chucks the magazine away, “Oh, like you weren’t when I mentioned Linda?”

“Linda and you are a real possibility. Barney and I are not.”

“Why not?”

“Stanley,” Ford says in that patronizingly slow tone that easily pisses Stan off, “You could bring Linda home to our parents.”

“So, that’s the only difference?”

“For the love of god, Stan! I am NOT interested in Barney. I’m not interested in anyone but you! You are the person I’m here with! You are the person I want to do this with! Only you!”

“Yeah?” Stan asks warily and Ford gives him a small smile, “Yes, you aggravating idiot.”

“I’m not an idiot.”

“Hmm, well, normally I’d agree with you but in this particular moment I’m afraid you are. After all, here I am in this bed…waiting for you…”

“Fair enough,” Stan chuckles, ugliness forgotten, as he crawls back over top of Ford, who eagerly meets him with kisses. They kiss one another for several moments, losing themselves in the pure joy of the act. Eventually Stan’s big hands coast down Ford’s sides and Ford’s legs part and rise up, making it so that they can rub more intimately against one another. Stan groans and feels Ford’s hands dart up under his shirt, touching the bare skin of his back.

Stan pulls away enough to ease his shirt up over his head, letting it fall to the floor on one side of the bed. His mouth finds Ford’s left ear before tracing down to his neck and Ford hisses at the feel of Stan’s stubble grazing him. The sensation is unbelievably erotic and it only gets better as Stan moves down, kissing his collarbone and Ford has always loved this.

Sometimes in their more heated make out sessions, Stan has grabbed the collar of Ford’s shirt and tugged it down enough to nibble on his collarbone, to lick at it and for some reason it always causes
sparks to shoot down his spine. Ford has no idea why this part of him is so sensitive but apparently it’s more than his collarbone – it’s his whole chest – his chest which Stan has never really graced with his mouth.

Because the moment Stan places kisses on Ford’s bare chest, when the very tip of his tongue meets one of Ford’s hardened nipples Ford jerks violently beneath him, a loud cry escaping him. Stan pulls back, immediately worried but Ford shakes his head, gasping, “No, no – please don’t stop! Please!”

“You like that?”

Ford answers with a moan and Stan just goes back to it, licking and sucking Ford’s nipple and Ford feels out of his mind with how pleasurable it is. Stan switches to the other and Ford is tugging at his hair and hissing because the feelings are overwhelming him and he has no idea why he’s so sensitive but he is and eventually Stan pulls back, lips damp, eyes heavy lidded as he breathes in wonder, “Wow…you really do, don’t you?”

Ford just nods and rubs a hand across his forehead, “Feels good.”

Stan grins and gives him a kiss on the lips before returning to gently scale down Ford’s body. He kisses his chest and his stomach, playing a little with his bellybutton – tongue dipping inside to make Ford laugh and complain about being ticklish again only for Stan to finally come down to his pants. He hovers over Ford’s very obvious erection and he grins down at it, “Well, what do we have here? Buried treasure?”

Ford rolls his eyes at the cheesy line but finds his nerves starting to peck at him as Stan carefully unzips his pants and starts to tug at them. Ford lifts his hips enough to help, his pants and his underwear joining the pile of clothes on the floor. Ford lies back and covers his face, his voice coming out muffled from beneath his hands, “Let me know when you’re done looking.”

“Sixer, why are you hiding?”

Ford doesn’t answer at first but eventually he says, “You’ve never seen me all naked. I mean, not this way. Up close and-”

“You’re worried I won’t like what I see?” Stan asks, then he lowers his head near Ford’s crotch, his breath washing over it in a warm wave of air, “Or taste?”

Ford’s hands drop away as he whispers, “What you-?”

Stan hums and he runs his tongue along the length of Ford’s cock, making Ford gasp, “Fuck!”

And while this stirs Stan’s blood he’ll admit he’s being a lot more confident than he actually feels. After all, he’s never done this before. It’s a bit intimidating. He’s eye level with the most intimate part of Ford’s body. And it’s pretty damned impressive. It’s thick and rosy and curled up towards his belly button and there’s the tiniest pearl of precome on the soft tip. Not to mention Stan’s never given someone a blowjob before. He has a general idea of how it works but performing one himself…

But Stanley Pines has never backed down from anything and he’s not about to start now, so he takes a gentle hold of his brother’s dick and wraps his mouth around it. Ford lets out a yelp and fingernails bite into his shoulders as he hears, “Teeth! Teeth!”

Stan mentally berates himself for that (god, he knows better) and tries again, tries to be more tongue than anything and Ford relaxes, relaxes and lets out a huff, “Ohhhh better…much-ahh-much, much better…”
Pleased at his improvement, Stan takes his time. He bobs his head and traces every inch of Ford’s flesh and Ford is starting to babble. Phrases like ‘yes’ and ‘god’ and ‘so good’ and Stan is starting to feel pretty damn proud of himself. He feels even better when he licks at Ford’s straining sack and Ford moans, “Lee, Lee!”

Stan loves when he gets his brother so broken down that he can’t help but refer to Stan by the end of his name. In fact, it’s almost always his goal to get Ford to this point and as he gently draws one of Ford’s balls into his mouth one of his free hands pumps Ford’s cock.

“Lee! Christ, you…you gotta stop…I can’t! I’m gonna, I’m gonna c-come…I’m gonna-!”

And Stan knows Ford is trying to do him a favor, trying to get him to pull off before he comes but he finds himself wild with the idea of Ford’s release flooding his mouth. He wants it, he needs it and he rises up, taking Ford as deep into his mouth as he can, working ruthlessly to get it, sucking and stroking him until his brother can’t help himself.

Ford’s clutching at the sheets and he’s beautiful vocal as he falls apart. A lot. In fact, Stan finds himself choking trying to drink it all down and Ford’s cock escapes his mouth to shoot a little on his face, coating his lips, chin and cheeks. Ford sees this and whimpers; one because he’s sorry and two because he’s not sorry at all – the sight of Stan covered in his come undeniably sexy.

Stan himself is huffing and puffing and finding that he’s beyond aroused by Ford coming on his face. He draws off, quickly shucking off his pants and underwear. He didn’t know it was possible for his dick to ache this much and he wants…holy shit…he doesn’t know what he wants because he’s just realized he doesn’t quite know how to do this.

Turns out Ford’s research is going to come in handy after all, so Stan switches tactics. He crawls back into the bed and cuddles Ford close as Ford comes down from his release. Ford is damn near boneless but when Stan gathers him close he become terribly affectionate. He kisses Stan and runs his hands through his hair and his whole face is nothing but dreamy happiness.

Stan whispers, “So, uh, I take it I did good?”

Ford just nods dumbly.

“Okay, well, I’m kinda…you know. Ready for the rest but I realized I don’t really know how to-ah…”

His twin’s eyes widened as he regains some semblance of consciousness, “Oh. Oh, yes! Well, the most common position would be for whoever is, ah, receiving to get on their hands and knees.”

“Well, who’s going to-”

“Me!” Ford nearly shouts. He pales a little at his enthusiasm and tries again, voice aiming for something cooler, “Me. I was thinking I would do it. Be beneath you, that is. I’ve been…I’ve been practicing and I think-”

“Practicing?”

Ford looks away, “I…have, ah, put-put my fingers in…up…um…my…um…”

“You…fingered yourself?”

“I just wanted to see what it was like!” Ford rushes on defensively, “So, one day when you were at boxing practice and Dad was at work and Mom was out shopping and I had the place to myself I
thought I’d try and I read about it and I was pretty sure I could handle it and it wouldn’t be too hard and-

Stan kisses Ford to stop him talking because he sometimes finds it’s the best way to calm his nervous wreck of a brother down. Not to mention he really, really, really wants to get to the main details. Because the idea of Ford fingering himself, of him getting off on it, is undeniably one of the hottest things he’s ever heard.

“Get to the point, Poindexter.”

“Yes,” Ford breathes, “I…touched myself.”

“Let me get this straight,” Stan takes one of Ford’s hands and lifts it up, “You mean to tell me you fucked yourself with these beautiful hands? With these gorgeously long fingers?”

Ford’s throat works as he gives a wordless nod.

“Tell me.” The words come out in a deep command that Ford can’t resist, “I took my clothes off and…and I got on my bed and I coated my hands-”

“You got them good and wet.” These words leave Stan not so much as a question but a gravelly statement.

Ford squeezes his eyes shut, moaning; “Yes. And I used one hand to, ah, stroke myself and with the other I…I put one finger in first. In-inside me, I mean, and it-it wasn’t too bad so- so I did a second one and then…then I pushed them in deeper and-”

Another kiss stops Ford’s words but this time it’s because Stan can’t stand to hear more. It’s not that he doesn’t want to, but he feels like he won’t last if he keeps hearing this. He’s never thought of himself as having much of an imagination but he can see all of this in perfect clarity. Can see Ford spread out on his bed, touching himself, fucking himself and it’s too much. Ford kisses him back just as eagerly and when they part Stan asks breathlessly, “Show me.”

Ford’s eyes widen, “You-you want me to-?”

“It’ll be educational.” Stan teases and Ford lets out a jittery laugh. He reaches for the lube and he liberally coats his fingers. He spreads his legs and can’t meet Stan’s eyes, too shy as he lowers his hand. It felt weird enough doing this alone and now he has an audience. However Ford is ever the scientist, ready to venture forth into the unknown. His heart is beating double time as he gently pushes one finger inside his body.

He lets out a halting gasp and works it carefully in and out before adding a second and then a third. Stan keeps looking down and then away and then down again. He doesn’t know what to think, how to react. His brain is short circuiting and he can only groan, “My god…so hot…so, so fucking hot…”

Ford lets out a tiny whine as his fingers pick up their pace, surging smoothly in and out of his body, “It’s-it’s a little…uncomfortable at first but-but then it starts to feel-feel so good…”

“I want to make you feel good,” Stan growls and he suddenly realizes that – while it is completely irrational and stupid – he’s jealous of Ford’s own fingers. He doesn’t want to watch anymore. He wants to participate. So he finds the lube and he gets his fingers soaking wet, bringing them down, “Show me, Ford…show me how…”

Ford whimpered, withdrawing his fingers to take a hold of Stan’s hand. He guides it down and directs
his fingers and suddenly it’s Stan’s fingers inside his body, Stan’s fingers moving in and out of the tight ring of muscle, going deeper each time and Ford trembles, “Stan…I can’t…can’t…there’s…my-my…”

“You’re what?”

“Ju-just you’ll-you’re almost-!” And Ford really can’t talk, his breathing so heavy, and Stan really needs direction but he decides to try his luck and he pushes his fingers in further, curls them a little and the sound that rips out of Ford’s throat startles Stan so badly he practically falls off the bed, pulling away from Ford roughly.

Ford curses at the loss, “Goddamn it, Stanley!”

Stan immediately assumes he messed up, “Oh god, oh Jesus – Ford, I didn’t mean to hurt you!”

This is answered with a dry laugh, “Hurt me? God, no, Stan – you just hit my prostate. And it was fucking amazing!”

“Oh…I-I did?”

“Yeah,” Ford lets out a heavy sigh, “That’s-ah-what you’ll want to do when you’re, um, you know…”

“So…I was doing okay? I didn’t hurt you?”

“No, you didn’t hurt me and yes, you were doing okay. More than, in fact,” Ford reassures him and he gives Stan a quick kiss, he starts to turn over, more than prepared to be on his hands and knees when Stan stops him, “Hey! Wait! Um…is-is there any way to do this where I can…uh…look at you?”

“You want to look at me?” Ford asks uncertainly and Stan gives him a tender smile before kissing him, “Yeah. I’d like that a lot.”

Ford’s lips twitch, “Well, yes…I mean, we, we have to rearrange some of these pillows so they’re under me, tilt my hips better and move my legs up, but…we should be able to.”

“Awesome.”

They do as he suggests, moving things around until Ford is angled just right. Stan grabs one of the condoms and puts it on and as he poses himself above Ford he looks down and feels sort of dizzy. This is really going to happen. They’re really going to do this. He feels a pleasurable jolt of lust shoot through his body and his palms start to sweat. They feel slippery on Ford’s sides and Ford’s legs are raised up on either side of him and Stan can’t help but ask, “Is…is this uncomfortable? You-you look like you’re bent in half.”

“I’m fine,” Ford promises and one of his hands reaches up to brush Stan’s face. His six fingers dance across Stan’s mouth and he kisses them, smiling as Ford whispers, “Just…take it slow.”

Stan nods and he starts to push forward but sort of wavers, not sure if his angle is right, he reaches down to make sure he’s lined up where he needs to be when he feels Ford’s hand meet his, “Here, let me help.”

And Stan feels his blood heat as their fingers lace over one another, as they work together to guide Stan’s cock into Ford’s waiting entrance. Stan lets out a shaky gasp as he begins to push himself in, grunting, “God! Ford! Tight! You’re-you’re so…so fucking tight!”
Ford lets out a shaky breath, “S-sorry?”

“Don’t be…it-it feels…” Stan doesn’t continue because he doesn’t know how to explain how it feels. It doesn’t feel quite the way he thought it would but it’s not bad. It’s just…different. And he definitely didn’t know there would be this much pressure. It’s almost as if Ford’s body is against this intrusion and part of Stan wants to pull out, feels like maybe this is a bad idea because he doesn’t want to do anything that Ford doesn’t willingly want.

But Ford isn’t verbally unwilling, instead he breathes in sharply, moaning, “Stan, oh fuck, fuck...you’re...you’re inside of me.”

“Yeah,” Stan pants, sweat beading on his skin as he risks edging in further, “Does it...does it hurt?”

Ford closes his eyes tightly and shakes his head, “No.”

“How-does it feel?”

“How-does it feel?”

“Sort of...strange. Weird.”

“Bad weird or good weird?”

This is answered with a threadbare laugh, “Is there such a thing as good weird?”

“You tell me.”

He just shakes his head, “You’re....you’re b-big. You...feel so big in me.”

This revelation makes Stan’s flesh feel like it’s caught flame and he groans, “Yeah?”

Ford nods, “Maybe...maybe if you just...start moving a little...”

Stan licks his lips and carefully pulls out a little then pushes back in, his movements very deliberate. Just tiny pumps of his hips, not wanting to hurt the person beneath him. Ford makes little discontented noises and Stan is starting to wonder if this whole thing is going to end in abject failure. The very thought makes his throat constrict and he lowers his head, eyes closing as determination sets in. No. He’s not going to fail. He’s going to make this work. He’s going to make this fan-fucking-tastic and nothing will stop him.

With this in mind he starts picking up the pace, his thrusts taking on more force and he knows he just needs to find that spot again. That spot inside Ford that made him cry out so violently. Ford starts making sounds beneath him, little injured noises and Stan doesn’t want to hurt him, he doesn’t, but he wants to find that spot again, he wants to make this good and Ford isn’t telling him to stop and he opens his eyes to check, just to make sure he’s not hurting Ford because if he is he will give up.

But Ford doesn’t look upset or hurt. He looks just as determined as Stanley and he starts rocking his hips back into Stan’s movements and Stan rotates his hips, adjusts his angle and on the next thrust an absolute scream rips from Ford’s throat. Stan feels Ford’s body clench around him and he cries out, “Ford! Ford! Holy fuck!”

“Stan-uh-lee, Lee! There, there! Again, again, please, god!” Ford begs and Stan does as he asks, body working like a piston now, each thrust a direct hit and Ford begins wailing beneath him, hands thrashing through the sheets, head tossing about as he moans every vowel in the alphabet.

The sounds coming from their room are no doubt boisterous – between Ford’s shameless cries of passion, their bed thudding against the wall thanks to their rigorous actions, and Stan’s hefty grunts
anyone within the nearby vicinity can probably hear them – thickness of the walls be damned.

But frankly, Stan could really care less if someone hears them. He’s drinking in every sound Ford is making – every gasp, every moan, every scream. He wants to go deaf from it and he wants Ford to go mute – he wants his brother’s throat to be as wrecked as his body and Stan knows he’s really lost control of himself. He had been so careful at first but now he’s really charging into his brother, pounding without mercy into him and Ford is just begging for more of it, whimpering like a broken record beneath him, “Yes, yes, yes! Please, please-oh please, more, more! Give me it – all of it! I want it! Need it! Fill me! I can take it, I can take it…”

Stan didn’t know that Ford would be such a talker but he finds he absolutely loves it. Loves every word that comes out of Ford’s filthy mouth, each one igniting another fire inside of him and he knows he’s reaching the end, his body wound too tight and he can’t hold out much longer and Ford’s cock is a hard, leaking rod between them and Stan grabs it, clumsily stroking it and Ford’s voice cracks over his name as he comes again, striping their bodies with his sticky release.

His whole body spasms and Stan feels like it’s milking him and with a ragged wail of Ford’s name he shatters, his orgasm taking his breath, his vision, everything. When Stan returns to his senses he’s still moving but his body is going at a slower pace, clearly winding down. He withdraws himself and Ford inhales sharply.

Stan removes the used condom, tossing it in the nearby trash bin before he collapses to one side of Ford, damp with perspiration, his whole body singing with sweet afterglow. Ford is trying to catch his breath and Stan feels wonderfully stupid as he mumbles, “Good first time?”

His answer is a weak confirming hum.

“Yeah! Take that statistics! Our first time was awesome!”

A sound leaves Ford, a huff that could be construed as a laugh. Stan wouldn’t be surprised if his brother can’t speak for a bit. After all, he was rather – ah, vocal, during sex. And Stan’s still a bit dazed and wildly pleased about that. Who knew his brother would babble so much during it? He wonders if next time he can work his brother up to a point where he can’t form words, where he just becomes a mindless creature of pleasure.

This, of course, is when Stan realizes that he thought of a ‘next time’. Would there be a next time? Could there be a next time? Stan doesn’t want to think about it right now. Right now he just wants to bask in the warmth of a job well done. He gathers Ford into his arms and starts to feel a heaviness take his eyelids and Ford whispers, voice notably hoarse, “Stanley…we should clean up.”

“Mmm, yeah, sure.”

“Stan? I’m serious.”

“Mmm.”

“Stan, don’t fall asleep. Stanley!”

Stan drifts off with a smile on his face, pressed up close to Ford’s side. As such, he doesn’t see Ford’s look of affection. Nor does he see that look fade away as Ford’s face takes on a more contemplative and worried expression, his eyes looking up at the ceiling as if maybe it will have all the answers.
They make sure to pass through the gift shop to grab more candles. The lights still have yet to kick back in and personally, Ford is thankful. After all, he imagines his naked body will be a sight more bearable in dimmer lighting. He still questions himself with every step he takes—what on earth is he doing? This is such a bad idea. A terrible idea. The worst idea in the history of ideas ever.

But he doesn’t seem to be stopping. Oh no, if anything he’s plunging headfirst into what will no doubt be one of his biggest mistakes ever. And from someone who created a trans-dimension portal with the capacity to be a doomsday device, this says a lot. But nothing deters him—in fact, he even takes Stanley’s hand again to help direct him, to help lead him down the stairs and to the elevator. The elevator works on a generator completely separate from the lights, so it has no trouble whatsoever lowering them down, down, down.

Down towards Ford’s inevitable ruin. Or maybe it would be better to say it’s Stan’s ruin. After all, Stan still has a chance. He hasn’t committed the sins, the atrocities, Ford has. And Ford knows he should tell him. He should tell him the truth—tell him everything, but he can’t bring himself to do it. Because once he does he knows this will all be over. Stanley will never want anything to do with him ever again. It was as he had told Stan before—Stan would hate him.

And yes, he’s had reason to worry Stan would hate him before—the most notable being when their father tossed him out and Ford had had his head too far up his own ass to try and stop it. But he hadn’t thought it would be so permanent. Not really. He’d still been a kid. Not even out of high school and somehow he had thought, even then, that they would patch things up. That it wasn’t forever, that they would resolve their issues and be...well, he didn’t know what exactly.

Friends again? Brothers? They certainly couldn’t be the other thing they were—the secret, sinful thing that Ford worked so hard to purge from their relationship. Worked on it for over thirty years to only come to tonight and bury them both in it again. Stan sheds a few tears and Ford can’t help himself. Can’t help but kiss him, can’t help but give him something—give him some kind of pleasure, some kind of warmth, some kind of...

That awful four lettered word floats in his head again and he violently banishes it from his thoughts. He refuses to think it, to say it, to feel it. Lust. Lust, that’s all this is. All it’s ever been and it’s sick and dirty and twisted but Ford can deal with lust, Ford can handle lust. They end up in the basement and it’s so dark and cold down here, foreboding, like the underworld and Ford finds that so damn fitting that he chuckles to himself.

He leads Stan towards his bed and starts lighting the candles and Stan looks at the dismantled portal, his voice soft, “You did it. You took it apart.”

Yes. He had taken it apart. But at a price. Ford thinks of the stored rift energy and scowls. It has to be disposed of. He knows this and he has some ideas on how to do it. The most compelling one lingers at the forefront of his mind. It would certainly fix the majority of his problems. But there are variables that would need to be dealt with first. For everyone’s sakes. And he’s still not quite sure he can bring himself to do...to do what needs to be done. God, he’s really kidding himself, isn’t he? He knows that the first option is the best option. He should just rip the Band-Aid off and do it.

He looks at Stan, who is still staring at the remains of the portal. Ford finishes lighting the last of the candles and the area has a spectacular glow to it. While nowhere near as bright as the overhead lights would be, there is more visibility than Ford had counted on. It appears that Stan will be able to get a better look at him, after all.

He tugs at his sweater and debates whether or not he should really do this. Stan had obviously been
trying to be kind earlier. Ford knows what he looks like under his clothes, his skin a wretched patchwork. Outside matching inside, he supposes. He opens his mouth to say as much to Stan, to voice that maybe they shouldn’t do this when Stan sighs, “Thirty years.”

He rubs at his eyes, “Thirty years, I worked on that thing. Slaved at it. I learned a helluva lot more about physics than I ever wanted to, to get it up and running and now it’s gone. Just hunks of useless metal.”

“You…learned physics?”

“What? Like it’s hard?” Stan scoffs, shaking his head, a bitter smile on his face, “How else do you think I got it to work, Poindexter? Yeah, getting the rest of the journals together helped but I still had to fire the machine up.”

Ford’s lips twitch, “I’d love to have a discussion with you about theoretical physics sometime.”

Stan shudders, “God, no. Never! I just learned what I had to, to get the job done. Put a bunch of those gobbledygook words on my punching bag and beat the shit out of it until I remembered enough to do what I had to.”

This draws a laugh out of Ford and Stan grins, pleased to hear the sound. Ford shakes his head, “Well, I’m sorry you didn’t get to punch the portal apart.”

“Oh ho,” Stan puffs up, “I woulda loved that. You shoulda called me down here. I would have punched it to pieces.”

“I’d have liked to see that,” Ford says simply. He knows better. Knows that Stan couldn’t have deconstructed the portal. Only Ford could have done it and only he could have contained the dangerous energies that resulted from its reactivation. Still, he had made a pact with himself to try and forget it for tonight. After all, he didn’t see the harm in indulging himself for the evening. It would be like when they were kids – just one night. Just one.

And it would help him in the long run, wouldn’t it? New memories to dull the pain when the time came. Fresh memories of this Stan – an older, cuddlier version and he’s sure Stan would hate that but it’s true. Stan is so much…softer now. Softer and happier and Ford knows it has to be because of the kids and maybe even the town. Soos, Wendy, the Shack…everything. Everything here has made Stan complete. Finally. But not Ford. Ford doesn’t make Stan complete – all he presents is the possibility of tearing him apart. Of destroying all he’s gained.

Ford won’t let that happen.

He won’t.

For all his sins and awfulness – he can at least do this thing. This one thing. He can make things right.

But not tonight. Not now.

Now is about hoarding that last little bit of him that he can so he approaches Stan with a tiny smile. Stan turns to him, eyes wide and vaguely vulnerable. Ford cups his face and kisses him, lips sure and strong and Stan lets out a shaky breath, fingers threading into his brother’s hair. Ford eases them towards the bed and he draws away to sit on it, patting the spot next to him. Stan takes it and Ford shucks his sweater back off. He sits there, feeling awkward and ugly.

He doesn’t meet Stan’s eyes, looking ahead as he breathes, “Okay, well…now you can, you know…"
He can barely see Stan out of his peripheral vision and when Stan touches his right shoulder he flinches slightly. There are deep gouges here and he can feel Stan tracing them with one finger. Explanation. Lectures. Yes, this is the best way to deal with what is happening. Ford clears his throat and begins to talk in a robotic tone, “That was from a Rapjawer. They’ve got these big talons and the one that got a hold of me was planning on taking me home for dinner. Luckily bigger, juicer prey came by and she released me.”

Stan’s fingers go down towards Ford’s elbow where there are deep pock marks, “That’s from an Yshotaopus. They’re relatives of that creature you saw a couple of days ago – the Cycloptopus. Unfortunately if they grab you the marks stay. They secret an acid so, it’s…unavoidable.”

“The Cyclo-cyclo-”

“Cycloptopus.” Ford provides.

Stan nods, “That thing looked scared of you.”

Ford huffs, “Yes. And it had every right to be.”

“You say that like I should be scared of you.”

“That’s because you should be.”

Stan laughs but the sound has no joy to it, “I’m not scared of you. If anything, I’m…”

He trails off and his hands have moved to Ford’s back. They hover over the thin lines that crisscross over on another here and Ford verbally nudges him to continue, “If anything, you…?”

“If anything, I’m scared for you.”

Ford shrinks back a little from Stan’s touch as he hunches forward, shoulders rounding in, “You shouldn’t be. There’s nothing to worry about Stanley.”

“Oh? Then what happened with the fireworks? And those couple of nights where you refused to sleep? What about upstairs when I first saw these?”

He closes his eyes, “I’ll admit it’s been…difficult readjusting to everything. Sometimes I’m…I’m back there.”

“Back in those dimensions?”

“No. Just…just one dimension. There’s just…just one in particular. One I refer to as ‘there’. The others were rather pleasant, actually. Bad things happened in some of them, yes, but they were nothing like there.”

“I take it most of these scars happened there.”

“Yes. They gave them to me.”

“Who?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Ford mutters and Stan’s hands resume their trek, touching him all over and he can’t help but shiver, “How can you stand it? Touching me?”
“I like touching you,” Stan confides softly, “Besides, I’ve actually seen worse. There was this one guy I met in prison, he…”

Stan stops and he coughs, “Well, ah, you probably don’t want to know about that.”

But I do, Ford’s thoughts growl, I want to know his name – the names of anyone who hurt you, who used you, who touched you. I want to know so I can find them, so I can flay them alive, so I can-

“I like touching you,” Stan confides softly, “Besides, I’ve actually seen worse. There was this one guy I met in prison, he…”

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But I do, Ford’s thoughts growl, I want to know his name – the names of anyone who hurt you, who used you, who touched you. I want to know so I can find them, so I can flay them alive, so I can-

“Earth to nerd robot. Come in, nerd robot.”

“Hmm?”

“You were lost in your own head again.”

“There’s nothing wrong with thinking, Stanley.”

“There is the way you do it. You overthink things.”

Ford turns to look at him, “Not in this particular instance.”

“Well, what are you thinking about then?”

“I don’t know…time, I guess. A lot of time has passed Stanley. We’ve been separated for years and a lot has happened to us. We both went through so much that I don’t see how we can ever really reconnect. How we can ever really rebuild anything between us. We’re practically strangers.”

“Okay, so, you’re wrong then. You are overthinking this,” Stan says and Ford glares at him but Stan is unmoved, “Yeah, we’ve spent a long time apart and yeah, we’ve both been through a lot. Some good, some bad – but in the end you and me are the same people we’ve always been.”

“I disagree. We are both very different people now.”

“I’m not gonna say we haven’t, y’know, grown as people or whatever but at the end of the day you’re still Stanford Pines and I’m still Stanley Pines. Nothing’s changed.”

Ford crosses his arms, voice heated, “That’s a very naïve way of looking at things.”

“So, you’re trying to tell me the Ford Off Switch won’t work anymore?”

“What Ford Off-?” Ford’s words are cut off as Stan takes a firm grip on him and pretty much tosses him back onto the bed. Stan crawls over top of him and brings his lips near Ford’s. They hover, unbearably close and Ford can feel the insidious heat of them, Stan’s eyes are lock with his and Stan’s eyes are so deep, so warm...

“Ford?”

His eyelids droop, his breathing deepens, and all he can manage is a soft, “Mmhmm.”

Stan beams and says brightly, “That off switch.”

Ford tries to work up some outrage but finds it difficult with Stan’s comfortable weight on him, with Stan’s lips just within kissing distance. However, his brother helps as he cockily remarks, “Yeah, you’re a real genius, Stanford. But once I get you under me, you become as dumb as a stump.”

“I do not!”
'Do too.'

‘Do not!’

‘Do too.’

‘Do – ah! I am NOT doing this with you! We’re not twelve anymore, Stanley!’

‘Got that right,’ Stan growls as he grinds his hips down against Ford’s and Ford hisses at the contact, that little bit of friction. Stan’s robe starts to fall apart and Ford is reminded that his brother is gloriously naked beneath. The only real barrier between them is Ford’s pants and underwear – both of which are becoming uncomfortably tight as Stan’s fingers start to linger over Ford’s ruined chest.

And Ford doesn’t understand why Stan doesn’t react with revulsion. Lord knows Ford is disgusted by his own looks. It’s why he’s adopted his particular fashion choices. Not to mention looking at any of the marks on his skin is nothing but a grim reminder of his own mistakes. He would have never ended up there if it hadn’t been for his own hubris.

Moreover the scars on his body not caused by them are truly a sign of his own failures – as he’d told Stanley earlier when he’s lightly recounted the Rapjaw story. He’d been the one stupid enough to be in the wrong place at the wrong time – he had been the one to wander into the Rapjaw’s territory – therefore the claw marks he’d earned were his own doing.

That’s what the mutilation of his body was – a price. A price he had to pay for his own stupidity. Or maybe it was deeper than that – maybe it was a price he had to pay for being who he was. For thinking the way he did, feeling the way he did. God, he truly was a freak, wasn’t he? And here he was – dragging Stanley down with him again.

He knows he should stop Stan but now his brother’s hands aren’t all that’s touching him. He lets out a surprised gasp as Stan’s mouth hovers over his collarbone. It traces the light scars there before moving downward, finding one of Ford’s nipples – both are still astonishingly intact and Stan licks at one, tip of his tongue teasing and Ford sucks in a sharp breath, back arching and he can feel Stan smile against him, “See you still like this.”

Stan sucks the nipple into his mouth, tortures it lightly with his teeth and much to Ford’s chagrin a whine escapes his throat. His brother draws back and lightly blows on the sensitive skin, making it become an even tighter pebble, “Learned a few tricks in my day. Bet you’d like me to show ’em to you.”

Ford doesn’t answer, can’t speak, his throat tight with emotion. So then, this how Stanley’s chosen to deal with it? To make jokes? To make light of what he had to go through, of what he had to do in order to feed himself? In order to live? And Ford is more than ready to hate on himself for it when Stan speaks up, “Hey! Egghead! I can literally hear your thoughts. Stop being a buzzkill, will ya?”

“I’m not being a buzzkill. And you’re not telepathic.”

“Don’t have to be to hear your thoughts. You might as well be broadcasting them. Now relax and have some fun with me, will you?”

“This is fun for you?”

Stan shrugs and his fingers dance along Ford’s damaged stomach, “Well, I mean, the sight of these is actually killing me. Thinking of how you got them, how you got hurt and I couldn’t help… it tears me up inside. But I mean, there’s something to be said for the power of distraction and it’s nice to see that some parts of you are still the same.”
“Like what?”

“Like…” Stan trails off as he, without any preamble, sticks his tongue deep into Ford’s bellybutton. Ford, much to his dismay, lets out a pretty high pitched squeak at this. A squeak. A squeak. And Stan draws away laughing and Ford smacks his shoulders and Stan just laughs harder. He goes to move back up towards Ford, body practically springing up when he lets out a loud bellow and collapses to one side, falling off of Ford to rest face down on one side of the mattress.

“Oh my god! Stanley! Stanley, are you okay!? Are you hurt?!” Ford cries as he sits up and reaches for Stan who waves one of his hands dismissively. Stan is muttering into the mattress and cursing and Ford is terribly worried about him until he hears Stan hiss, “Stupid friggin’ back!”

“Your-your back?”

“Yeah, yeah. It’s my damned back,” Stan mutters, his tone clearly apprehensive, “I’m…it’s…I,” and whatever he says next is so muffled Ford can’t hear it.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t catch that.”

“I said-” Stan buries his face in his embarrassment, “I-mmse-amm-ormmedac-pmilow.”

“Stanley, I can’t hear you.”

“Fine! Back pillow, all right?! I use a friggin’ orthopedic back pillow! There! You happy?”

“So? A lot of people use-” Ford’s words are cut off by Stan various groans (both from aggravation at his brother’s words and from the pain of his sore body) as he slowly rolls over on to his back so he can lay next to his twin, eyes on the ceiling, “I have to use it because I’m old, Stanford. I’m old and outta the game and reaching the end. Y’know, not all of us can just vault over countertops like it’s nothing.”

“You’re not reaching the end,” Ford argues even as Stan makes a noise of dissent, “And as for vaulting over the counter, well, my physical prowess is in large part due to running for my life in hostile environments. I had no choice but to try and stay in some semblance of physical peak condition. But age has taken its toll on me as well – you didn’t see me down here after I vaulted over that counter. I’m pretty sure I pulled a muscle in my shoulder, had to ice it and take a breather.”

“Yeah, but at least you didn’t have it happen right now. Talk about a mood killer.”

“Do you need me to go get your pillow or some pain medication or-”

Stan shakes his head, “No, no, no. It feels better now. I shifted a bit and it seems to be more…I dunno, righted or whatever. Nothing hurts save my pride.”

“Hmm, I understand what a burden that must be to admit.”

“Look who’s talking.”

Ford gives a sardonic grin, “I suppose I can’t argue with you there.”

“What? But you love arguing with me. About everything and nothing.”

“True, but we’re trying to, ah; engage in something here where I think we should put those arguments aside.”

“I’m sorry – what exactly are we engaging in?”
Ford gingerly rolls over Stan. He makes sure not to put too much weight on him, instead keeping himself propped up, his hands on either side of Stan’s head, as he carefully lowers his mouth near his twin’s, “I think we were about here…”

They start kissing again and while Ford’s enjoying it he worries for his brother. He doesn’t want to further a possibly injury just so he can get off. His brother is all about putting on a big show – pretending he’s not upset about his past, pretending he doesn’t care about how the kids might feel about him, even now possibly pretending his back is fine when it’s killing him. As always, Ford has to be the responsible one. As much as he would love to get physically intimate tonight, he’s willing to put it on hold if his brother’s hurting. However, he sees no reason not to shower Stanley with more attention.

So, Ford pulls away from their kiss and starts lavishing him with affection. He kisses Stan’s neck and breathes in his scent. Nostalgia washes over him. After all this time, Stanley still smells the same, still uses the same aftershave – it’s a fresh piney scent mixed with leather– Ford remembers when Stan first found it.

They had been at a drug store to get a couple of malted sodas when Stan came across a bottle that said ‘Manly Forest’. They had joked about that for a while – what the hell was a manly forest? Did the forest have particularly manly trees? Were all the animals in it male? How was a manly forest different from a girly forest? But Stan had popped the cap anyway and taken a sniff.

“Oh, hey! Sixer, it smells like Pine trees…and,” he sniffed again, “Leather, I think.”

“So?”

“So?!” he pointed to the bottle, “Pine Trees,” he pointed to himself, “Pines. We’re meant to be together! This is fate! And the leather smell? I mean, can’t you see me in a leather jacket?”

“What? Like Fonzie?” Ford asked and just as Stan opened his mouth he shot him a warning, “If you say ‘Ayyyy’ I’m leaving you here.”

Stan had frowned at that but purchased the bottle anyway and from then on it had been his signature scent. The fact that they still make it, the fact that he’s wearing it now, makes Ford’s heart constrict. He takes another lungful before resuming his kisses, removing Stan’s robe entirely to reveal his naked body as he moves to his shoulders, his collarbone and when Ford moves down to his chest he hears a huff above him, “Might want to avoid that. Man boobs and belly and all…”

Ford ignores him. He’s never known Stan to be so verbally self-conscious but then he wasn’t lying when he talked about how time has changed them both. It’s clear that in his later years Stan has started to worry about his image. He tries to bury it in jokes but Ford has picked up on it. Surprising really, because Ford is usually terrible about picking up on these sorts of things. But he remembers Stan being pretty proud of his body when they were younger – bragging about his biceps and how he wasn’t just ‘another pretty face’ and yes, it had been jokes but Ford knew he was secretly pleased with how he looked.

And Ford doesn’t know why he isn’t pleased now but he knows he’ll try his damndest to make him feel that way again as he glides his tongue over one of Stan’s nipples. His brother lets out a hiss and his hands clutch at Ford’s hair. Ford grins and moves to the other, giving it the same needed attention before moving down to Stan’s stomach. Yes, it is plusher than he remembers but he finds he really adores that. He rubs his face against it, runs his hands all over it and Stan is making strange sounds above him so he looks up to see Stan looks…bashful.

Stanley Pines bashful is a sight to see. Ford wishes he had a camera. His brother’s cheeks are a bright
pink and his eyes have a little sheen to them. Ford eases back up to give him a quick kiss on the lips before returning his attention to his tummy and Stan breathes, “You sure have gotten confident.”

His answer is a questioning sound, Ford not wanting to stop his actions as Stan explains, “You’re sorta the one taking charge here. Wasn’t that way back when we, y’know, first started this thing.”

“You said it yourself, we’ve grown as people. Am I to understand you don’t like my taking the lead?” Ford lays his face on Stan’s stomach and just rests there. So nice, warm and soft. He closes his eyes and just relishes it. Relishes being this close to the person he missed the most, this person that means the most.

“No, I-I like it…it’s just different.”

“Refreshing?”

Stan doesn’t say anything for a long time but eventually he replies softly, “Maybe.”

Ford smiles and lifts his head, kissing Stan’s bellybutton, “You’ve had a lot on your shoulders for a long time. Nothing wrong with taking off a little of that weight.”

“Or you’ve grown into even more of a control freak.”

Ford rolls his eyes and starts working his way down farther when Stan stops him, “Hey, what’re you doing? You’ve already done that.”

“So you’re turning down oral sex?”

“Ugh. You and your textbook talk. Can’t you just say ‘blowjob’ like a normal person?” Ford glares at him but Stan continues, “And yes, I mean, it’s not like I don’t like ‘em, ‘cause I do and I certainly enjoyed the one upstairs but I thought we were gonna…y’know. Go all the way.”

Ford sits up to one side of him and Stan frowns, sad at the loss of contact, “Did you-did you change your mind?”

“No, I didn’t but,” Ford becomes a little apprehensive here, not quite sure how to continue, “Well, we have all night. There’s nothing wrong with us taking our time, is there? Not to mention we’re not getting any younger-”

Stan scowls, “This is because of my friggin’ back, isn’t it? Knew that was a mood killer!”

“I’m just saying we should be careful. Take it slow.”

“And I’m saying I told you it was fine,” Stan sits up and does his best not to flinch. Okay, so, his back does still hurt a little. But it certainly doesn’t hurt enough to stop and he needs to convince Ford of that so he kisses his brother deeply, just enough to hit that Ford Off Switch, before whispering against his lips, “Besides, I wanna be inside you.”

A needy whimper leaves Ford because no one’s said that to him in…well, he doesn’t think anyone has ever said that to him and god, does he want it. Desperately. Still, “It’s not just that, Stanley, it’s… it’s been a long time since-”

Yeah, yeah. I know, long time since I’ve done this with anyone either,” Stan talks over top of Ford when suddenly he not only catches that he was talking when Ford was, but that Ford said something very important in particular, “Whoa, wait, sorry. We talked at the same time and I didn’t catch that. Or, I don’t think I caught it right. You said it’s been a long time since and then you said…did you
Ford flushes. He had been hoping maybe Stan had missed that. He had sort of dropped off into a whisper when Stan brought up his other various sexual encounters. But apparently despite the hearing aid, Stan is better at listening than he thought and Ford confesses, “Yes. I…haven’t had sex with anyone else. Ever. Just you.”

Stan just stares at him with big eyes and Ford begins to feel defensive, “After you left I was very focused on my studies. Like I told you and the children, I went from undergrad to PhD three years ahead of schedule and that didn’t leave much time for dalliances. And you know how hard it is for me to talk to women and I wasn’t interested in pursuing any men and then I went through the portal and in all the dimensions I went to I met a variety of people and entities but none of them…I mean, there were times I tried or considered it, but I just couldn’t connect to anyone emotionally like I did to you and I’ve found over time I need that connection in order to—mmpf!”

Ford’s words end as Stan crushes their mouths together and he’s kissing Ford hard. His hands on Ford are almost bruising and when he draws away he looks devastated and angry, “I can’t believe you! I can’t believe you!”

And Ford’s shocked – he doesn’t understand why Stan is so angry – so furious. But then Stan is kissing him again with a savage intensity and his hands are tearing at Ford’s pants. Literally tearing, fingers rough, yanking at his clothing and Ford does his best to try and help, to get the pants off, the underwear off and soon he’s as naked as Stanley and if Stan’s back still hurts he certainly doesn’t show it as he takes a rough hold of Ford and throws him back beneath him.

He grabs the lube and sloppily coats his fingers, spilling some on the sheets and clearly not giving a damn as he practically throws the bottle down to one side. He runs his hand over Ford’s cock and balls and goes lower, finding his entrance and spearing him with one thick digit. Ford cries out, startled, and it hurts at first. It’s been so long and Stan’s not really gentle, but it also feels astoundingly good. Like a sweet sting and Stan adds a second finger and he’s loosening Ford quickly, thrusting his fingers in and out mercilessly while his mouth attacks Ford’s neck – chews at it, really, and Ford doesn’t understand this change in temperament – this fury, but he’s starting to find he really fucking likes it.

Ford finds he doesn’t want Stan to be gentle or sweet. He doesn’t want him to do anything that makes him think of that doomed four lettered word. No, no. This is better. This is what he wants. Hard, fast, brutal and so he starts thrusting his hips back, meeting Stan’s fingers and moaning loudly, openly, and Stan growls, “That’s right! You like that, don’t you? You want it?”

“Lee,” Ford moans pitifully and for a moment Stan freezes. Lee. No one’s called him Lee since...

And this just adds fuel to his anger.

“Tell me you want it!” Stan virtually shouts and now there’s a third finger and Ford’s cock has risen between them, rosy and insistent, bobbing with each movement, tip wet with pearly precome as Ford wails, “I do! Fuck, Stanley, I do! I want you, I need you…fuck!”

Stan withdraws his fingers and he’s tossing Ford about again, shifting them so he’s back under Ford and he pushes at him, “Then show me, goddammit! Come on, ride me!”

And Ford looks at Stan’s erection which has returned to vast prominence. It’s just as big as Ford remembers and a bit intimidating and they never did it this way but Ford is a well-educated man. Now more than ever, thanks to his introduction to the internet, which has far more pornographic material than Ford would have thought possible. And he would be lying if he said he didn’t look at
some of it out of curiosity because he is, in general, a curious person no matter what the subject.

So he’s somewhat confident he can do this and he wants to show Stan and really, Stan hadn’t made it a request so much as a demand and Ford likes that demand, likes that Stan is back to being the one running the show because really, Ford has always loved that. He is a control freak and letting go of that control and just letting Stan own him physically has always appealed to him, so he does as Stan asks. He finds the condoms, quickly sheathes Stan and then gets himself positioned right. He does his best to lower himself down, to impale himself properly on Stan’s dick and he’s letting out a keening sound as he does it.

Stan’s hands are on his hips, are helping to guide him and they’re gripping him hard, squeezing as he grunts, “Yes, good. That’s right. Just like that…you can do it, you’re doing so good.”

Ford’s body touches down on Stan’s and they’re joined completely. Ford’s eyes are closed and he’s breathless, body coated in a light sheen of sweat as he moans, “Oh god…god, Lee. You’re so deep in me…feel-feel so much bigger this way…feel so-so full…stretched…”

“Yeah? How about you move then, might help…”

He does as Stan asks; rising up and lowering himself and he cries out at the sensation. It feels amazing, Stan’s length slipping in and out of him all based on Ford’s movements and Ford’s head falls forward and suddenly he’s gasping a variety of words, all in a different language, an alien one that has never been heard in this dimension.

“English, Poindexter.”

Ford shakes his head, “L-language here can’t-can’t describe…as-as good…”

Stan’s hips jut up off the bed, driving himself deeper and the sound that rips out of Ford is close to a scream. Stan grins but it’s not a happy grin, it’s a predatory one, as he mutters, “Well, go on then…I told you to ride me.”

Ford picks up the pace, riding his brother and Stan is still gripping him tight, helping him to move, encouraging him to be faster as he breathes, “That’s good…so good, Ford. You like this, huh? Like bouncing on my cock? You always were such a little slut, weren’t you?”

His answer is heavy panting and frantic little ‘uh uh uhs’ until he tightens his hold to an almost painful point, hissing, “Answer me!”

“Yes! Yes!”

“You’re so good at taking me…you were made for this. For me.” And Stan’s voice is still full of rage and he kisses Ford’s roughly, swallows his cries and then he draws him off and he’s moving like lightning, getting Ford back beneath him, making it so they face one another and he’s grabbing Ford’s legs and throwing them up under his armpits with a harshly muttered ‘fuck it’ before he pushes right back in.

He pumps in and out of Ford’s willing body a few more times before he gasps, “Look at me.”

Ford eyes are still closed until Stan slowly his movements, voice deadly, “Look at me!”

He does.

Stan nods, “Good…want to see your face while I’m giving it to you.”
He begins to move again and he adds, almost as if in wonder, “Fuck, you fit me just like a fucking glove.”

“Lee,” Ford moans, mindless with pleasure, “Yes, yes…want this…felt so empty without you…it’s been so long. Please, please…fill me, fill me up…”

And Stan does. With Ford back beneath him, with their bodies fully joined, Stanley just completely and utterly loses it. He charges forward like a bull, hips snapping roughly, lips locked with Ford’s and he’s digging his fingers into his brother’s flesh, hoping he leaves deep, dark bruises and it’s almost like they’re physically fighting alongside their fucking. It’s vigorous and energetic. It’s like Stan’s forgotten all about how old he is and how old Ford is and they’re back in time when they were kids and pretty much made of elastic.

He wants to fuck Ford right through this mattress. He wants to destroy him. He wants him to not be able to walk or sit or do anything but remember this moment. Remember Stan completely owning him and more than anything he wants to scream at him, wants to say – How could you? How could you say that to me? How could you confess I’m the only one? How can you be so awful all of the time and then say something like that? I hate you, I hate you, I fucking hate you so much…

He wants to say it because it’s so, so much easier to say ‘hate’ when it’s the exact opposite. And he’s so close, right on that razor’s edge of release when somehow it escapes him, just a gasp, just an inaudible breath that he prays Ford doesn’t hear, “Love you.”

And with that he falls. He comes so hard that he’s worried his heart will explode and he feels Ford’s cock jerking, wet heat streaking across his stomach and chest as Ford tumbles over as well, the two identical even in this. Stan collapses, crushing Ford and the position is an awkward collection of sweaty, satisfied limbs. He draws back slowly and his back gives one futile twinge, warning him that he’ll have hell to pay tomorrow.

He rolls off Ford and removes his condom, tossing it away. They both lay there, winded and dazed and Stan cuddles back up against Ford, tossing a heavy arm over him. And Ford knows he should tell him to get up, that they should take a shower because there is one down here and they’ve made a mess of things in more ways than one, but Stan proves that as much as things change they also stay the same because he’s out like a light now, totally asleep.

Ford looks at him then looks at the ceiling. He rubs at his forehead and tries to catch his breath, his sanity, because while that was phenomenal he knows that that was the last time. It has to be the last time. Especially if he wants to go through with his plans. Which he has to. Ford lies there, thinking about this as he slowly drifts off to sleep.
Chapter 11

THEN

It was inevitable.

Ford sits at the kitchen table, homework spread out before him. He’s almost done with his math when his mother walks in. She leans against the doorway, arms crossed, just watching him. He looks up and blinks, “Oh. Hey, mom.”

“Hiya, sweetie. Whatcha up to?”

“Just finishing my school work.”

“Hmm,” she comes over and pulls out a chair, sitting next to him, “Was wondering if you and me could have a chat.”

“Of course.” Ford returns and he’s never noticed before, but his mother and Stanley have the same eyes. It makes him feel sort of discombobulated and he has to try and focus as his mother reaches out and takes one of his hands in hers. Their mother has always been very tactile person and her thumb rubs over the top of his hand, “So, before you boys went to New York your father spoke with you in private. And not to say I wasn’t listening in around the corner, but, I was listening in around the corner.”

Ford isn’t surprised. Their father promotes himself as head of the household – the end all be all of everything but their mother has her own way about her. She’s crafty and sort of conniving and he honestly has never understood how his parents fit together. His father isn’t the sort to tolerate lies, yet his wife is a well-known pathological liar. It’s a mystery but frankly, despite his thirst for the truth, it isn’t one he ever wishes to solve.

However, because of his parents various traits, he himself has never really connected closely with either one of them. Oh, he still loves them as one naturally loves their parents but it’s more of a distant feeling, an ingrained one. He would never want anything bad to happen to them but he’s also not going to confide anything deeply personal either. Technically, they’ve never really asked, which is why the next words out of his mother’s mouth are such a surprise.

“So, do you want to tell me about her?”

“Her?”

She uses her free hand to nudge his shoulder, “Lee, silly.”

Ford feels his pulse jump and he swallows. He wants to draw his hand away, suddenly nervous, but he reminds himself that to his parents ‘Lee’ is a fictional ‘Ashley’. They don’t know. No one knows. No one will ever know. He repeats this as a mantra in his mind before he offers a shaky smile, “Oh, I-I don’t know…there’s—there’s not much to tell.”

“Stanford, I know I’m your mother and this might be a little embarrassing, but I’d really like to know. After all, I’ve noticed how distracted you’ve been lately.”

“I-I have?”

She nods, “You usually get your homework done in under an hour but lately you’ve been taking a
And Ford can’t deny that. He’s often lost himself thinking about Stanley. He’ll remember random snippets of conversation or how good it felt to hold his hand when they’d been in New York. He’d think about the catch in Stan’s breath when they were making out in his car or lose himself in the memories of their first kiss in the fort. How something so small had grown into something so big, so momentous.

His mother is looking at him expectantly and Ford is tempted to dismiss her. It can’t be that hard, right? After all, it’s not like she’s shown this kind of interest before. It’s not that she doesn’t care; it’s just that she’s as lost when it comes to him as (almost) everyone else is. They can’t quite grasp his love for science and, as Stan has put it more than once his interest in ‘supernatural weirdness’; and he’s just as guilty. He knows his mother loves a variety of things that he has no interest in.

One of their only common threads is that they both read the same trashy books and Ford will deny doing that into his grave. Even if sometimes he does want to talk to his Mom about that one book he nicked from her, ‘The Flame and The Flower’ because, really, how can Heather ever truly love Brandon after what he did? Not that Brandon isn’t one smooth talker and the sex between them amazing, but come on…

Still, he finds it would be nice to talk to someone about Stan. It’s hard to feel so strongly about him and keep it to himself all the time. And it’s not like he has any friends he can confide to. Besides, he has the perfect blind – he just has to make sure he uses the right pronouns that would fit a girl named Ashley. Otherwise he can keep most of it the same, right? And Stan lies all the time – it can’t be that hard. So, Ford takes a deep breath and tries, “Well, I mean he’s-she’s great.”

Ford wants to smack himself in the face. Oh my god. He messed up already? But his mother doesn’t notice the slip up, if anything she looks pleased that he’s going to actually talk to her, “Go on.”

“Lee is,” Ford struggles with a moment, not sure where to begin, “Lee is…funny. Very funny. She makes me laugh. No one’s ever made me laugh like her. And she’s smart. She doesn’t think she’s smart because she’s not smart like I am, but it’s a different kind of smart. She’s good at reading people and has street smarts.”

“Sounds like a good Jersey girl.”

Ford grins, suddenly really warming up to the subject, to being able to talk about this, “Oh, she’s a great Jersey girl! But I think she could do so much outside of state. I could see her being a fantastic traveler because of how adaptable she is. And she’s very strong – very physical.”

His mother gives him a strange look and he realizes how that sounds, his cheeks start burning, “I mean, in the way where she’s good at sports. You know that physical education is not one of my strong suits but she’s better at it, which I think is good because we balance each other out that way.”

“What does she look like?”

“Oh,” Ford’s thoughts immediately go to Stan and he knows he can’t describe him word for word so he does his best to break him down, “Brown hair – nice eyes, good skin. I mean, she breaks out now and then but who doesn’t? She worries about that though. And she’s thicker than me…curvy, I guess?”

He tosses out the last bit because he has no idea how to explain it otherwise, “But her looks aren’t really important to me. She’s so creative. The things she thinks up are amazing and, like I said, some
of them are just hilarious. She really helps me to relax and takes me out of my head.”

Ford smiles and looks down, his voice growing softer, “Sometimes…when I’m with her I-I forget all about the things that bother me. Like my hands and my future and anything that’s troubling me. She takes it all away. She makes it better. I like spending time with her, being with her. I like when we’re alone, just the two of us. No one else matters when we’re together. I don’t see anyone else, think about anyone else. Just her.”

“Wow.” His mother breathes and Ford lost himself a bit there, forgot his mother was here and he looks at her sheepishly, “So, yeah, Lee’s-uh-Lee’s great.”

“That’s beautiful, sweetheart. It sounds like you’re crazy about her.”

His head jerks up and he looks at his mother, stunned, blood turning to ice, “Wh-what?”

“Stanford,” Mrs. Pines giggles and she holds his hand up, gives it a motherly squeeze, “It’s okay! You’re growing up and it’s only natural for this to happen! I’m so happy you’ve found your someone special. Have you told her?”

“T-Told her?”

“That you love her.”

No.

No.

NO.

Ford feels like he’s going to start hyperventilating. That he’s going to be sick. And his mother must see the abject terror on his face because she just laughs and shakes her head, “Honey, relax! It’s alright, I promise! I don’t know why you’re taking it this way.”

Ford feels light headed and he starts shaking his head.

“Oh my goodness! You’re turning pale! Here, I’ll get you a drink,” His mother lets his hand go and shoots up. He hears her moving around in the kitchen but his heart has descended into his stomach and he grips at the table, trying to keep himself steady. He’s never fainted in his life, never even thought about fainting and now he’s positive he’s going to. Love, his mother said, love. You love her but her is a him. Her is Stanley. Stanley, your brother. Your twin brother. No, no, no – you can’t, you can’t…

“Here, drink this.” He hears his mother command and Ford does. He’s startled out of his panic by the sharp taste of whiskey and he coughs, sputters, stunned that this is what his mother has given him.

Mrs. Pines gives him a grim smile, “Figured that snap you out of it.”

“Is-is this dad’s-?”

She waves a hand, “Just a couple of drops, your father won’t notice. Needed something strong to snap you out of it. Now tell me why you’re so upset! Is there something about Ashley I need to know? I can’t think of any reason for you to be so upset about loving her.”

“I just-I just…I never thought…”

“Kids your age have first loves. It’s perfectly normal. Unless…maybe it’s not,” she looks at him with
serious worry and she asks softly, “Stanford?”

He looks at her and she cups his face in her hands, “Is Lee an Ashley?”

Ford goes to shake his head but instead his eyes well up and his mother gasps. She lets his face go and rubs at her mouth, contemplating him silently and Ford feels like she just slapped him hard. She swallows thickly and gets up. She’s trembling as walks around in circles for few moments, shaking her head to herself. Then she stops, looks at him, and gives one sharp nod, “Okay.”

She goes over and hugs him close, her voice a gentle whisper, “Okay.”

Ford feels hysterical and a dry sob chokes out of him. Mrs. Pines strokes her son’s hair, her voice quiet, “You...need to be careful. Need to think about-about what you want to do.”

He nods against her and he knows what he has to do. Exactly what he has to do. And he feels like he’s dying. He feels like someone’s wrenched his heart out of his chest and crushed it into dust. And it all just – shatters. The dry heaves become sharper and deeper and suddenly he’s just...crying. He’s crying like he’s never cried before. Tears are escaping him and he’s a weeping wreck, head bent over and his mother’s grip tightens on him and she keeps hushing him and rocking him and kissing the top of his head.

“It’s okay, Stanford. I promise. But...let’s keep this between us, alright? Don’t tell anyone. Not your father, not even your brother.”

And that last bit just makes him sob all the harder and he doesn’t think he’ll ever stop. He’s just going to keep at this until he’s completely wrung out, a complete shell of a human being. This is how he’s going to die. Because he is dying. He’s dying.

Mrs. Pines pulls away and brushes her thumbs along his wet face, “Come on. Let’s get you washed up.”

He hiccups and his glasses are speckled with teardrops as he gives a weak nod. She takes him to the bathroom and she takes off his glasses, putting them to one side. She runs a rag under the tap. It’s warm and soft as wipes it along his face like she did when he was a child. Her eyes are infinitely sad as she looks at him, “I take it this is why you’ve never brought Lee home to meet us.”

Her answer is a feeble nod. She sighs, “It’s…it’s a shame, I’ll never get to meet,” she licks her lips and looks away, “him.”

“I’m sorry,” he croaks and she turns back to him as he moans, “I’m so sorry.”

Mrs. Pines eyes grow a little glassy and she shakes her head, “Don’t be sorry, Stanford. You…you should never be sorry for how you feel.”

“Do you-?” His voice wavers and his breath is shaky, “Do you hate me?”

“No,” she answers automatically, “No, I don’t. I…I won’t lie this is...difficult. But you’re my son.”

He sniffs and crosses his arms, hugging himself tightly and she lets out a heavy breath, “And I guess…I mean; I’ve…always thought it was possible. I’m not-not blind, you know. The world is full of people who...feel that way. Who are-are interested in their own, ah...”

She looks distinctly uncomfortable as she trails off but she tries again, “You might not remember her, but your great aunt Jackie she was…was like you are.”
He just stares at her and she explains, “I mean, Jackie was with-a a girl, so, sort of different but... anyway, it didn’t... go over well when it came out. With the family, I mean. And because of that I haven’t talked to her in a very, very long time. But...I like to think she’s... happy, wherever she is. She was such a sweet woman.”

Ford feels hollow. Empty. Cold. All the tears are gone now and all he can feel is this agonizing weight settling over him. His mother looks at him and lets out a heavy sigh, “Look, just... be safe. Okay, baby? People can be... cruel. You know that.”

“Yeah,” he huffs dryly, playing with his extra finger, “I know that better than most.”

“I wish-I wish things could be different.”

He feels his shoulders slump, “Me too.”

She brushes at his hair again and gives him another kiss on the forehead, “I know it doesn’t feel this way right now but... I think it’s good. I’m glad you found someone like you. And I want you to be happy. Like I said earlier, you’re my son. I’ll never hate you, understand?”

He gives her a nod. She draws away, “I better go make dinner. Remember what I said, okay? And... if you need to talk again...”

She leaves and he gets the sense she’s grateful to go. She probably needs a moment to herself. Ford knows he needs one. He grabs his glasses and puts them on. He doesn’t even recognize himself in the mirror. His face is blotchy and red. His eyes are bloodshot and he rubs at them. He goes to his room. Their room. He walks in and Stan isn’t here, thank god. He doesn’t think he could face him right now.

He walks over towards his bed then turns and goes towards Stan’s. He picks up his brother’s pillow and buries his face in it. He breathes in his scent and then he just screams. The sounds is muffled but full of pain and then he draws away, clutching the pillow to his body as he begins to pace. He has to think. He has to start thinking. Thinking will save him, logic will save him, sanity will save him.

For too long he’s been stupid. So, so stupid. He let Stanley talk him into this. He let his hormones and his baser instincts overwhelm him. He’s better than that. He’s better than this. His mother is wrong. The twisted, vile weak thing in his chest that beats and fruitlessly struggles behind his ribcage is wrong too. He doesn’t love Stanley. He doesn’t.

He refuses.

He outright rejects it and he tosses the pillow away, fingers clawing through his hair. How to fix this. How to fix this! There has to be a way. After all, what is known as love is merely chemicals, right? He can fix that – maybe he can create something. An invention, a remedy, something that will alter his way of thinking, of feeling. It can’t be that hard, right? Or maybe something that will help him forget...

And Stanley! He has to save Stanley too. He can’t let his brother get destroyed because of his own personal failings. But then, maybe Stan doesn’t feel the same way. Of course! His mother didn’t mention anything about any sort of change in Stan’s behavior. Stan was the same as he’s always been. Because Stan isn’t as weak – it’s like he said, Stan is strong – apparently not only physically but mentally. He’s stronger than Ford, he doesn’t...

Ford stops. He stops pacing and just stands there as the realization washes over him.

Stan doesn’t love him.
Stan doesn’t love him.

The sick creature inside him – the pitiful hunk of muscle and sinewy defined as his heart – constricts to a painful point and he clutches at his chest. He immediately goes to reassure himself that this is a good thing, a great thing. His mind chatters at him about this but he feels...devastated. He thought he felt pain earlier but it pales in comparison to this. He collapses to the floor, sits there, eyes seeing nothing.

Stan doesn’t love him.

After all, he’s never said it. True, Ford has never said it either, but he is currently in the process of purging it from his system because according to his mother he does and that must mean he at least feels something. And if she saw it, it must have been there, right? But Stan….she never noticed anything going on with him at all. Neither did their father. Stan feels nothing. Oh sure, he likes Ford. He likes kissing him and having sex with him but not love, never love. This is all probably just...just a lark for him.

It’s not as if they’re officially a couple or something. They’ve done things like dates but they’ve never called them dates and all they’ve ever done is sneak around and-and had fun, right? It was all probably just fun to him. And Stan’s never expressed interest in other men before. Just Ford. And only because, well, why not? There were no girls currently.

But there could be girls. Linda had been interested and he had had Carla. Stan can easily rebound. Stan can be happier with someone else. He can tell someone else he loves them because he will love them. He doesn’t love Ford. He’ll never love Ford. And the more these sinister thoughts take hold, the more Ford believes them with an utter and absolute conviction.

He feels something inside of him…break. But he doesn’t cry. Not this time. No, if anything this broken part sets him free. He can do this. He can turn himself to metal, to stone. He looks at his brother’s side of the room and edges away from it. He sits on his bed and feels a grim resolve settle over him. This is good. This is good.

Now he just has to find a way to end it. Stan probably won’t even be affected. Maybe it will even be a relief to him. Or if he is upset, it will only be temporary. A minor setback. He’ll recover. He’ll be fine. Yes, yes – of course he will. Stanley Pines always bounces back. Things will be a tad awkward at first but hopefully they’ll go back to being brothers again and all this torrid business can be swept up and put behind them.

It will fade away to memories that will eventually just be completely forgotten. Ford comforts himself with these thoughts, his eyes now completely dry. Yes, yes – it will all work out. It will all be fine. Everything will be alright and go back to normal. But how to end things? What was the best way to put a stop to all of this? There had to be some sort of solution, some sort of out. Some sort of saving grace that would make it so that Ford could separate himself from Stan easily, effortlessly.

Ford finds he can’t think about it right now. He doesn’t have the will or the energy. So instead he sits at his desk and pulls out some of his tools. His science fair project, a perpetual motion machine, sits before him. He hasn’t finished working on it yet – some fuses rest to one side, waiting to be installed. He does so with shaky hands, trying to focus on losing himself in his work for now. He’ll find an answer to his problem with Stanley – yes, he will, but not right now. Not just yet.

NOW
Stan’s back feels like it’s been broken in half.

And it was totally worth it.

He lumbers upstairs to find the lights are now working and there’s a pile of melted candles on the gift shop counter. He’ll have Soos fix that later. He goes towards the shower and lets the heated water pelt his spine. When he woke up, Ford had been gone. He hadn’t been surprised, but he had been a little disappointed. He was hoping to see how their actions last night had affected him.

If Stan’s honest with himself, he’s still pretty mad at him. Ford is just... so fucking frustrating. He’s hot and then cold. He’s a walking, talking contradiction and Stan doesn’t know what to make of him, what exactly to do with him. He would be willing to just be brothers again if that’s what Ford wanted but last night would imply that that isn’t what he wants at all.

Which begs the question – what exactly does Stanford want? And, more importantly, what does Stanley want? If he had to choose between the two options, which would he prefer? Stanford, his brother or Stanford, his lover? He thinks about it and it only takes him a second to settle on his answer. It’s the same answer it’s always been.

He wants both.

And he knows it’s selfish but he honestly doesn’t give a shit. Yes, he’s had his apprehension and occasional misgivings about it. He’s not a fool – he knows it’s wrong. And he’s tried to deny it to himself occasionally. But it’s too much of a hassle in the end and he’s just – he’s not wired that way. If he wants something he wants it. And he wants Ford.

He’s worried on and off about Ford wanting him back but last night was a pretty damning confirmation that Ford does want him. He’s just too dumb to get it. It’s sort of funny, actually. Ford is a genius about almost everything but when it comes to the entire spectrum of human emotion he’s a complete moron. He also, thankfully, doesn’t seem to be that good at hearing because he didn’t react to what Stan said. And Stan knows he said it – he remembers quite vividly saying it even if it had been on nothing more than a breath.

Love you.

He had said it. After all this time – he actually said it.

At the time it had terrified him – okay, well, not entirely because he had been pretty consumed by his orgasm at that moment and goddamn, had it been a GREAT orgasm. Stan hasn’t seen any action in... lord; he can’t remember the last time. He supposes he could have had a chance with Lazy Susan had he continued pursuing her, but he had really only been vaguely interested in her. He had let Mabel put everything together because it had made his great niece so happy, but their date had been nothing short of train wreck.

Not to mention he couldn’t deal with all those cats. Especially Mister Catface. That beast was a real piece of work. And Lazy Susan is a classy lady. She deserves better. She deserves someone who can actually love her for her and Stan can never do that. His heart belongs to someone else. It always has. Jesus, now that he’s said it and let himself think it, feel it, he actually feels... better.

Loads better. And kinda worse. But mostly better. Besides, Ford didn’t hear him – so he doesn’t have to deal with that yet. Also, again, GREAT orgasm. He’s taken care of business himself in the past now and then but it’s nothing compared to what happened last night. He’s pretty sure it’s actually returned some years to him. Yeah, his back hurts but as a whole he feels... lighter. Younger. Certainly happier as he gets dressed and takes some medication for his back. He enters the kitchen to
make breakfast and finds himself whistling.

Holy shit – he can’t even remember the last time he’s whistled. Huh. He’s still really bad at it. Yes, he and his brother still have a lot to work through and nothing is truly resolved, but there is something to be said for what took place last night. And not just the sex (the amazing, amazing sex with the fantastically great orgasms and yes, he’s not letting that go anytime soon) but the things they did reveal. At least now Ford knows some of what Stan went through on his own and Stan knows a little more about what Ford experienced on the other side of the portal.

He’s seen his scars and he’s learned just the tiniest bit about there. Ford also mentioned a ‘them’. When he had first asked about it, Ford had warned him never to ask again but now he knows something. Ford opened up to him, whether he meant to or not, and Stan’s going to call that a win.

Between all this and the fact that his back medication is finally kicking in, he’s pretty much swimming in a sea of endorphins and feeling nothing but happiness. Hence his whistling, which just gets louder (and worse) as he makes pancakes. He hears the front door open and close and he beams as Dipper and Mabel call out to him, “Grunkle Stan?”

“In here, kids!”

Mabel comes in first, nothing but bright smiles, “Hiya, Grunkle Stan!”

“Morning, sweetie. You have fun camping?”

She tosses her camping bag aside, “Uh, yeah! It was awesome! Let me just say one word: mudslide!”

Stan looks over to see that Mabel is, indeed, covered from head to toe in dried mud. Dipper trudges in behind her, looking nowhere near as happy, “Our tent got washed away.”

“But we’re fine,” Mabel stresses, “And now I have a greater appreciation for mud! Waddles will be so proud!”

Dipper shakes his head and sits at the table, “Luckily Manly Dan fished us out. We were going to take a shower before we came home but some people wanted to stay this way.”

He glares at Mabel who just beams, “It’s good for your skin, Dipper.”

Dipper rolls his eyes and looks at Stan, “What about you? Did you do okay with the storm? We heard some places lost power.”

Stan’s about to answer when Ford walks in. Or, it would be better to say, hobbles in. Stan’s smile goes from ear to ear at the sight. Ford does his best to straighten up when he sees the kids, “Oh! Hello, children! I didn’t know you were back.”

“Hey, Great Uncle Ford!” Dipper returns cheerfully, his earlier surliness gone at the sight of his favorite relative, “Yeah, we just got back.”

“What happened to you both? You look like you’ve been doused in chocolate,” Ford gives a soft grin, “That used to be a fantasy of mine as a boy.”

Mabel looks pleased at this response, “It’s mud, Great Uncle Ford!”

“Mmm, too bad. Mud doesn’t taste as good. Well, mud in this dimension.”
Her eyes grow wide, “There’s a dimension where you can eat mud?!”

Ford nods and Mabel lets out a delighted squeal. Ford tries to play it cool but it’s clear he’s having issues walking as he moves over to the pot of coffee Stan started. Stan goes back to whistling and flipping pancakes. Ford glares at him, “Stanley.”

Stan just salutes him with the spatula. Ford pours himself a cup of coffee and is sipping it deeply when Dipper asks, “Are you okay, Great Uncle Ford? You’re kinda limping.”

Ford choke on his coffee, some of it spitting out of his mouth and Stan turns away, his shoulders shaking with silent laughter. Ford clears his throat, “Oh, yes, well-I-ah-injured myself when I…um-um-”

“When he was helping me,” Stan offers cheerfully, “Yeah, the power did go out and your Great Uncle Ford was a huge help. See, I fell and hurt my back and he took care of me. I mean, he went to great lengths. And, you know, since he was bearing my weight and all – he got hurt himself.”

The look Ford is shooting Stan is beyond lethal but Stan is having far too much fun to stop, “It was a good thing you kids weren’t here though. No fun watching two old men moaning and groaning all over one another other.”

Ford looks absolutely livid but neither Dipper nor Mabel pick up on anything out of the ordinary. Stan knows it’s wrong to run this sort of risqué talk by the kids but he knows it’s going over their heads. Besides, Ford’s face is just too funny. And what else can he say? Ford can’t make up a good lie to save his life and he has to tell them something.

Still, he decides to try and end it with something appropriately parental, “That’s why you kids should make sure you eat your veggies. You don’t want to end up like Ford and I in your old age. The two of us are just one step away from a sprained muscle. Happens when you get up in years. Now who wants pancakes?”

Dipper and Mabel wave their hands shouting out various affirmatives. Stan makes each of them plates and does the same for Ford and himself. Ford doesn’t come to the table right away, hanging by the coffee pot, still shooting daggers at his twin.

Stan walks over, voice hushed so the kids won’t hear, “Want to join us for breakfast?”

“I can’t believe you!” Ford hisses and Stan edges even closer, whispering in his ear, “What? I told them you went to great lengths; I didn’t tell them you took great lengths.”

Ford’s face colors and Stan chuckles as he goes to the kitchen table. He takes his seat and tears into his pancakes. Eventually Ford joins them, though Stan notices he takes his time sitting down and yes, Stan’s expression becomes even more gloating if possible. Mabel looks between the brothers, smiling, “It’s great to see you two finally getting along!”

They both look at one another and it’s clear they each feel a stab of guilt at this. After all, their ‘getting along’ is still sort of in question. Last night’s activities are not a cure all for their problems. If anything, it only complicates them. Sex tends to do that, But Stan doesn’t want to lose the momentum of this day. It started off pretty damn blissful and he wants to keep it that way.

With this in mind, he finishes his pancakes and then gets up. He comes back a few moments later with his wallet, all smiles, “Hey kids, I got a gift for each of ya. Here’s five bucks a piece from your Grunkle Stan!”

He holds out the two bills and Mabel looks at them in horror, “Oh my gosh! You’re dying!”
“What?” Stan asks in confusion.

Mabel gets up from the table, grabbing big handfuls of her hair, eyes impossibly big, “Is that what you meant earlier about your back? Is it broken? Do you have some form of spineatosis, we didn’t know about? Was Great Uncle Ford trying to cure it with some kind of back fluid transfer and that’s why he’s limping too? OH MY GOSH! Grunkle Stan, why oh, why didn’t you tell us!”

“Mabel, sweetie, I’m not dying.” Stan tries to assure her but she’s already hyperventilating.

“Wait a minute,” Dipper says calmly, he goes over and takes both bills. He holds them up to the light, inspecting them and when he lowers them his face is pale, “Oh no…Grunkle Stan, why didn’t you tell us? I-I didn’t even know you were sick!”

“I’m not sick! What’s the matter with you, kids? Can’t your Great Uncle give you a present?”

“Not one that involves money,” Dipper returns, “You’d never willingly give away money … unless…”

He edges closer and looks Stan up and down critically, “Did-did anything else happen while we were gone? Did you drink something? Inhale something? Did anything suspicious happen, like, did you see a ghost or a goblin or-”

“Nothing supernatural happened, Dipper,” Stan stresses, annoyed, “I just thought I’d give you kids something nice.”

Dipper looks at him skeptically, “Okay, well, what do you want us to do in exchange? Do Mabel and I have to brush Gompers teeth? Does the totem pole outside need to be power washed? Are you having us wear matching costumes for the Shack as some sort of – I don’t know – new attraction like the Flamingomoose or something?

“No! I just – wait. Flamingomoose?”

“Yeah, like – a bright pink moose with big antlers, wings, and a beak or something.”

“Hmm, needs a better name but we’ll come back to that,” Stan mutters, “No, I swear! I just wanted to do something for you kids!”

Dipper looks over at Great Uncle Ford who just shrugs, “I think he’s serious.”

“Come on, it’s just five bucks each. And you kids can do a lot with that, right? Like, you could go out to a movie later this week. Take Soos. Go to a nice, long movie.” Stan eyes float over to Ford’s and immediately Ford understands why the kids got money. He breathes out of his nose loudly, shaking his head. Dipper and Mabel, however, are still a little concerned.

Mabel runs over to Stan and gives him a big hug. He shakes his head and eases her away, getting down to her eye level, “Mabel, I promise. I’m not dying.”

“Okay,” she returns warily before she cups his face in her hands, squeezing his cheeks, “But you’d tell me if you were, right?”

“Yes, I swear.”

She lets him go and nods to herself. She takes her five dollars from Dipper and runs out of the room. Dipper follows and it leaves the older Pines twins alone. Ford sighs, “Any particular reason you want them out of the house again?”
Stan just waggles his eyebrows at him and Ford snorts, “You can’t be serious.”

“Hey, we still have a lot to talk about! And it’s not like we did a lot of talking.”

Ford visibly swallows and Stan loves it. But Ford just shakes his head, “There’s…there’s nothing more to discuss.”

“Oh please! We’ve got about forty years of stuff to hash out. You don’t get that over and done with in one night! Besides, I still gotta convince you to let me keep the Shack up and running.”

Ford glares at him, “The Shack?”

“Yeah! If you’re really going to let me stay here that’s what I want to do – I want to keep running the Shack,” Stan’s voice gets a little softer here, “I’m…I’m good at it, Stanford. It’s the only thing I’ve ever been good at.”

Ford’s lips twitch and it’s obvious that this confession is sinking in. Stan decides to press his advantage while he has it, “So, I was thinking maybe you could take a tour.”

Ford’s eyebrows rise, “You want me to go through the Shack?”

“Yeah! You can play the part of tourist! It’ll be fun!”

“Doesn’t sound like my idea of fun.”

“Oh, come on! Remember our trip to New York? You took pictures, examined all the exhibits…”

“Yes, in the Hall of Science, not in some tacky tourist trap!”

Stan feels his face heat, “But this is my tacky tourist trap!”

Ford looks unsure so Stan continues, “Come on, Stanford. At least give me a chance.”

His brother grimaces as he shifts in his seat a little, “Well, I-I suppose…I mean; I’m not entirely unreasonable…”

This is met with a huge grin, “Great! You won’t regret this! Promise! I can stick you in the back of one of the groups I walk through this week! Oh! And you can wear a disguise! Get you a fake mustache, some shades – and a new name, a new backstory…”

“I don’t see why that would be necessary.”

“Bup-bup-bup! I’m thinking here…” Stan looks him up and down assessingly. Ford rolls his eyes and crosses his arms, looking slightly put out. Stan rubs at his chin, “Hmm, I’ll have to give it some more thought but we’ve got time. I know your research is like, the most important thing in the world to you or whatever, so I’ll give you some time to work on that. Besides, you need time to recover.”

“Recover?”

Stan leans closer to him and winks, “Yeah. Recover.”

“You’re-you’re not-not suggesting we’re going to…going to,” Ford can’t even bring himself to say it, just skipping the word to breathe, “again?”

Stan edges his chair closer to Ford so that their within inches of one another. Ford tugs at the collar of his sweater and his eyes dart about anxiously, “Stanley! The children-”
“Aren’t here. They’re upstairs.”

“Stan…”

Stan brings his face dangerously close, “Shh…I’m clicking the Off Switch.”

“I TOLD you, there’s not a…” Ford trails off because Stan is looking into his eyes and he’s very, very close.

“Stanford?”

His answer is a breathless hum.

“Do you want to do that again?”

All he gets is erratic nodding. Stan draws back, voice booming, “Great! I’ll let you know when you’re taking the tour!”

He practically dances out of the room. He should really buy a lottery scratcher today, because as of right now, his dumb luck is seriously out of control.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

WARNINGS: Blood, mentions of torture both physical and psychological, semi-public sex

See the end of the chapter for more notes

THEN

Stanley doesn’t understand what he’s done wrong.

He keeps going over and over it in his mind. He must have done something. That’s the only logical explanation. The past few weeks Ford’s been so…distant. Every time Stan tries to sneak in a kiss Ford turns his head or pulls way and any time he suggests they go out, he gets blown off. Stan’s even asked him directly; more than once, if anything is wrong.

But Ford denies it – he just gives lame excuses about how he’s distracted with his science fair project or how he isn’t feeling well, like he has a headache and that’s the oldest line in the book. Clearly something is bothering him and he won’t tell Stan what it is. And it hurts. Like, it really hurts. Even before this whole new level of their relationship began, Ford always confided in Stan. If something was wrong, Stan knew about it before anyone else.

From the mundane to the serious, Ford always shared his troubles with Stan. But not now, not on this – whatever this is and Stan is convinced it has to be him. He’s done something or said something and for whatever reason Ford doesn’t feel comfortable telling him what. Maybe because of how their relationship has changed? Maybe whatever it is would be something easy to tell a brother but not a…

Well, what was Stan exactly? Past Ford’s brother and twin, what else could he call himself? Ford’s… boyfriend? And that’s weird. It isn’t like he hasn’t been someone’s boyfriend before, but he’s never been a guy’s boyfriend and he certainly never expected to be Ford’s boyfriend. But then, the things he’s done with Ford are very boyfriend-like. The movies and the hand holding and the kisses and certainly the sex.

New York was their first time but there have been other clandestine meetings. Other heated rendezvous and Stan can’t lie – it’s damn near impossible for him to keep his hands off Ford. He wants to touch him all the time, kiss him all the time. It’s always in the back of his mind and each day it becomes harder and harder to restrain himself.

Frankly, it makes him really hate the times they live in, makes him hate the world they live in. He wishes he could just be with the person he wants; openly and freely. Instead, he has to keep it under wraps and while that started off as fun, it’s grown tedious. He wants to proclaim Ford as his– he wants to tell everyone to back off, not to touch him; that Ford belongs to him and only him. He wants to brag about how he’s got the best guy in the world but he can’t.

He can’t.

He can’t tell his friends or the rest of his family. He can’t tell anyone. Not ever.
And now, apparently, he can’t even share this with Ford. It’s causing gloomy seeds of doubt to sow deeply within him because maybe Ford isn’t his. Or, worse, maybe he was and now he’s not anymore. Because Ford is pulling away from him. He can feel it. As each day passes, Ford seems farther and farther away and it takes all of his self-control not to throw himself at his brother’s feet and beg him.

Beg him to talk to him, beg him to look at him, beg him to kiss him again, to touch him again to love him again? And what kind of love is he even talking about anyway? The love between brothers and family or the passionate, romantic kind found between two partners? Stan doesn’t even know which and that frightens him. Love frightens him. It frightens him because he’s not sure he’s ever even had it.

Oh, he’s felt it for others, but he doesn’t think anyone has ever felt it for him. Not really. His mother has referred to him as her ‘free spirit’ and hugged him and kissed his head but his connection to her is mixed at best. And his relationship with his father is a whole other kettle of fish. The only time he’s ever felt anything remotely resembling love it’s always been from Ford and now…now he doesn’t feel that. Not at all. Not anymore.

He doesn’t feel it as Ford’s brother or as Ford’s…whatever Ford might have thought of him as. He gets desperate enough to see if maybe Ford talked to their mother. When he asks, all she does is eye him balefully and say, “Look, I’m sure you know more about your brother’s problems than I do.”

“What do you mean?”

She lets out a heavy sigh, “You’re a great brother Stanley. And I know you meant well covering for him but…your brother’s interests are better left unsaid.”

“Ma, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I think you do and if you’re really unclear about it, you should talk to him.”

And Stan would – if Ford would talk to him. But he won’t say a word and he’s buried himself in his project. Stan tries to convince himself that he’s just overreacting. The science fair is next week – maybe after Ford’s shown off his dumb project, things will go back to normal. And hopefully it will be the normal that involves kissing, because Stan really misses that.

He’s resting on the couch upside down, legs thrown over the back as he absent mindedly plays with his paddle ball and watches television. He’s not even really even seeing the screen. He’s just sort of spacing out when his father walks through the front door. He walks over to Stan, a folded up newspaper in one hand and he smacks his foot with it, “Knock it off, you knucklehead.”

Stan does as his father commands; turning right side up and putting the paddle ball down. His father walks to the television and turns it off. He tosses the newspaper on to the nearby table and crosses his arms, “Where’s your mother?”

“Other room, doing her phone psychic thing.”

“And Stanford?”

Stan tries not to pout, “He’s in our room, working on his science fair project.”

“And why aren’t you working on yours?”

“Mine’s done,” Stan boasts proudly, “I made a Foot Bot. It’s a football robot.”
His father sort of sneers at him and Stan feels a flash of shame. Mr. Pines clears his throat and his mustache twitches, “It’s actually good neither of them is here. You and I need to have a serious and frank discussion about your future.”

“O-Oh?”

“I mean you’re graduating this year. You’re almost an adult. When I was your age I already had a full time position lined up, not to mention a place of my own. It was important to me not to be a burden on my parents.”

Stan’s positive his cheeks have taken on a brighter hue, “I-I don’t plan on being a burden either, Pops.”

“So,” Mr. Pines asks, “What’s your plan?”

Stan swallows thickly and scratches at the back of his head, “Well, I-I mean, I-I have plans. There are soooo many plans.”

“Name one.”

“I’m going to get a job,” Stan tosses out quickly, “Obviously. I’ve even had a couple of interviews.”

This is a straight up lie but if his father catches it, he doesn’t say, so Stan continues, “And Ford and I have talked a lot about striking out on our own.”

This is actually the truth – though Stan has started to worry about it more than ever lately.

“Ford has his own plans but we’ll probably live together. Y’know, help one another with the bills and the groceries and stuff like that.”

“Is that what Ford really wants?” Mr. Pines presses and Stan’s heart skips a beat, “Sure. I mean, why not?”

“You shouldn’t expect your brother to carry your weight,” he says sternly, “With your brother’s grades and general responsibility, I have no concerns about his ability to be a respectable, fully functional adult who can contribute to society. You, on the other hand…”

Stan sits up straight, “I-I can be responsible!”

One of Mr. Pines’s eyebrows rise, visible even over his shades, “You’re telling me you can be a serious adult.”

“Well! I can be serious. I’m plenty serious!” Stan returns with some heat, the accusation stinging far more than he would like it to. His father looks him up and down before giving a firm nod, “You better.”

Stan looks down and he keeps his mouth shut even though he wants to ask why. Why is it so hard for his father to have faith in him? Why is it so hard for him to offer some form of encouragement – any encouragement. He tries to remember if it’s always been this way – has his father ever told him he’s done a good job?

He vaguely recalls a few kind words when he was younger – low hums of approval whenever his mother put up one of his drawings on the fridge. The occasional pleased nod when he swept the shop. But nothing really stands out – he can’t clearly recall a moment where he feels like his father is really, truly proud of him.
Or happy to have him. Although there was one moment. He had won a boxing match and Pops had put an arm around his neck, shaking him warmly. That had been nice. But when his father had released him he’d looked mildly embarrassed by the whole thing. He’s cleared his throat and patted his shoulder and said, “Nice left hook.”

And that’s been it.

That was the closest he could remember coming to his father’s approval. Otherwise it was nothing but a string of his being viewed a ‘knucklehead’. He had called Stan that more times than he could count. He rarely called Ford that, but then he had had his own issues with Ford. He always seemed confused by Ford – as if he couldn’t understand where he had come from.

Stan didn’t know which was worse.

But then that was Filbrick Pines – tough as a cinderblock. And Stan will never know why – maybe because he just wasn’t thinking or maybe because he was desperate – but as his father goes to leave the room he hears himself ask, “Hey Pops?”

His father stops and just looks at him.

“How so?”

“Um-uh-I mean, he’s-he’s just been…quiet?” Stan doesn’t know how else to describe it. At least not to his father, who always wants things to be as straight forward as possible.

Mr. Pines glowers, “You should ask him yourself. Like a man.”

“I-I did. But he-he says nothing is wrong.”

Mr. Pines pauses and, again, it’s rare for him to do so. It looks like he’s struggling with himself for a moment before finally he mutters; “Your mother told me he broke up with that Ashley girl.”

“Ashley?” Stan breathes and it’s like someone’s punched a hole through his chest. Ashley. Ashley as in Lee. As in…

“Ford…broke up…with-Lee?” Stan asks stupidly and Mr. Pines nods, “Give him some time. He’ll get over it.”

And then his father is gone. He leaves Stan standing there, completely oblivious to his son’s internal turmoil. Stan can’t breathe. He can’t breathe. He can’t breathe. He can’t breathe.

Ford broke up with Lee. He told his mother he broke up with Lee. Stan is Lee. Lee is Stan. Ford broke up with…

Stan feels frozen in place. All the color, all the life, everything drains from him and pools at his feet. He shudders and he hears a strange, pained noise and he realizes he made it. He makes it again and he feels like he’s outside of his own body as he starts walking, as he starts damn near running to his room. Their room. The room where Ford is.

He bursts in and slams the door behind him. He locks it and rests his forehead against it. He hears Ford’s chair scrap against the wood of the floor and his brother asking, “Stanley?”

Stan doesn’t know what he feels. He feels everything and nothing and his hands clench into fists and
he knocks them against the wood of the door as he licks his lips and when he turns his voice is unrecognizable to his own ears, “When were you going to tell me?”

Ford looks startled, like a deer in headlights, as he starts to stutter, “T-tell you wh-?”

“Don’t!” Stan barks, fury ripping through him – anger becoming the dominant emotion in his whirlwind of feelings, “Don’t you stand there and act like you don’t know!”

“I-I don’t-?”

“You broke up with me!” Stan hisses and Ford instantly grows pale, his bottom lip quivering, “Stanley…”

“When were you going to tell me?”

“Stan…”

“When were you going to tell me!” Stan shouts and he loudly beats his fists back against the door and Ford flinches, “I-I don’t know!”

“But you told Mom?!” Stan’s voice cracks over the last word and he didn’t know he was capable of feeling this much pain.

“Stan, you-you don’t understand! She-she was asking me about Lee and she…she…” Ford’s eyes are shining with unshed tears as he speaks, voice wobbling with each word, “I couldn’t…I can’t…I can’t do it anymore…”

“Why?” Stan asks on a tight breath.

“You know why! Our involvement with one another is a disgrace!” he cries, the tears running freely now, “We’re siblings! If anyone finds out –it would kill our parents, kill Mom! To think that her babies, her twins, her sons are fucking one another…”

A dangerous fire ignites in Stan’s eyes, “Don’t you say that!”

“Say what?” Ford gasps, rubbing at his face, “The truth? We’re committing incest like it’s no big deal! We’re playing with fire and we could get burned, but we won’t because I’m trying to do the right thing!”

“Oh ho,” Stan lets out an unhappy laugh, “And what’s the right thing, Stanford? Breaking up with me behind my back?”

“I,” Ford swallows thickly, “I was…was going to tell you…I-I swear, but…”

Stan starts breathing out of his nose heavily, shaking his head rapidly, “But nothing! ‘Cause you ain’t breaking up with me!”

“Stan…”

“No! I won’t let you!” he snaps and he knows he sounds crazy. He sounds possessive and insane. Ford is right. He knows Ford is right. He needs to let this go. He needs to let this break be clean. He needs to stop, just stop…

But he can’t.

He won’t.
Ford continues, voice robotic, “We can do this. I…I know it seems hard now, but we just have to work together. We have to want to…to get things back to what they should be. We—we can still be brothers, Stanley. We can still be twins, we just can’t be.”

“Shut up!” Stan spits and he takes a bruising grip on Ford’s arms, turns and smacks his back roughly against the bedroom door, “Shut up! Shut up!”

And then he’s kissing Ford. He’s grinding their lips together and Ford is struggling so Stan just tightens his grip. He knows he’s hurting his brother, he knows his hands will leave marks and he doesn’t care. He doesn’t care because if he holds him tight enough, if he kisses him hard enough, Ford will stop. He’ll stop and take back all these horrible things he’s saying. He’ll stop and he’ll love him, he’ll love him, dear god, please just…just love him…

Stan draws his mouth away with a ragged cry and his tears are out of control. He can’t see through them and his head drops, heavy as he presses it to Ford’s chest and he hears himself—hates himself—because he’s begging in a weak, quiet whimper, “Please shut up….please, please…don’t do this…Stanford…”

Ford doesn’t move. He stands there; not moving and Stan despises him. Despises himself and he slowly lets his brother go. They both jump as someone pounds at the other side of the door. The knob jiggles and they hear their father’s voice, “What’s with all the racket?! What are you two knuckleheads doing in there?! Why is there a locked door in MY house?!”

Stan chokes and sobs and he pushes his brother away. He unlocks the door and shoves past their father. He hears Pops call his name out – tone beyond livid – but he ignores it. He hates his father. He hates Stanford. He hates everybody. But most of all he hates himself as starts running. He leaves the house, he leaves their neighborhood – he just keeps running and running until he collapses at the beach.

He’s out of tears, out of breath, and the sky is starting to turn dark. Stars begin to dot the skies. He sits in the sand and watches the waves and tries to get ahold of himself. Ford is right. He’s right. It had to end sometime, right? It’s not like they could be together forever. It’s not like they could get married or something. Ford is right to end it. He’s right, he’s right, he’s right…

But Stan doesn’t feel like he’s right. He doesn’t feel like anything will ever be right again.

**THERE**

Ford’s fingers are slippery with blood – some his own, some not.

This is it – this is it, this time – *this* time he’s going to get out, he’s going to get out, *he’s going to get out*...

They have let him have fake escapes before. It was amusing to them. They enjoyed letting him think he had made it out – that he got away. Only for them to ‘recapture’ him and put him through the same tortures. Over and over again. He can’t even remember now how many times he’s ‘escaped’. But this is different – this feels different. This feels real.

But then, its felt real before, hasn’t it? Yes, it’s felt real but this feels more real – this is *real* real! Right? Right? It must be. It must be.

*Please god-be real, please god-be real, please god, please god, please, please, please...*
And he can feel an attack coming on, so he does what he always does. He starts repeating his brother’s name. He can hear himself muttering it under his breath, “Stanley, Stanley, Stanley…”

Stanley wouldn’t be afraid. Stanley would fight back. Stanley would get out. They would never break him. Stanley is so much better than Stanford is. He’s always suspected it, but now he knows it. Knows it in his very bones. Stanley is brave and kind and loyal. Stanley would never have done the things Ford’s done – Stanley would never stoop to the levels he has.

Ford closes his eyes and thinks of Stan and the last time he saw him. Stan had been so angry. He had had every right to be angry. Ford had been such a fool, such an uncaring bastard. He should have explained – he should have taken his time…

This was all his fault.

All of it.

They had shown him that. Again and again and again. Physically, mentally, spiritually – they had taken him apart and put him back together again so many times, too many times and each time they pieced him back together he was less of who he had been. He lost pieces of himself and now he’s just…just a fragment of who he used to be. He doesn’t even know who he is half the time.

But he knows Stan. They can’t take that from him. Not that they haven’t tried. Oh…how they’ve tried. And he’s been punished for it. Brutally. They don’t like someone not playing by their rules. They don’t like not winning. But they can’t rip Stan from him – he’s embedded into the very fabric of Ford’s being. But they have done their best to sour him – they’ve presented him variations of Stanley. Twisted, dark horrible interpretations of his brother.

Those Stanley’s…they’ve hurt him – god, how they’ve hurt him. With things they’ve said and done and he’s always managed to keep it in perspective, to tell himself that it’s not real but sometimes it’s harder than others. Sometimes he sees these monsters with Stanley’s face and Stanley’s voice and he just…crumbles.

It made him reach that point. The one where he accepted that this is where he belongs – that this is what he deserves. In fact, he stopped trying to escape – he gave up. He gave up so long ago. Or it felt long ago. Time’s hard to read here. But still, he abandoned all hope. Which is why this particular escape feels so much more legitimate than the others.

They had had him in the cage. They had lots of different places where they stored him, but this particular day (night?) it had been the cage. And normally it was always shifting, always sharp, always clawing at him but something…happened. It stopped. And then there had been a light. And he had moved towards it stiffly, shaking, and there had been a being there, a creature and he had—he had attacked it, throttled it, took its skull in his hands and…

He looks down at his palms and they’re still wet and they’re shaking. Shaking and covered in some kind of viscera (or brain matter?) and he’s never thought of himself as strong. That was Stanley. But somehow he had had strength or at least strength enough to—to…

He will never forget that sound as long as he lives.

That awful, wet, crunching sound.

He moves on and finds a weapon, some sort of gun and the barrel is shaped like a triangle and he’s terrified to touch it but he does it anyway. He picks it up and keeps moving on, limbs wobbly, and he’s still surrounded by a universe of horrors. He doesn’t know where to go or what to do and then
he sees it. A portal.

It rests before him, standing upright, like a simple doorway. It’s bright green and slimy looking and it’s swirling and for a few moments he’s lost just watching it. His head hurts. He rubs at his eyes. No, no, no... he can’t afford one of his lapses now. His mental lapses where he’s completely useless – his insanity ridden mind a useless hunk.

He used to be so smart, so smart…

A mind, a mind…a mind is a terrible thing to break…

Then he hears it, his blood turning to ice.

“IT’S GONE! IT’S GONE!” the thin voice shrieks.

“HE! HE’S GONE!” the deep voice corrects in a growl.

“FIND IT,” the thin voice wails, “FIND IT! KILL IT, KILL IT! PEEL IT APART AND PUT IT BACK TOGETHER AGAIN!”

And then that laughter – that shrill, hideous laughter.

Ford is trembling and he’s running and he doesn’t need to think another thought. He starts shooting at the portal and he can see the bright green disc fluctuate – breaking apart and he knows he only has one chance. He damages the portal even as he jumps through the last bit of it and then there’s an explosion.

An enormous one.

There is nothing but blinding white light and he feels himself floating. He’s dead. He’s finally dead. Thank god.

He floats in this bright abyss and then everything explodes into vibrant color.

Ford falls to hard packed, red earth with a pained grunt.

He’s shivering and covered in some kind of gore.

He opens his eyes and looks up and sees nothing but lavender sky.

This…this isn’t...there.

This is...somewhere else.

He’s…escaped.

He’s…free.

NOW

Ford looks at the device and frowns. He positions it better under the large stationary magnifying glass and shifts in his seat. He has to be careful. This is a delicate instrument and he can’t afford to make one mistake. Everything he’s doing right now is purely theoretical. Yes, he saw similar devices in his travels but to duplicate one…
There are about five other scientists he’s met that he wishes he could contact right now but none of them are in this dimension. Some of them could probably construct a device like this in their sleep. It’s humbling to think of how much cleverer they are, but also extremely frustrating. He should be able to do this. He should be able to do this and to do it quickly. The quicker the better, because he has to get out of here and get out fast.

He can’t afford to stay. Not when Stan can just…can just get in his personal space and turn him into a flaming idiot. He wants to doubt the validating of the so called ‘Ford Off Switch’ but he can’t. He really can’t. Not when it comes to Stanley. If he lets things continue as they are, they’ll just fall into the same old patterns. Ford won’t allow that – he can’t. He can’t do that to Stanley.

Which is why the other part of his plan is so important and he has to talk to Dipper about that one. He’ll need the boy’s help. Or rather, he’ll need to borrow something from him. It will be better for Dipper too. And Mabel. He doesn’t want to hurt them, he never wants to hurt them, and that’s why he’s come to this decision.

It will be better for everyone in the long run.

And the rift energy – it should be consumed in the process. And if not…if it backfires…

Well, the only loss will be himself.

And he’s okay with that. More than fine. Technically, he died a long, long time ago. Actually – he died several times. He is not afraid of death – at least, not if it’s permanent. He would prefer to skip the part where he gets repeatedly resurrected. Though all of those times were at the hands of them and they are far, far away. They won’t come here-if they came here they’d have to leave all those other toys behind.

He remembers when he first escaped there. Every second he had been terrified that they would find him, come for him, take him back to there. But they never did. They had no reason to. Sure, they didn’t want to lose him, but he was just a thing to them. And they could find others. They could find replacements. They could get new toys, so why expend the energy?

But he remembers the thin voice saying once Ford was his favorite toy. He said it while wearing Stanley’s face but his eyes were all wrong. They were bright yellow with feral black slits and the song had been playing – their song – but it had been distorted and garbled. Just a cold, deeply reverberating repeat of the main lyric: I only have eyes for you…

The things that had happened to him during that song…the things he had done…

It doesn’t matter. It’s best not to think of it. To never think of it.

When Ford first came back to Gravity Falls he was relieved to see Stanley older. He hadn’t looked like the Stanley of there. He had looked like the Stanley of…well, the here and now. And while Stanley repeatedly pointed out his believed physical faults, Ford found him to be wholly perfect. He loved his wrinkled skin and his gray hair. He loved his chubby belly and his eyes – his warm, warm brown eyes. Eyes that weren’t sickly yellow. Eyes that instead were like pools of whiskey honey-he felt drunk when he looked deep into those eyes. Probably how the so called Off Switch was activated.

He had warred with himself on and off – was he truly making the right decision? Maybe things would work out. Maybe he could make this work. Maybe they could truly just be brothers this time, just be siblings, twins. Maybe one day they could even be friends? But he knows that’s impossible.
Because of what he heard. No, what he thought he heard. He must have imagined it. He had to have imagined it. He imagined it. Stanley wouldn’t say that to him. He would never say that to him. He would never breathe those words.

Love you.

No, no, no. Stan didn’t do that – Stan didn’t say that. Stan doesn’t feel that way – he has never felt that way. Not then, not now. Ford had just-just been hearing things. Things past his own loud mouth and yes, it’s mortifying to realize he still has —ah – that problem. There’s something about sex that just seems to turn off all his higher reasoning– his brain, his volume control, everything.

He becomes a jumble of nerves and needs. Every little thing he thinks pops into his head and just strolls right out of his mouth. Sort of like Stanley, but when Stan says what he thinks he’s not, um, pretty much shouting to the world about how much he wants to be taken sexually. Thinking of the things he said makes Ford blush deeply and he stops working on the device.

It’s going to need a lot more work, especially since he’s doing it on his own and at a much smaller scale. Not to mention his design is a lot more elegant than the other devices he’s seen–even more so than his original design. But then, that was the point. He couldn’t risk making another gigantic portal. But something smaller, sleeker – something designed to transport just one person, one time…

Ford pushes his glasses up and rises from his seat, stretching until he hears his back pop. He scowls and rubs at it. He can’t work anymore – he’s feeling too burned out right now. Best to take a walk outside, get some fresh air. Besides, he needs to check and see if the old bunker is still an option. He will most likely have to move all of his operations there. It looks unlikely that he will get the device done in time and as such, he will have to switch up his plans a little bit.

So, it feels kismet that when he goes outside and the first thing he sees is Dipper. The boy is leaning back against a tree, flipping idly through the second journal. It will be a shame to take that journal from him – to take all the journals from him. It was kind of nice…having a fan of his work. But he knows better. This is all for the greater good.

Ford clears his throat as he approaches him, “Hello, Dipper.”

“Oh! Hey, Great Uncle Ford!”

“I was, ah, wondering…” Ford scratches at the back of his head, feeling terrible but trying his best not to show it, “If you could do a favor for me.”

“Of course! Anything!”

“Well, it’s not so much a favor as-as something I need to borrow from you,” Ford lets out a heavy breath, “You know that gun I used on the government agents?”

Dipper looks unhappy, “The…the memory erasing gun?”

“Yes. I would like to see it, if I may.”

“Why?”

Ford swallows and prepares to lie. Stan doesn’t think he can lie. This is not true – he can lie. He’s just not as good at it as Stanley is. His lies are better performed as omissions. Secrecy. But outright lies are more difficult for him. Still, this is important so he says, “I just need to check some calibrations on it. When I used it on the agents I had to do so quickly. I must make sure that they will not come back.”
Dipper looks relieved and nods to himself, “Oh! Okay, that makes sense! Sure! I’ll go get it right now.”

His nephew runs off and Ford leans against the tree, taking in a hefty breath. Alright. So far, so good. He can do this. He can *do* this. Dipper returns with the gun and Ford takes it, he drums up a smile and hopes it doesn’t look too fake as he pats the top of Dipper’s head, “Thanks so much, my boy. I’ll have it back to you in no time!”

Ford pockets the gun and goes back to the basement. With that bit of the plan out of the way, he can go back to working on the device. He still needs to check on the bunker but he doesn’t feel up to it now. One problem at a time. However, when he returns to the basement he finds a couple of surprising things waiting for him.

First there are outfits. Several outfits. Just…a lot of clothes are spread out all over his desk. And wigs. And hats. And some shades. And on top of all of this is a package. Describing it as a wrapped gift would be a mistake. Mainly because it looks so…manhandled. Honestly, it’s like someone punched it several times – like a birthday or Christmas gift that someone just kicked the shit out of.

The wrapping is brightly colored but madly wrinkled and tied around it looks like an attempt at a bow. But the ribbon is too big and too tight and instead it looks like it’s choking the package (gift?) so Ford goes over and decides to do his best to release it.

The knots make it a bit difficult but eventually he manages to unwrap it to find several novels inside, a big note on top. He reads the note first-

_Ford,

You’re with the last tour group at 5 today. Kids are going out with Soos tonight. Clothes are for you. Surprise me.

Stan

PS – Books are for you. Know you’ll like ‘em. Don’t lie to yourself._

Ford puts the note to one side and looks down at the books only to scoff. He carefully shuffles through them, shaking his head. Romance novels. Three of them. Each with silly covers, each with ridiculous names.

“‘To Seduce a Sinner’?” Ford scoffs aloud as he moves thorough each, reading the titles aloud, flipping them over to peruse their descriptive backs, “‘When Beauty Tamed the Beast’? ‘Nine Rules to Break When Romancing a Rake’?! Come on, Stanley! I do not like—Oh! Actually, this one sounds pretty good…”

Ford sits down and thumbs through one of them, though he makes sure to look around at first…just in case Stanley is hiding somewhere or something. When he eventually looks up from the book (and yes, okay, he’s seven chapters in – so sue him) he notices that a couple of hours have passed and it’s pretty close to five.

He puts the book to one side and looks at the clothes. It’s an interesting mix. Pin striped suits, various uniforms (police, military, fireman…he really doesn’t want to know how Stan got these, does he?), loud Hawaiian shirts and shorts, and of course a couple of dresses because Stan would offer dresses.
He picks up a ball gowns thoughtfully. It would serve Stan right…

Still, he’s not going to play by his brother’s silly rules. He just grabs some plain black shades and a ragged baseball cap. He checks the security camera. A lot of people are milling around the gift shop, so the vending machine exit is not an option. He thankfully has other ways out of the basement and he takes one of them to find that there’s quite a crowd outside.

Parents usher their excited kids along and several elderly couples group together, talking in hushed voices and double checking their cameras. Ford sticks his hands deep in his coat pockets and walks up to a woman who is glaring daggers at two teenage boys. He catches the tail end of their conversation, “…what Ray said! You two are going on this tour and that is that!”

“Excuse me, miss?”

She turns to Ford and her face clears up considerably, “Yes?”

“I was just wondering…are you part of the five o’clock tour group?”

She nods, “Yes, everyone here is. If you get behind my son and his friend, you’ll be at the end of the line.”

“Okay. Thank you.” Ford returns genially and he moves behind the two boys. One of them, most likely the woman’s son, glares at his mother, then Ford, the turns to his friend, muttering, “Sorry about this, Mason.”

“Tristan, dude, don’t worry about it.” Mason says, “It’s not your fault your Mom’s a total bitch.”

Ford frowns and does his best to pretend he’s not listening but the two teens aren’t doing much to keep their voices down.

Tristan continues, “I know, man, but I can’t believe she dragged us to this freak show! We could like, be at the condo right now, playing the new Call of Duty!”

“I know, but isn’t your Dad there right now cleaning his stuff out?”

“Psh, yeah. Moving it all to his new place in Cali. God, I hope he takes me with him. You could come to, brah. Live in like, our loft or something.”

“You think you’re Dad’d be cool with that?”

“Yeah! ‘Sides, we’re going to West Coast Tech next year, right? So, we’d only, y’know, have to be around him and his new girl for a little while.”

Ford’s frown deepens. These two little clods were going to his dream school? How was that even possible? They seemed like idiots! Was this the kind of people he would have had to rub elbows with had he been accepted to the school? Maybe Stanley had done him a favor…

Ford ponders over this when there is an unexpected flash of smoke. Everyone in the crowd gasps and suddenly there’s Stan standing before them. He’s wearing the normal suit and red tie, an eyepatch firmly in place as he waves his eight ball cane at them, “Hello ladies and gentlemen! Welcome! Welcome to the Mystery Shack!”

A smattering of applause breaks out and Stan grins, waving his hands, “Thank you, thank you! Ladies, please contain yourselves!”
Some of the women giggle at this. One woman in particular fans herself. Ford can’t help but smile, rolling his eyes as Stan continues, “I’m town darling, Mr. Mystery, and today, I will show you sights the likes of which, you have never seen! If you’ll just follow me-to the Mystery Cart!”

He waves with his cane towards a set of linked golf carts. Everyone clamber aboard and Stan goes to the front. Once everyone is settled in he starts driving, talking into a speaker system, “On your left you’ll see the world famous Outhouse of Mystery! I got stuck in there once! I made it out – but will you?”

Ford groans and rubs at his face. The two teens who sit in front of him, Mason and Tristan, do the same but not in the same way. Ford’s groan is more from affection while the teenager’s sounds have a clear derision to them. Ford narrows his eyes at them and wonders how much of a problem they are going to be as Stan continues, “Up ahead on our right, you’ll see our dogwoods—made from real dogs!”

Like everyone else, Ford directs his gaze to the right to see a fenced off area full of pug dogs. Ford has no idea how Stan managed to get so many pugs, but each of them is wearing a vest that has strips of wood glued to it. ‘Mr. Mystery’ explains, “As you can see, these woods have bark inside and out!”

As if on cue, the pugs start barking and prancing about, much to the amusement of the tour group. Tristan scoffs, “Dude, so lame!”

“Yeah, man.” Mason adds unhelpfully.

The tour moves on and Stan continues to point out various sights, each more elaborate than the last. There’s the ‘mysterious sinkhole’, which is pretty much a whole kitchen sink that’s been embedded deep into the ground. ‘The Batacombs’, which are a bunch of bats strung from tree branches with combs attached to them. ‘The Plant Cemetery’, which is a collection of dead house plants with silly headstones (one reads, ‘Here lies Fern, Too Easy To Burn’). And Ford’s favorite, the water fall—with water that falls!

But amazingly, the tourists seem to eat all of this up. Ford looks around to see them smiling, taking photos, laughing and talking about which sight they like best. They return to the Shack to enter the ‘Museum’ half of their tour. Inside Stan shows off some of the oddities Ford has already seen - the ‘Giant’s Ear’, the ‘Six-pack O’ Lope’ and the like.

Ford will be the first to admit that he still finds all of this to be vaguely insulting – after all, there are real supernatural creatures present in this area. However, he is still trailing behind the surly teens who keep making nasty remark after nasty remark. They haven’t shut up once since this all began and their comments are really starting to grate on him.

Yes, the attractions are juvenile at best but at least Stan is trying. There’s actually more imagination here than Ford had thought and his brother’s performance alone is noteworthy. Stan is really selling himself as this Mr. Mystery and he honestly thinks that that is what makes this tourist trap successful.

It’s just…Stanley.

Stanley being Stanley.

Yeah, he thinks of Mr. Mystery as a persona, but in a way this is who Stanley really is. A charismatic, jovial wellspring of life that makes up the most amazing yarns you could ever imagine. Being around him, hearing him talk…it just…makes you feel good. Happy. And these punks don’t even seem to appreciate that. Oh no. Everything is ‘stupid’ and ‘dumb’ and a ‘waste of their fucking
time’ and there are kids in this tour group – young kids who definitely should not be hearing that kind of language and these two delinquents could stand to turn down the volume a bit, not to mention the vitriol.

Ford’s hands ache from being clenched into fists for so long but he’s done his best to behave. He can’t make waves. And how would it look if he throttled two teens? But then Stan takes them to a sheet where he hints that they will see the most hideous creatures known to man. He pulls it back to show a mirror and when people recognize themselves they laugh. But not Mason and Tristan.

The first thing out of Tristan's mouth is, “Not cool, brah.”

Mason snorts, “That old man should really be looking at himself. He’s ugly as sin.”

One of Ford’s eyes begins twitching.

Tristan chuckles, “Yeah, man. Like, what the hell is on his nose? Warts? And what’s with those big ass ears? Motherfucker looks like Dumbo!”

The teens laugh and Ford thinks of the one hundred and one ways he knows how to kill them – to torture them – but instead he decides scientific approach is the best. He reaches into his voluminous trench coat and pulls out a small inoculation syringe. Instead of a needle it has a very sharp laser, which he quickly shoots at the back of both boys’ necks.

They each hiss and rub at the spot, then turn around to see where the quick jab might have come from. Ford is a picture of innocence, rocking on his heels, syringe neatly tucked away. He counts down in his head, knowing the effects will hit in five, four, three, two, one…

Mason hiccups. Then he hiccups again. Then again.

Tristan does the same. Then he moans and grabs at his stomach, “Dude!-hic-I do-hic-don’t fee-hic-eel so go-hic-good.”

“Me-hic-either!” Mason gasps, clutching at himself, “Got like-hic-major gas pains!”

“Hic! Hic! Ew! Hic! Hic! Gr-hic-oss!”

Both start moaning and groaning and eventually Tristan's mother shows up, looking concerned. Ford feels slightly bad for her but, unfortunately, the little bastards were asking for it. Besides, it was only the Xasperian Flu. It would clear up in – oh – about two weeks. Two weeks of constant hiccups, severe gas pains, blotchy rashes that itched like the devil and – oh yes, the discharge from – well, everywhere. And it was an orange discharge. Bright orange.

And it did not come out of clothes easily.

But then, that’s just a little of what they truly deserved. No one talked about Stanley that way without paying a price. Honestly, they should be thankful that that was all he did to them. His initial thoughts had been much more…violent. Tristan, Mason, and the woman leave and Ford lets out a relived sigh, happy to be free from them for the rest of the tour.

He edges closer to the rest of the group only to accidentally bump into a gangly man who had just pulled out his camera to take a photo. The camera clatters to the floor and, without thinking, Ford picks it up and offers it to him, “I’m sorry, here you go.”

“Thanks, I – wow!” The guy’s eyes grow wide as he takes back his camera, “Six fingers!”
Ford snatches his hand back, blushing even as the guy turns to a woman near him, “Honey! Honey, you got to see this! This guy’s got six fingers!”

“Wow! Really?”

“Oh, um, well…” Ford goes to scratch the side of his face only to reveal his six fingers again. The woman squeals and others turn. They all seem to zero in on his hands, a murmur rising up from the crowd. Ford can only pick out bits and pieces—people asking if he works for the Shack, people asking if they’re fake, people asking if he can write with them, tie his shoes with them and so on.

Stan steps in front of him, arms outstretched, “Whoa, whoa, whoa! Folks, folks—this is merely a patron like yourselves. No reason to—”

“Hey buddy! Can I get a picture!” the gangly guy pipes up, camera poised, “You could like—put your hand over my wife’s head or something! Make it look like you’re a six-fingered reaper!”

Stan scowls, “Listen here, pal…”

“How about a handshake?” Someone else tosses out, “I bet that’d feel weird!”

“So weird,” another person agrees, “But cool!”

“Yeah! Come on, Sixer, let us—”

“HEY!” Stan’s voice is loud and brokers no argument. The tour group quickly looks insulted as he hisses, “YOU don’t get to call him that! And you don’t-!”

“Sixty dollars,” Ford returns, cutting his brother off. Stan turns to him, wide eyed as Ford continues, voice calm, “Ten dollars a finger. Want to shake both hands? That’ll cost you an even one eighty.”

The gangly guy frowns, “One eighty? But ten dollars a finger should mean only one hundred and twenty!”

“Extra for tax and luck. These fingers are like rabbit’s feet, people!” Ford waggles all of them and everyone is back to smiling and happy. They’re reaching into the various purses and wallets while Stan takes a firm grip of Ford’s right elbow, “Ladies and gentlemen, if you’ll excuse me and my colleague a moment…and please feel free to keep pulling out your various forms of payment…”

Stan ushers Ford out of the Museum quickly and into his office. He barely gets the door closed before he’s on Ford. He pushes him back against one of the walls, his mouth devouring his brother’s. Ford lets out a startled noise as Stan’s tongue invades his mouth. Stan pulls away, panting, “Oh my god, my god…so sexy. What you just did…Jesus!”

Ford can only chuckle into the next kiss. Of course Stan would get turned on by Ford scamming people for money. That just makes too much sense. Really, he had only done it because he hadn’t wanted his brother to lose business because of him. Yes, some of the tourist’s comments had hurt, but it had just seemed better to roll with it than to make it into a big issue. After all, he had heard a lot of those things over his life— they didn’t really bother him that much anymore.

However, Stan’s current—um—adore, is a little unnecessary and since Ford’s currently in the process of trying to make himself stop wanting this…

He pushes at Stan gently, trying to get him to let up but Stan’s mouth has moved on to his neck now. Licking and sucking and biting and Ford can’t help the hearty moan that leaves him at that, the harsh rub of stubble against his skin exhilarating, “Stan-ah!-Stan, you nee-ah!-eed to stop! You’ve still got
a tour group out there!”

“Screw ‘em,” Stan snarls against the hollow of Ford’s throat, “They can wait.”

“What? No! They could—they could hear us.”

“So?”

“Stanley!” Ford returns, scandalized.

“You just don’t get it, do you?” Stan groans as he rips off Ford’s hat and shades, tossing them away, his hands dancing down to Ford’s belt buckle, “Having you in my group – knowing you were back there the whole time. It was drivin’ me fuckin’ crazy! And I could hear those kids talking shit about me and the look on your face…you were so angry, so furious and it was so goddamn sexy.”

He starts undoing his belt, nimble fingers tugging down the fly of his pants, “Looking like a ruffled college professor – students driving you up the wall and you just need to take that stress off with the right one—an older one…”

“Stan!” Ford cries, cool air rushing in to caress him through his underwear as he tries to pull away, “What are you doing?”

“Gotta have you, gotta do this right now…” Stan growls and he drops to his knees with far more speed that Ford thought possible for his age. And his hands are not gentle as he tugs Ford’s underwear and pants down, exposing him and Ford lets out a shocked cry as Stan’s mouth descends on him. He’s not even hard (although he’s rapidly becoming that way) as Stan’s tongue circles the tip of his cock, runs along his sack and under it and Ford lets out a whine, “No! Sta-Lee! Lee! Not now! Not now!”

Ford’s becoming desperate because he knows he should stop Stan but an even larger part of him doesn’t want Stan to stop at all. He’s quickly growing more and more erect as Stan’s mouth continues to lap at him and he’s not shy at all. His face is mashed against Ford’s most private area and his fingers are teasing the backs of Ford’s knees and rubbing along his inner thighs and Ford’s head knocks back loudly against the wall, a wail escaping him.

“Shh!” Stan returns dryly, “Don’t want them tourists to hear you!”

“You’re-uhh! You’re the wo-worst!” Ford pants, “Lee! I’m-I’m se-serious. No, no! You can’t… you…you need to-stop…”

But Ford’s words are clearly halfhearted and his hands are carding through Stan’s hair, knocking his fez off. He’s all focused on Ford and he’s making these obscene sounds, slurping and moaning and Ford’s pretty sure he’s got one of his hands between his own legs and he’s…Christ. He’s touching himself; Stan’s touching himself while he’s going down on him and…

“Fuck!” Ford breathes and he tries to be quiet, tries to control his volume even though it’s difficult. Very difficult.

“Lee! Lee, don’t…don’t stop, don’t stop…suck me, please…suck me…” Ford starts chanting and his hips begin rocking up, moving rhythmically, and Stan is…god, he’s humming around his length and then he-he takes him so deep. Deep into his throat and there’s such a heavenly amount of wet, tight warm softness and pure suction that Ford can’t help himself, letting out a threadbare keen as he comes.

He can feel himself pulsing into Stan’s mouth, can feel Stan swallowing every single drop and his
eyes roll upwards into the back of his skull as bliss showers over him, every vein in his body singing. Stan draws back and cracks his jaw, grunting. He gets to his feet and...oh. There’s there’s a puddle on the floor. And Stan’s pants are undone.

Ford huffs and feels weightless. He thanks the wall for being so wonderfully supportive. Stan goes over to his desk and grabs a box of tissues. He cleans himself quickly then hands the box to Ford, who barely takes it, still lost in hazy afterglow. Stan looks at him with a proud smile, “You like that? I learned a lot while you were away.”

He gets a weak sound in response. Stan chuckles and gives him a quick kiss, “I better get back out there. Meet me as soon as you can. We still got some rubes to fleece via six fingered handshakes!”

Stan leaves and Ford tries to catch his breath, wondering how the hell that spiraled out of control so quickly.

It’s hours later and the Mystery Shack is closed for the day. Ford eventually managed to piece himself back together enough to face people. He gave out handshakes and made a pretty hefty profit and no one seemed the wiser about what he and Stanley had been doing beforehand. He was actually pretty mortified by the whole thing. Stan, on the other hand, was acting like this was the best day of his life.

When all the tourists and customers left and they locked the doors, Ford made sure to specifically pay close attention to Wendy, Soos, and the kids because god forgive him - they had still been in the Gift Shop when everything happened.

He couldn’t believe he’d been so careless, so reckless. God, had Stan even locked the door?!

But it didn’t seem to have mattered – no one acted as if anything out of the ordinary had happened. The kids actually seemed in very high spirits as they debated with Soos over which movie to go see. Dipper wanted to see the latest sci-fi epic, while Mabel was all about the romantic drama period piece. Soos actually wasn’t interested in either and was subtly trying to suggest they go to the arcade instead.

Wendy, who had had no plans beforehand, ended up convincing all of them to go with her to her place – pointing out that a horror marathon was on television tonight. Mabel had been against this plan, until it was revealed that ‘Nighthfall: Bright Stars’ was on the schedule and that film wasn’t a horror picture so much as a purple-prosed nightmare of a film about a supernatural love triangle. Once she was on board everyone fell into place.

Stan pulled Ford to one side, whispering, “Why don’t you bug off for an hour then come back up to the Museum? I can show you the Mystery Shack after hours.”

Ford wanted to wave him off but somehow found himself unable to. After all, what could it hurt? He already had the wheels in motion to execute his plan. One more night with his brother wasn’t going to change that and it certainly wasn’t going to cause any more damage. One more night. Huh. Where had he heard that before?

Still, Ford did as Stan requested and when he comes upstairs later he enters the Museum to find it in shadows, “Stanley?”
“Over here! I got a surprise for ya!” Stan returns and Ford walks towards where his brother voice sounded from. He notices a warm glow and when he turns the corner, he stops dead in his tracks. Stan clears his throat and waves behind him, “Ta da!”

Several white sheets have been strung up high on a rickety rope, creating an ethereal looking tent. White Christmas lights hang haphazardly in various places and tacked up to the wall is a handmade sign that reads ‘Fort Stan’. Ford looks at it all, stunned, as Stan shifts where he stands, “Do you-do you like it? Thought it might be, I dunno, kinda nice.”

Nice, he says. Nice. Ford looks at it and feels as if someone’s squeezing his heart tightly as Stan nervously continues, “I got us some snacks – you know, couple bags of chipackers and popcorn and I have some cold Pitt Cola cans but I actually got us a couple of beers too. I haven’t had a beer in-”

“Why did you do this?” Ford breathes and Stan turns red, “I…I don’t know. Thought…maybe you’d like it?”

“Like it?”

“You-you don’t?”

“I…” Ford walks closer and he swallows thickly, “…don’t know what to say.”

“Is that…good or-?”

“You…did something romantic.”

Stan blows out a raspberry, “What? No! No, it’s not…”

“It is.”

“Well, I mean,” Stan looks guilty, “Maybe…”

“You did this…for me.”

Stan just nods and Ford takes his face in his hands. He kisses him, just once. Soft and gentle and sweet. He pulls away and looks into Stanley’s face, his voice quiet, “You shouldn’t have done this.”

“I wanted to,” Stan says simply and he pulls away, “I also, uh…got this…”

To one side sits a record player. He pulls out a record and puts it on. There’s the soft crack of the vinyl being pressed under the needle and then the eerie tone starts, soft words singing, “My love must be a kind of blind love, I can’t see anyone but you…”

And everything for Ford stops. It turns...red. Then black. And he’s gone. He’s back there. Everything in his mind is shrieking and his heart is beating so fast he feels like it will explode. His adrenaline ramps up and he’s lost. Completely and totally lost. He doesn’t see anything, he doesn’t hear anything - he doesn’t feel anything. He’s a machine. Cold, untouchable, unbreakable.

There are warped echoes of sound and sights and there’s an endless chattering, a nattering and thousands of other dimensional languages float around him and come out of him and there’s this crashing…this banging…this endless shouting…

Then he hears something, soft at first, so distantly far away but he hears it and it reverberates, slowly sinking into him, growing in force and power.

“...OP! STOP! STOP!”
Stop? Ford blinks and blinks again and new colors come into his vision and his limbs ache. The voice is closer and there’s something wrapped around him, something strong and heavy and he fights against it, fights like a wild animal but then he hears, “FORD! FORD! IT’S ME! KNOCK IT OFF, WILL YA! YOU’RE HURTING YOURSELF!”

No, his thoughts cry, _No, you’re not him! You’re a liar and a fake! This is another one of your games, isn’t it? You’re wearing his face again, using his voice again! How can you do this? How can you do it for so long? I never made it out, did I?! This is all some sick twisted joke! I’m still there! Still there! Still here in your sick game, still your favorite toy – your toy you break…_

“How,” The voice is softer this time, full of pain, “Ford…”

 completa 11: You hurt me. Over and over again. Destroy me and bring me back and you think it’s funny and you like doing this and it’s all a sick joke, all a dream – the kids, the Shack, and Stanley, Stanley…

“It’s…me. Ford, please…”

_Com’t trust you. Can’t trust you. Can’t trust you. Nothing you can say-!

“I love you.”

Ford freezes. He stops. He stops struggling. He stops thinking. He just…stops.

He hears himself breathe. The sound is shaky and loud. He breathes again and the colors start to come together, start to take shapes and…and everything is falling back into place. The first thing he sees is…glass. Broken glass everywhere. Shattered Christmas lights. Torn white sheets. A ripped handmade sign lies on the floor next to a crushed handful of electronic circuits. And blood…there’s blood…

He blinks again and again and he looks down at his hands. They’re covered in blood. And his face hurts. A lot. And there are arms around him, strong like steel bands and there’s heat in his hair…someone has their face mashed into his scalp and they’re whispering, whispering huskily, “I love you, I love you, I love you…”

Ford swallows and when he speaks his voice comes out in a croak, “Stanley?”

“Shh, shh…I love you, shh, I love you…Stanford…”

Ford moves and the embraces tighten and he closes his eyes, “Stanley…I’m-I’m back…”

He hears a choked noise in response and Ford gently pries himself away. He turns and Stan’s nose is bleeding, dark red marks are on his throat and they’re finger shaped – like someone was strangling him. One of Ford’s eyes hurts as does his right cheek and his bottom lip. He licks it and tastes copper. He gets to his feet weakly and looks around at all the destruction. The destruction he knows he caused.

Stan is still on his knees, looking wrecked and Ford feels empty as he whispers, “I’m sorry.”

He slowly walks out of the Museum and he heads straight for the basement. He was a fool. A complete fool. He can’t put it off. Not even for a second longer. He goes straight down to the device and begins working faster, quicker before he eyes the memory gun. He drops his work on the device and turns to the gun. It will take a lot of calibrations but its best he does this first, it really is.

Ford starts programming it so that they can forget – they can all forget. It’s for the best.
Chapter End Notes

The romance novels mentioned are all real books. They were written by Elizabeth Hoyt, Eloisa James, and Sarah Maclean respectively.
Chapter 13

THEN

The last few days have been horrible.

No, wait – beyond horrible.

Ford didn’t know it was possible to be this miserable and still survive, still function. Stan won’t even look at him. His brother treats him as if he’s a stranger or, worse, as if he’s someone who doesn’t exist. When Stan first returned their father tore him a complete new one – about locking doors, about shoving him, about dashing off and not responding when he was being spoken to. And Stan had just…taken it. He had let their father spew hateful, awful scorn at him for what felt like hours.

Then, when it was done, he’d accepted his punishment (grounded for six weeks) and gone to their room. He had fallen back on his bed and looked up at the ceiling and said not one word to Ford. Ford himself had had to deal with his own verbal tongue lashing. Their father had been outraged when he’d seen Ford’s tear streaked face. How could Ford be so weak? So flimsy? Crying? Really? What was he? Some kind of pansy girl? Did Filbrick have daughters instead of sons?

Mr. Pines didn’t care if Ford and ‘Ashley’ had broken up – Ford should take it with some dignity for Christ’s sake! He should take it like a man. Their mother hadn’t interfered. Not at all. In fact, it wasn’t until much later that she took Ford aside to ask him what exactly happened. He tells her the best version of the truth that he can – he tells her that Stan had been good friends with Lee and angry about their break up, angry that Ford hadn’t told him right away, angry that their mother now knew about Ford’s…proclivities.

She accepts this explanation. How can she not? It sounds perfectly reasonable. Besides, there’s no way she can know, that she can even guess, that Lee is Stanley. Why would she? No one would ever think something so sordid. And Ford should be happy about that – happy that their secret is safe and no one will ever know.

But he isn’t.

He feels sick. He feels sick all the time. Sick with longing and sick with heartache. He wants Stan back. He wants him back in all sense of the word. He wants him back as his brother, as his twin, as his best friend, and also as his-his...

But he can’t. He can’t want him like that. He can’t love him like that. This is for Stan’s own good. And Ford’s too. Sure, it doesn’t feel that way right now but someday, maybe, eventually…

And then the science fair comes.

Ford shows off his perpetual motion machine and his teachers seem very impressed. His booth is right next to Stan’s and he looks at the ‘Foot Boot’ (which is nothing more than a football strapped to a toaster) and his heart feels heavy. But Stan…he doesn’t look like he’s affected at all anymore. In fact, he’s all smiles. And Ford is pretty damn sure it’s fake.

It looks so phony – like a bad mask, but no one else seems to be picking up on it. No-everyone else looks at Stan as if he is that happy and Stan’s happiness seems to be rubbing off on them. Ford wasn’t aware his twin was such a good actor. Such a good liar. But then…maybe he isn’t.

No, in fact, Ford was probably right all along.
Stanley doesn’t love him.
Not like that.
Not really.

He’d been upset – yes, but that had most likely been because it had come across as such a shock. After all, Ford had kept a lot from him. He hadn’t told Stan about what their mother had uncovered. He hadn’t told him that he had then later informed her that he and Lee were no more, so as to cover their tracks. He had woven a web of secrecy and that wasn’t something he normally did. Well, not something he normally did without Stan.

Normally he included Stan in the loop. Usually Stan knew what Ford was up to. So, being on the outside looking in had probably hurt him a great deal. But once he knew– once it was all revealed and he’d had time to process it…he had probably seen the validity of Ford’s actions. Seen the wisdom in just…ending things. After all, as Ford had already surmised – Stan could easily move on.

Ford catches sight of Linda at her booth and tries not to glower at her. She’s a nice girl. Really sweet. She-she wouldn’t be a bad choice for his brother. Romantically speaking. She would certainly be a better option than himself. A saner option. For god’s sake – they’re siblings. It’s not like they could have-could have been together forever.

Not that Ford doesn’t think about it sometimes. Dream about it. Late at night, when he’s trying to go to sleep, he allows himself to imagine it. Imagine a world where they aren’t related. A world where they can be more. A world where they can have a…

And as soon as the words ‘happily ever after’ come into the picture he stops because it’s childish. That isn’t how the real world works. There’s no such thing. There’s just this…life. In life, people don’t ride off into the sunset. And even if they do, they don’t do it with their male relatives.

The head of the science fair comes around and hands Ford an impressive trophy, signaling he’s won first place. Ford happily takes the award but frowns slightly as Stan comes over. Until Stan throws an arm around his neck and points to him, clearly proud. Cautiously, Ford smiles. This is the first time in a long time that things have felt…better. More back to the status quo.

Ford basks in it. And from there things just steadily improve. Stan starts talking to him again. And not just stilted, short words. He starts talking to him almost as if nothing ever happened. As if he’s forgotten all about it. Yes, there’s a bit of a pang in Ford’s heart when he does, but he keeps telling himself over and over again how this is for the best and Stanley talking to him like this is better than Stanley not talking to him at all.

So, naturally, just as they regain their footing and get some semblance of normal back into their lives, they’re called to the principal’s office. Stan wonders what it is this time and Ford is also at a loss. They haven’t done anything to catch attention at school and usually when they do; it’s because Stan’s defending Ford from some form of bullying. They go to the office only to be informed by the snippy secretary that the principal only wants to see Ford, not Stanley.

Ford looks at Stan with some concern, wondering why they bothered to call both of them if they only wanted to see him but Stan just grunts and folds his arms, taking a seat to one side. Ford goes into the principal’s office to see both of his parents there. He feels his face heat, worry washing over him. Oh god, what is this? What’s wrong? Did his mother betray him? He would never think her of it, but perhaps she told their father about Lee’s true gender after all.

And then maybe they told the principal. Maybe this is some sort of intervention. Ford sits down,
palm sweating, feeling for all the world as if the sword of Damocles is hanging above him. The principal talks first, “Now, Mr. Pines, I’d like to speak with you very frankly if I may.”

“Very frankly is the only way I speak.”

“You have two sons: one of them is incredibly gifted, the other one is standing outside of this room and is named Stanley.”

Ford immediately feels defensive, but all he does is frown and look away. Stanley is gifted. He’s smart, funny, and handsome. He wants to say this, to argue, but he keeps his mouth shut because he can’t afford to make a scene. After all, if he pipes up while the principal is talking his father will no doubt smack the back of his head and tell him to watch himself. Tell him how ‘the adults are talking’ because, of course, Stan and Ford are only recognized as adults when it’s most convenient.

However, his mother steps in for him, “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying your son, Stanford, is a GENIUS! All his teachers are going bananas over his science fair experiment!” he reaches into his shirt (ew) and hands Ford a pamphlet, “Ya ever heard of West Coast Tech? Best college in the country! Their graduates turn science fiction into science fact!”

Ford reads over the pamphlet quickly. He’s heard of this school before. He’s dreamed of this school before! But he’s never thought of it as a real possibility. It’s too expensive, too far away – too unattainable. But now here’s his principal talking to him as if it can actually happen! Ford’s eyes grow big, bright with excitement and happiness as the man continues talking, “The admissions team is visiting tomorrow to check out Stanford's experiment. Your son may be a future millionaire, Mr. Pines!”

Filbrick’s eyebrows rise, “I'm impressed.”

Ford looks at his father in wonder. His father is…impressed? His father is never impressed!

Mrs. Pines looks worried, “But what about our little free spirit, Stanley?”

The principal lets out a huff, “That clown? At this rate he'll be lucky to graduate high school.”

Ford takes objection to that but, again, keeps silent. Still, he must have some kind of expression on his face – one mirroring his mother’s because the principal reassures her, “Look, there’s a saltwater taffy store on the dock. And somebody’s gotta get paid to scrape the barnacles off of it. Stanford's goin’ places. But hey, look on the bright side: at least you'll have one son here in New Jersey forever.”

Mr. Pines just gives a brisk nod before leaning forward and asking the principal more questions about this school and – more importantly – how his son might go about being a future millionaire. Ford looks over the pamphlet again. So many interesting topics of study at this school…he could finally be challenged. He’s always found school to be a breeze – having to actually do real work, to talk with others on his same level of intellect…

But then he thinks back to Stan. If he does this…if he goes to this school…Stanley won’t be with him.

Ford chews on his bottom lip. Well, what has he been trying to convince himself of for the last few weeks anyway? That he can’t be with his brother forever, right? And does he really want to be around when-when Stan moves on? And he will move on.

Can Ford stand there and watch Stan get involved with someone? To see the new version of Stan
and Carla? Whether it’s Linda or someone else, eventually Stan will…will get involved with someone. Like…like that. He’ll kiss someone, touch someone…look at someone the way he used to look at Ford and no, no, no…Ford knows he can’t take that.

If he sees that he’ll…he’ll just…

He looks back at the pamphlet and starts nodding to himself. This is great. No, scratch that – this is awesome! He can go to this school; he can put some space between himself and his brother. And when he comes back he’ll be all better, he’ll be…cured, and he knows ‘cured’ isn’t the best word to use, but it’s the only one that currently comes to mind.

He’ll go to West Coast Tech; he’ll make new friends – maybe even…find someone for himself. And he’ll visit Stan and his family and it’ll all be alright again. It’ll be the way it’s supposed to be, the way it should be. Maybe…maybe not the way he secretly wants it to be, the way he longs for it to be…

But it’ll be right. Logical. It’ll be the way it has to be.

Because it can’t be any other way.

It just…can’t.

NOW

Stan sits in ruins.

His mind is still trying to grasp what exactly happened.

All he had done was start playing a record.

It had only been seconds in when Ford went…crazy. Absolutely crazy. Stan had never seen anything like it. He had never seen Ford like that. All the lights, all the life, in his eyes just…went out. He wasn’t Stan’s brother anymore. Not in that moment. He wasn’t anyone. He was just some- some thing. A raving, wild thing. It was like he’d transformed. His face became a horrible caricature of who he was supposed to be.

Stan considers himself made of some pretty stern stuff. He’s seen things, done things, that would wither most people into nothing. But in that moment…he’d been scared. Terrified. Because the person he cared the most about in the entire world was gone and replaced. Replaced with this slobbering, frenzied creature.

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A creature that let out an unholy sound before tearing everything apart. It had gone straight to the record player first - picked it up, tossed it, thrown it to the ground again and again, slamming it down with a brutal amount of force until the player broke to pieces. But it didn’t stop – it kept kicking it, tearing at it, pulling it apart. Stan had called out to Ford, tried to reach him but…there had been nothing to reach.

Because Ford hadn’t been there.

The thing had.

Once the record player was gone it turned on the ‘Fort Stan’ sign, ripping it down, shredding it then turning on the sheets and the lights – tugging and yanking, breaking and destroying everything in sight.
Then it got worse.

Worse because the thing with Ford’s face started talking – shouting – in languages Stan had never heard before. Sometimes it even sounded as if it was talking backwards.

Then some broken English came, garbled words – triangle, three sides, three of you, must mean something…

Stan had no idea what it was talking about. Was it talking about him, Dipper, and Mabel? Would it try to hurt them? Why was it in Ford? Ford was possessed, right? He had to have been. Because when he looked at him, he didn’t see Ford there…he saw something else behind his eyes. Possession was the only thing that made sense.

But then, he had seen glimpses of this before. When the fireworks had gone off. And when he had first seen Ford without his shirt. But it hadn’t been this strong – this in control. Seeing it in full control was unbearable and Stan wanted it to stop, to just stop – to give him his brother back.

He went to it, hollering at it to stop only for it to lunge at him. It hit him. A firm punch right square in the nose and Stan had cursed, unprepared for the blow. And then there were hands around his throat, choking him, strangling him and he’d fought back, anger overtaking him. Whatever this thing was, he wanted it off of him and out of his brother.

He’d kicked out at it, made it loosen its grip just enough so he could deliver a swift upper cut. Then another punch, right in the mouth and then another near its eye and it stumbled away from him, stunned, shaking its head, eyes bleary but still no Ford, still no signs of cognizance. Instead it turned, falling to its knees.

It landed in a pile of broken glass and destroyed electronic pieces. It started searching through the debris and its hands were already bleeding but it didn’t care, unfeeling as it began making deeper and deeper cuts, picking up glass and parts of the player that weren’t completely smashed to smithereens. It focused on trying to destroy it even more, even though there was nothing more to destroy.

Stan fell down next to it and gathered it up in his arms, trying to make it stop, holding on to it even as it struggled like a caged animal. “FORD! FORD! IT’S ME! KNOCK IT OFF, WILL YA! YOU’RE HURTING YOURSELF!”

And then it answered him.

It was the first time it had actually acknowledged that he was even there, aside from the moment where it had tried to choke him out.

And it sounded just like Ford…but a different Ford…

A Ford whose voice was a withered, ruined husk of its normal tone.

“No! No, you’re not him! You’re a liar and a fake! This is another one of your games, isn’t it? You’re wearing his face again, using his voice again! How can you do this? How can you do it for so long? I never made it out, did I?! This is all some sick, twisted joke! I’m still there! Still there! Still here in your sick game, still your favorite toy – your toy you break…”

“Ford,” Stan breathed, the words striking out at him, making him feel a pain he didn’t even think was possible, “Ford…”

“Can’t trust you.” It moans – it moans in Ford’s voice, “You hurt me. Over and over again. Destroy me and bring me back and you think it’s funny and you like doing this and it’s all a sick joke, all a
dream – the kids, the Shack, and Stanley, Stanley…”

And Stan felt broken.

Here was his brother, crying out for him, but he couldn’t hear him. Couldn’t hear him at all, but Stan still tried, tried to reach him, tried to exorcise the creature out of him, “It’s…me. Ford, please…”

“Can’t trust you. Can’t trust you. Can’t trust you. Nothing you can say-!”

“I love you.” The words left Stan unbidden. They left him because he couldn’t stop them. Because he couldn’t think of anything else to say. There was only one thing to say. Only one. The truth. The one most solid, irrefutable piece of truth in his whole existence.

And it worked.

The thing stopped. It stopped and Stan tugged it closer, burying his face into its hair and breathing in Ford’s scent as he kept babbling, “I love you, I love you, I love you…”

Because once he said it, he couldn’t stop. It wasn’t like the night where he had said it while they were fucking. That had been different. That had been said in the moment, in a fit of anger and passion and it hadn’t felt like this. This felt real. This felt serious and deadly and far more powerful. So he kept saying it over and over again, using it like a shield to protect himself from everything that had happened. Saying it to try and summon Ford back to him, his Ford – his Stanford Pines – who he loved beyond all reason.

“Stanley?”

The question came out in a croak and it was the first time it didn’t sound like an ‘it’ anymore. This voice was…warmer. More alive. But Stan couldn’t trust it, couldn’t trust that he wouldn’t be hurt again, so instead he shushes it, too scared to believe, his grip tightening, “Shh, shh…I love you, shh, I love you…Stanford…”

“Stanley…I’m-I’m back…”

And a choked noise left Stan because he could feel it. He could feel that Ford was back. The creature, the thing, the it – was gone. He was holding his brother again. Ford was back. But Ford pulled away, he pulled away and looked at Stan and when he spoke next his voice was hollow, “I’m sorry.”

Ford got to his feet slowly, deliberately, and then he left. He left. And now here’s Stan, still trying to process it all. Everything around him is annihilated. It’s like a visual metaphor of his whole fucking life right here. Although there are some bright spots. He sees a few lights that survived the massacre. It’s a whole line in fact. White lights still glowing strong and vibrant.

He looks at them and thinks of Wendy, Soos, the kids…yeah, there are some bright spots alright. And right at the end of that line there is one light that is crushed but still trying it’s damnest to glow. The pitiful thing wavers in and out, its connection tenuous at best. He moves over and picks it up, the light flickering in his hand. He rests it against one palm, feels the heat of it.

He takes hold and gently twists it, trying to get it closer to its electrical current. The outer glass is cracked but not entirely broken and his actions cause the light to stutter even worse. He feels a ridiculous lump form in his throat as he works on it with as much patience as he can muster, more patience than he’s ever shown most anything and it’s so stupid – it’s just a dumb Christmas light in a chain of lights – the vast majority of which are broken beyond repair.
But he looks at the ones ahead of it – the strong, bright family that has no problems staying fully lit – and he just keeps at it. The feeble light in his hand is clearly tempted to just throw in the towel, the filament inside wavering, going dark until it’s gone. It’s dead. Burned out. He keeps at it. It slowly sparks back to life, a tiny orange glow in the thin black embers but then its growing more and more and he’s talking to it like an idiot, “Come on, come on…”

Just one more twist, one more careful nudge and it ignites – it glows brightly, beautifully. It glows as if it never went out. The outer casing is still damaged and the inside charge might not be what it once was but it’s lit. It’s salvageable. Stan cradles the now functioning light close to him.

Then he looks up in the direction Ford left in.

He starts shaking his head and gets to his feet. No. He’s not just going to let his brother walk away this time. That’s been his response far too much. And every time, every time he’s tried to keep his distance, things have only gotten worse. No more. This time they’re going to get to the bottom of this come hell or high water. He didn’t say ‘I love you’ after all this friggin’ time just for his brother to walk out.

He lumbers towards the vending machine, ignoring how his throat hurts and his nose is bleeding and on the way he runs into Soos, Wendy, and the kids. They look at him with matching wide eyes, faces distraught. They’re all talking at once. Soos is saying, “Mr. Pines!” and Wendy’s got a hand to her mouth, gasping, “Oh my gosh!” and Mabel and Dipper both cry “Grunkle Stan!” and one of them – or all of them – ask what’s happened and he waves them off, eyes fixed firmly on Soos, “You keep these kids up here!”

“But Mr. Pines-!”

Stan ignores him, ignores everyone – he goes to the vending machine, punches in the code and rushes down the steps. He takes the elevator and exits on the main basement floor where he finds… the place is tidy. Too tidy. There are boxes neatly stacked… packaging, there’s clearly been some packing. He looks at all of it with narrowed eyes, “Ford! Ford, where are you? Come out!”

He gets no answer.

He charges forward and finds a bunch of items littered on Ford’s work table. All of his journals are neatly stacked next to a weird looking watch. Is it a watch? It certainly looks like some sort of personal device that someone could wear on their wrist. But the center of it looks familiar to him. Frighteningly so. The symbols around it…and they’re etched on a circular metal disk and he touches it with one finger and it spins.

He looks at it and begins shaking his head, “This…this looks like the portal…”

“Step away from there,” Ford’s voice rings out. It resounds out of one dark corner of the basement. Stan looks in that direction and his eyes widen as Ford emerges into the light, holding a gun. But not a real gun. A memory eraser gun. He recognizes it from when Ford first arrived, when Dipper gave it to him and his brother used it on the government agents.

Ford points the gun at Stan, his face expressionless, “You weren’t supposed to see that.”

“Ford, what the hell is this?” Stan asks, pointing at the device and Ford takes the gun in both hands, stance becoming more rigid, “I said step away from there!”

“Why the hell should I!? You telling me you’re gonna zap me with that thing!”

Ford grimaces.
Stan’s head rears back, “Holy shit…you…you are, aren’t you? You’re-you’re actually threatening to-to-?”

“Just…just get away from the portal, Stanley.”

“So this is a fucking portal!”

“It’s a personal portal transport device! It’s…going to take me away from here. I’m-I’m not done with it yet…”

“Oh, you’ll never be done with it!” Stan hisses and he reaches out to grab it, to smash it against the floor but Ford fires a warning shot past Stan’s ear. Stan looks at him as if he’s completely lost his mind. Ford swallows thickly, Adam’s apple bobbing as he breathes, “Don’t…don’t make me do that again…”

“Do what again?! You’ve already made up your mind to shoot me with that goddamn thing, haven’t you? HAVEN’T YOU!” This last explosive comment isn’t a question so much as an outright accusation and Ford doesn’t deny it and Stan’s head and heart start pounding in agonized unison, “So, that’s it then? Just like that…you’re going to leave me.”

“You won’t remember.” Ford offers weakly.

“How can you?- How can-?” he stutters and stops, finding it hard to even ask, because his brother’s actions are that incomprehensible to him “What are you even doing?”

“Whatever I have to,” Ford breathes and Stan notices the first cracks beginning to form. Ford is trying so hard to keep it all together but his hands…they’re shaking. Trembling. And an uncertainty has crept into his eyes. Stan’s voice is soft, quiet, “Is it…is it awful that I love you?”

His answer is an empty sob, “You still don’t get it. You never have. It’s me, Stanley. It’s me, that’s awful. Don’t you see? I’m…I’m no good. Never have been. Don’t you remember me turning my back on you when Dad kicked you out? That’s just…just one example. Of how I’ve failed you. I’ve failed you so many times and this…this is who I am. Who I truly am. You don’t know, because I haven’t told you, I was too ashamed to tell you but when I was gone…when I went through the portal…the things I did…the things I went through-”

“I did things, Stanford! I did things just as bad as-”

“I KNOW!” Ford bellows, cutting him off, “I know because it’s MY fault! None of that would have happened to you, if it wasn’t for me! I DID THIS! ALL OF THIS! Don’t you see how you’ve wasted your life on me! You should have…should have left me gone!”

“Because that’s what you would have done,” Stan returns sharply, “If I had been sucked through the portal, you would have left me-”

“No,” Ford interrupts again, “That would have been different! I made the portal! If somehow our places had been reversed, I would have brought you back immediately because, again, it would have been my fault like most every-fucking-thing IS.”

“You’re unbelievable! You really think everything that’s ever happened, that’s ever gone wrong in my life is because of you? Well, I hate to disappoint you, but you’re not that important! Not everything revolves around you, Ford! Not everything stems from your actions and your actions alone! You’re not the wasp’s wings that put things in motion!”

Ford frowns, “Do…do you mean butterfly’s wings-?”
“SHUT UP!” Stan snaps, “Don’t correct me!”

“But that’s just it, I can correct you!” Ford returns grimly, “With this, I can… I can purge myself from your memories and you can… you can move on. You have the Shack and the kids… don’t you see? You deserve better. You always have. You always will. You can’t… I won’t let you let you feel this way for me…”

“Because you can control how I feel?” Stan grumbles, “Yeah, okay – I know I’ve called you a control freak before, but now you’re taking it to a whole new level!”

“It’s not about control! It’s about— it’s about me protecting you. Saving you. Even if I have to save you from yourself.”

“I’m a big boy, Stanford,” Stanley hisses, “I don’t need your protection or for you to try to control how I feel! Christ! You’re such an asshole! You always think you know what’s best for everybody and why? Because you think you know everything, but you don’t, Stanford! You don’t know shit, because if you did, you’d know that I love you and I ain’t gonna stop! No matter what. Not even now, when you’re playing the part of the world’s biggest idiot!”

“I am not-!” Ford shakes his head, letting out a growling sound before he continues, “You don’t understand, Stanley! It’s not love— it obsession! It’s not healthy. What we feel each other—”

Stan goes rigid, “So, you— you feel it, too?”

Ford looks damn near eviscerated by his unexpected confession and he starts shaking his head to himself but Stan latches on to it, “Maybe that’s the real problem then— you loving me. I mean, I get it. Loving me is pretty big step down. That’s why no one’s ever—”

“That’s not the problem,” Ford cuts him off; “You’re not the problem. You never have been. You think too little of yourself. Always have. And people do love you, Stanley. The kids, Soos— hell, Soos loves you so much he wants you for his father. But me… I’m not… I can’t…”

He looks lost, as if unsure what exactly to say, “I’m— damaged. I’m not something you can fix.”

“I DON’T WANT TO FIX YOU! I JUST WANT TO FUCKING LOVE YOU!” Stan roars and Ford’s hands are shaking worse than ever, his resolve slipping and Stan takes advantage of this. He starts marching over towards him but the sound of the elevator dinging halts him. He lets out a string of curses under his breath as Soos, Wendy, and the kids dash out on to the scene.

Stan glares daggers at Soos, “I told you to keep them upstairs!”

“Mr. Pines, I tried but-!”

“Don’t blame him!” Dipper insists, “We forced our way down here. We’ve done it before.”

“Yeah! Attack glitter for the win!” Mabel says, shaking a bag of glitter in his direction.

Dipper looks at Ford and his face pales, “Great Uncle Ford… why… why are you pointing the memory eraser gun at Grunkle Stan?”

Ford looks as if he’s frozen in place. Stan breathes out of his nose loudly, “My brother wants us to forget.”

Dipper looks wounded, “Forget? For-forgot what?”
“He wants us to forget him. Right, Ford? Tell them. Go on, tell the kids. Tell Soos and Wendy. You want us all to forget you, don’t you?”

Ford licks his lips and his tone is wavering, “It’s…for the best.”

Mabel’s eyes grow big and watery, “You…you want us to forget you? Why?”

Ford doesn’t answer. Or he can’t. Either way, Stan has no problem filling in for him, “He wants us all to forget him. He wants us to forget because I love him.”

“STANLEY!” Ford cries, appalled, but Mabel doesn’t pick up on anything out of the ordinary, offering meekly, “We love him too!”

Stan feels his lips twitch because she’s so damned cute and innocent, “No, sweetie…I love him.”

Mabel looks at Stan, then Ford, then Dipper, then back at Stan again. Her eyes grow big and she touches her now pink cheeks, “Ohhhh!”

Dipper frowns, “What? I don’t get it.”

Mabel nudges Dipper, “Stan loves Ford. Like, he lays awake in bed at night thinking about him.”

“What?!” Dipper gasps and he looks between his two uncles, “Whoaaaaa!”

“NO! That’s not-?!” Ford waves the gun at Stan, “What in god’s name are you doing?! Are you crazy?! Why would you-?!”

Stan edges closer to Ford, hands still raised in defense, “It’s too late now…they know. I told them. Now they all know. Everyone important to us knows…now give me the gun…”

“I can’t…can’t believe you…can’t…” Ford looks close to crumbling, his hands are a shaky mess and his eyes toss about the room erratically. Stan is almost at him when Ford tightens his grip and locks his posture, eyes focused squarely on his face, “Stop!”

Stan does but he’s much closer now, “Ford…you don’t want to do this.”

“I…I have to…”

“Then do it.” Stan hisses, “Come on! Go ahead, Big Shot! I’m right here! Pull the trigger.”

Ford starts damn near devouring his bottom lip, chewing it compulsively as he starts shaking again. His eyes are locked with Stan’s as Stan continues, “But if you pull that trigger, you should know you’re a coward. A coward who didn’t even have the guts and the decency to take me out right, to put me out of my misery with a bullet in my brain. Because using that thing…that’s worse than killing me. Taking my memories of you…that’s worse than death to me, Stanford.”

“Stanley…” His name escapes Ford in a weak whine and he can’t stop some tears from leaking out. “Look at me, Ford…look into my eyes,” Stan whispers and Ford does and Stan gives him the smallest, most tender smile, “It’s going to be alright. I love you.”

A choked sound leaves Ford and he draws the gun back, he turns it on himself and tightens his finger on the trigger.

“NO!” Stan shouts and leaps at him, knocking him to the ground. The gun fires but it doesn’t make
any impact, the laser firing off harmlessly to dissolve in the air. In fact, the weapon clatters far away from them as Stanley tugs Ford up and into his embrace, muttering under his breath, “Christ, that was close…too close…you would have forgotten yourself, forgotten who you are…”

Loud, ugly wrenching sobs escape Ford. He has his face completely buried in his hands and he’s moaning in a ragged, strangled voice, “Wouldn’t-wouldn’t have worked anyway…always gonna be like this…always broken…oh god, oh god…Stanley…”

“I know,” Stan mutters, crushing his brother to him, rocking him roughly, “I know; I know…it’s alright, it’s alright…”

Stan looks up and the kids look devastated. Soos and Wendy wear similar expressions, clearly unable to fathom what they just witnessed. Stan waves them all away with one hand. Soos takes a gentle hold of Dipper’s shoulder and turns him away from the scene. Wendy goes to do the same with Mabel but Mabel darts out, coming closer to her uncles.

She doesn’t touch either one of them but she meets Stan’s eyes head on. Her eyes are watery but she gives him the barest of smiles and then one firm, solid nod. Stan licks his lips and returns it. Mabel goes to leave, walking towards Wendy, who is waiting for her with Soos and Dipper. She doesn’t even get far before a loud sound rings out.

It sounds like someone magnified the sound of a piece of paper tearing in half, followed by a thick, heavy boom like thunder. Mabel turns as does Stan. Ford, who had moments before been crying, lets out a wild cry and pulls away from Stan, charging to his feet, “No! No, it can’t be; it can’t be!”

But it is.

From the dark corner where Ford had been standing earlier a green, slimy portal yawns open. A thin voice screeches out, “AT LAST! I FOUND YOU! I FOUND YOU!”

Long, twisted, black tendrils curl out of the opening. They reach out, searching and immediately zero in on Ford. They take a firm grip of him, coiling all around his body and Ford struggles madly, eyes wild with massive terror. Stan reaches out, grabbing his arms and tugging, trying to free him. The tendril tugs hard, lugging both twins closer to the portal. Mabel throws herself at one of Stan’s feet, wrapping around it, trying to ground him.

“What the hell is this?!” Stan asks and Ford answers, “Them! It’s them! Trying to take me back to—there!”

“There?” Dipper asks as he runs over, wrapping around Stan’s other leg to offer more weight. Soos and Wendy also jump in, trying to help Stan free Ford from the tendrils. More emerge from the portal – an innumerable amount – some with huge sharp, thorns lashing out and Wendy gasps as one of them knocks her hat off, another scrapping her arm, blood spraying out.

Soos also gets hit with one or two, hissing as they cut and tear at him. Dipper and Mabel manage to avoid the more dangerous ones, unscathed so far, but the situation is clearly spiraling out of control. The thin voice rings out, “Give him to me! Give him back! He belongs to me!”

“Like hell!” Stan growls but Ford looks resigned, “Stanley, Stanley…let me go.”

“No!”

“Stanley…” Ford whispers, “Stanley…I told you…I tried to warn you…”

“Shut up!”
“Stan… I love you,” Ford returns and it’s the first time he’s said. He finally says it aloud and, of course, he’d choose to say it now. His eyes lock with Stan’s, “It’s okay. Let me go.”

The tendrils whip out again, some of them pounding the floor with their full, thick weight and the action shakes the whole foundation of the room. It knocks Wendy and Soos back, it makes Dipper and Mabel lose their grip. Stan looks into Ford’s eyes and he looks so… resigned.

Stan’s mouth fixes into a firm line, “I love you, too.”

He lets Ford go.

And then he immediately darts towards the portal. He jumps past the tendrils and he dives in head first, shouting, “You want someone?! Then you take me!”

“STAN! NO!” Ford bellows but it’s too late. The tendrils release him as quickly as they took hold. Instead they fold in on themselves or they wrap around Stan, engulfing him, as they retreat back into the portal and another boom rings out as it collapses in on itself. Closed. Gone.

Ford dashes to the spot where it was and all that is there is a blank stone wall. He collapses at it, fists pounding on the stone, bloody fingers clawing, hysteria gripping him tight as he calls out Stanley’s name over and over again. But there is no answer. There’s nothing. Nothing but a sad, broken old man uselessly beating at stone.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

WARNING - Blood, frightening imagery, torture

THEN

He’s still going to lose him.

After their ‘break up’, Stan had been damn near inconsolable. And angry. Really, really angry. Because he couldn’t understand why Ford would want to end the good thing they had going. No, okay, actually – he could totally understand it. But that didn’t mean he had to like it. Especially the way Ford went about it. It had been a dick move to tell their mother first. Granted, she hadn’t known that Lee was Stanley, but that was beside the point.

Ford should have come to Stan first. He should have been up front about it. Instead he had to get the information second – no, third hand – from their father of all people. Stan knows he probably overreacted but sometimes his emotions are hard to control – they bubble to the surface and he reacts instantly. He has the same problem with talking – words pop into his mind and come right out of his mouth. It’s just the way he is.

Oh, he can lie and act with the best of them – hell, better than the best of them. But for the most part, he was actually pretty genuine. He’s always genuine with Ford, so for Ford to do this…

As such, Stan spends a week or so not talking to him, avoiding him and then – then he just makes up his mind to change things around. He decides to use all the heartbreak and the sorrow and to channel it into a very convincing performance. One so convincing he fools even himself. He creates a persona – an idea of what ‘Stanley Pines’ should be, the way everyone wants him to be.

Sure, this ‘Stanley Pines’ is a mere shadow of who he really is, but it was who he will have to be if he wants his brother back. If he can’t have Ford as something more, something deeper than he will take what he can get. He’ll take brother, he’ll take twin, he’ll take best friend. He will take anything Ford is willing to give him because it’s better than nothing.

He knows it’s pathetic but there it is. When Ford wins the science fair he makes sure to congratulate him. When he sees his friends and teachers he makes sure to smile and laugh and joke like nothing is out of the ordinary. He faux boxes with his father and kisses his mother’s cheek and is nothing but smiles. He can do this – he can make this work, he can play for all the world as someone else. He can do it forever.

And then they’re called to the principal’s office.

Or rather, Ford is called. And the secretary leaves the room to get a cup of coffee and Stan’s curiosity is such that he can’t help but press his ear against the door and listen in. Listen in as his world shatters apart. Listen in to hear that it doesn’t matter how hard he tries, how much he fakes it – he’s nothing. He’s nobody.

And he’s going to lose Ford anyway.
Ford had talked about West Coast Tech on and off since the beginning of high school. Some other egghead had mentioned it to him and Ford had told Stan about what a great college it was, how it offered such interesting courses. He’d told him about some of them and the titles alone made Stan want to go to sleep. How could a class called ‘Methods of Experimental Physics’ be interesting? The only exciting word in there was ‘experimental’ and Stan knew they weren’t using it the way he would want it to be used.

But Ford had been jazzed about everything he read on the school and Stan had humored him because that’s what any good brother would do. He knew just as well as Ford did that there was no way in hell he was going to college. Neither of them was, because their parents couldn’t afford it and frankly didn’t want to. Neither of them had gone to college – they had jumped right into the workforce and they expected their kids to do the same.

This had been fine for Stan, because he was more than ready to go out and explore the world. Hence his desire to see the boat finished. Yes, a part of him recognized that it was a waste of Ford’s potential but so what? Ford would be brilliant no matter – he didn’t need a fancy college to prove that. And if Ford really wanted to go, he could apply for a scholarship or something. But Ford didn’t because he didn’t really want to go.

Okay, okay – again – not quite true. Ford hadn’t applied for a scholarship because he’d been too self-conscious to. Stan, for the most part, didn’t care what others thought of him, but Ford – well, as smart as he was, Ford did care. He cared how others perceived him and since he already had a bad image of himself, he couldn’t fathom that anyone else could see anything different. So, no attempts at a scholarship had ever been made to West Coast Tech or any other school.

And Stan was okay with this because it kept the window open for Ford to go off with him. Even with the recent dissolution of their more personal relationship, Stan clung to the idea that the Stan O’ War was going to happen. That they would sail off together, hunt for treasure and adventure and maybe, just maybe, when they were away from home – away from judgmental eyes, Stan can…can convince Ford to love him. To love him like-like that. Like the way he wants to be loved.

As more than a brother, as more than a twin, as more than a best friend. He knows he should let it go, that it’s for the best but he…can’t. In his secret hearts of hearts there’s this awful glimmer of hope that just won’t die, won’t extinguish. And it holds to the idea, the pure belief, that he can win Ford back.

But now the glimmer is starting to fade and Stan is having a difficult time keeping it going, keeping himself positive because of what he overheard. Still, he does his best and after they leave the school he manages to convince Ford to go with him down to the beach, down to the swing set they’ve horsed around on since they were kids.

They sit there, just lazily swinging back and forth, eyes watching the glorious sunset. Stan keeps almost speaking and then stopping, having a hard time pumping himself up to broach this most tender of topics but finally he chuckles with no humor, remarking, “Heh. Joke’s on them if they think you wanna go to some stuffy college on the other side of the country. Once we get the Stan O’ War complete, it’s gonna be beaches, babes, and international treasure hunting for us!”

Stan adds the babes as a type of enticement, proving – yet again – that he’s totally over Ford and their relationship. It’s all part of the person he is now; the one he wants to sell.

But Ford doesn’t seem to care about that, he’s still holding that stupid pamphlet as he says softly, “Look, Stan, I can’t pass up a chance like this. This school has cutting edge programs and multi-dimensional paradigm theory!”
Again, how on earth can that be interesting? But naturally Ford looks jazzed and – as if to add insult to injury – ridiculous cute about the whole idea. Stan does his best to deflect it, moving his arms like a robot, “Beep boop. I am a nerd robot. That’s you. That’s what you sound like.”

“Heheh,” Ford chuckles; that bumbling thing firmly in place and it’s like, ‘Aw, come on! Stop it with the cute, will ya?!’ as he continues, an unsure note dropping in his tone, “Ah, well...if the college board isn’t impressed with my experiment tomorrow, then...okay, I’ll do the treasure-hunting thing.”

Stan’s throat feels thick, heart tight as he asks a question he knows he knows he won’t like the answer to, “And if they are?”

“Well then,” Ford returns with a dopey look on his face as he punches weakly at Stan’s arm, “I guess you better come visit me on the other side of the country!”

He laughs and Stan plasters on the world’s fakest smile and if Ford can see through it, he certainly doesn’t say so. Instead he gets up and leaves, calling out to Stan over his shoulder about how he’s going to go ahead and start walking home. Stan watches him go, answering with a weak, “Yeah, I’ll be along in a minute.”

But he knows he won’t be. He knows he’ll just be sitting here, thinking about how his life is going to pieces faster than he can handle. It’s bad enough to lose Ford romantically, but now he’s going to lose him physically. He knows the college board will be impressed. How can they not be? Ford’s a friggin’ treasure and they’re going to snatch him up. It was just like their principal said – Stanford is going places.

He was always going to go places. He’s too smart, too handsome, too-too perfect. Honestly, Stan’s always wondered how someone like Ford wound up in their family. His father, his mother, himself...they all have some linkable traits but Ford...Ford is above them, beyond them, and Stan knows Ford views this as a failing, but he’s always known better-known it as a true virtue without measure.

Ford can get out – Ford can be bigger, better, and brighter than all of them. His future is gold. Stan’s is tarnished copper – if that. Especially without Ford. Without him, he’s just one half of a dynamic duo. He knows he won’t make it without him. He’ll end up just like the man said – scraping barnacles off the salt water taffy store or worse.

Ford will go to this school; he’ll be miles and miles and miles away. A world away. He’ll meet new and interesting people. He’ll make friends with them and have inside jokes with them and he’ll forget all about Stanley. And then...and then they’ll be someone different. Someone special. Some girl or some boy and they’ll be just as smart, just as flawless, just as fucking perfect and Ford will...oh god, he’ll fall in love with them.

And he’ll kiss them and touch them and he’ll do so without restraint, without shame, and he’ll bring them home with him and introduce them to their parents and he’ll marry them and have kids with them and Stan knows that if it’s a boy, they’ll be some hell to pay but probably not much if Ford’s a friggin’ billionaire, which is really all his Pops cares about – his mother too, probably.

If Ford gets enough money they’ll overlook what they’ll probably just label as his ‘eccentricities’ and Ford will be with this guy and the guy will say, ‘I love you’ and Ford will say...he’ll say...

Stan clutches his head in his hands, picturing Ford saying those four letter words to this fictional man or woman and the gender flips back and forth but it doesn’t matter what their gender is. They could identify as no gender at all but that’s not what matters-what matters is the idea of Ford loving any other living thing more than he could possibly love Stanley and Stan knows this is crazy and sick and
wrong and he’s selfish and awful and cruel but he doesn’t want it.

He doesn’t want his brother to love anyone or anything more than him.

*What’s wrong with you?* His mind hisses. *How can you be so possessive? So greedy?*

Stan doesn’t know – honestly, he doesn’t. But then, every person has this ugly, awful side. This dark seed within them that they keep to themselves and never voice aloud and this is just a bit of his. This is a part of him that he knows is bad but it’s just…there. Like a thorn embedded deep inside and normally he can ignore it, but at this moment it’s sharp and insistent. It’s poking and prodding him and he finds himself getting to his feet and he’s walking and walking and then he’s in his car and he’s driving and driving.

Next thing he knows he’s back in the school and he digs a bag of toffee peanuts out of the backseat of his car. He fitfully munches on them as he sneaks into the gym. All of the science experiments are still up and as he looks at them he finds himself seething. An uncontrollable, sour anger rises up inside of him and when he sees Ford’s stupid project it crashes down on him, making him see red.

He tosses the bag to the ground and points at it, thundering, “This is all YOUR fault, ya dumb machine!”

One fist whips out and strikes the table it rests on. The machine stops and sputters and a piece pops off and smoke comes out. And it stops. The perpetual motion machine – which should always be in motion – *stops.* Stan looks at it, horrified – his anger quickly melting away into panic, “Oh no! Oh no no, what did I do!?"

Stan pokes and prods the machine. He finds the bit that fell off and clicks it back into place and it starts whirring again. A little bit. Somewhat. He feels a little calmer…it’s working now. Right?

“There. Alright. Good as new. Probably.” He tries to reassure himself and he finds a sheet to cover it, gingerly hiding it from his view. It’s fine. It has to be. He sneaks out of the gym and his mind is consumed with the memory of the machine sputtering to stop.

He should tell Ford.

That’s what he should do.

Just go home and tell his brother…

Tell him what exactly?

Stan sits behind the wheel of his car, staring out at nothing as his thoughts sink over him. What is he going to say? *Hey, Ford – I couldn’t deal with the idea of you having a future and being happy without me and loving someone else, so I went to the school and trashed your project but, y’know, I think it’s okay now, ’cause when I left it was still spinning? Kinda weakly, yeah, but, y’know…*

Stan can’t even finish the imaginary conversation because it’s so stupid. So pathetic. Ford will hate him if he tells him that. And he can deal with most everything but the idea of Ford hating him…it’s unbearable.

Besides, he fixed the machine. It was working when he left.

Right?

Right.
And, okay, if it works he’s gonna lose Ford forever because Ford’s going to go off to this school and forget all about him and they’ll be adults and only see each other on special occasions but oh god, oh god…

Stan’s forehead crashes on to the top of the wheel and he moans aloud.

Christ, why does his life have to be so goddamn awful all of the sudden?

He starts the vehicle and drives home and tries to find some silver lining in his future even though he knows for a fact there isn’t one. There’s nothing but a long, winding, blank road in front of him that he’s going to have to walk alone. All alone. Until the very end. An end that, as far as he's concerned, without Ford, can’t come soon enough.

NOW

Ford Pines sits there.

He doesn’t move.

He stares at the stone wall, the wall covered in his blood, and he doesn’t move a single muscle. He barely blinks. They try everything – talking to him, shouting at him, shaking him. Each of them in turn – Wendy, Mabel and Dipper do whatever they can to snap him out of it but Ford doesn’t respond. It’s like he’s not even there. Once his crying died off, once his screams ended, once his fingers quit digging at the wall he just…froze. And he’s been frozen ever since.

It’s been over an hour or maybe longer – Soos doesn’t really know anymore. All he knows is that he hasn’t done a blessed thing. He’s been just as stationary. He let the kids and Wendy try their best, watched their varied reactions but he himself has done nothing. Until now. Now he adjusts his ball cap over his head and walks over to them, voice quiet, “You dudes should head upstairs. I got this.”

“Soos?” Wendy turns to him, eyes wide, and it’s as if she forgot he was even here. Not that he can blame her. It’s been…a rough night. He looks at the wall and Ford, then back to Wendy, “Go on, take Dipper and Mabel upstairs.”

“What? Are you crazy? Why would I do that?! We have to do something! We have to do something now! Didn’t you see Mr. Pines-”

“I saw,” Soos cuts her off, voice firm, “I agree. But that’s not going to happen without him.”

He points to Stanford, who Wendy glares at, “He caused this!”

“We don’t know that.”

“Soos-!”

“Wendy,” Soos pleads gently, “Dipper and Mabel are a mess, so are you. Go upstairs, take a breath, and I’ll handle this.”

“How?”

“I’m a repair man, right?” he offers weakly and Wendy says his name again and it’s clear she’s about to point out how a repair man can’t repair people but he touches her shoulder and says, “Dude. Trust me. Please.”
Wendy meets his eyes and then, slowly, nods. She goes over to Mabel, who’s a sobbing wreck on the floor and Dipper, who’s still trying to reach his uncle. She talks to each of them quietly and while both are clearly reluctant, they each look at Soos and they must see something on his face that convinces them to follow her out.

Once those three are gone, Soos goes to the downstairs restroom. He searches the cabinets and finds some bandages and antiseptic. He takes them and a damp rag and he goes over to Mr. Pi…Ford. He doesn’t want to call Ford, ‘Mr.Pines’. Mr. Pines is someone else.

Someone who just vanished, sucked into some portal by some monster to god knows where.

Soos tries not to think about it. Not right now. Instead he sits down next to Ford. Ford’s bloody hands are cradled in front of him and he’s still staring at the wall, staring at it as if he sees a storm on the other side. A storm he can’t stop.

Soos clears his throat, “If it’s okay with you, I’m gonna bandage up those hands of yours.”

Ford doesn’t answer and Soos doesn’t expect him too. Instead, Soos picks up one hand and starts cleaning it with the rag. Ford doesn’t move, doesn’t flinch, doesn’t acknowledge him at all. Soos is okay with that. He’s focused on the task at hand. He cleans the deep cuts and abrasions and some of them are really deep. He wonders idly if they need stitches. He has no idea how to do that. Honestly, he’s not that big a fan of blood in general and he’s surprised he’s not more squeamish about all of this.

But he’s hurt himself on the job before and at this particular moment, he’s pretty damn numb, so it’s actually rather easy to do. Especially since it’s not himself that needs fixing up. He puts antiseptic on the spots that need it and he wraps the bandages around each hand carefully. This continues for several moments, nothing but silence between the two of them.

When Soos speaks he barely recognizes his own voice, it’s so lifeless, “I know you and I haven’t talked much, but you really gotta snap out of this, dude.”

Nothing.

He keeps talking, “I’m gonna be honest with you-I still don’t really know what just happened. I mean, we got back from Wendy’s and we find Mr. Pines looking like a car hit him and he told me to keep the kids upstairs. He’s asked me that before…when he first started up the portal to get you back. I failed him then and tonight, I failed him again. But last time, it worked out. I mean, he got you back and we heard your spellbinding tale and it seemed like a happy ending. Not so much this time, huh?”

Soos looks into Ford’s eyes and they’re blank.

“Do you know where Mr. Pines is?”

No response.

“Can you-can you bring him back?”

Still nothing.

Soos looks at the wall, shaking his head, then back to Ford and his expression is soft, “Look, dude, I’ve known Mr. Pines a long time. Longer than the kids, longer than Wendy…and I always knew he was…y’know, missing someone. I knew because I used to miss someone too.”
His lips twitch, eyes casting down, “I stopped missing my someone, ‘cause I knew he was never gonna come back. He…made his choice. Not to be a part of my life. And I’ve accepted that – I’ve found my family. And my family is here. With Wendy, Dipper, Mabel and Mr. Pines. They’ve all been so good to me and you…you’re kind of new to the family but, dude…I was hoping we could include you too.”

He breathes in deeply, “Because, I mean, like I said…I’ve known Mr. Pines a long time and ever since you’ve been back…he’s been…better. Like, there was nothing wrong with him, but now he’s more…whole. I mean, I know you two dudes have your problems or whatever and you fight and you haven’t resolved everything that happened between you all those years ago, but together you’re… like, you complete him? And I think that’s some dumb line from a stupid movie but it… fits.”

Soos thinks Ford actually blinks a little longer at this so he continues, desperate to see if he can get more of a reaction, “And, I mean, I guess you’re also kind of freaking out about what Mr. Pines told us. About how you and him are…ah…”

He removes his cap and scratches at his forehead, then lowers it back into place, “But…you shouldn’t be. Mean, at least, not on my end. I-I don’t care if you two…feel that way for one another. Long as your happy – who cares, right? And honestly, I’ve already like, written four fan fictions like that so…”

Ford’s blink is definitely longer this time. Soos can’t help but grin, feeling stupid but still talking, “You probably don’t know what that is, but fan fiction is when you like something someone else made and you sort of expand on it. I like Mr. Pines and I like to think of him as-as…I mean, don’t tell him and this is sort of a secret and I’m kind of amazed I’m telling you of all people since you and I haven’t ever really even had a full conversation but he’s pretty much my hero.”

Soos looks into Ford’s eyes and he chews on his bottom lip, “He’s my hero and I’d really appreciate it if you’d save him.”

Ford’s eyes meet his and for once he looks…alive.

“I’d like you to save him ‘cause only you can, dude. There’s nothing the rest of us can do. You got the smarts and all these inventions; I mean…you can do something, right?”

A wheezing breath, closed eyes, and Ford slumps down, body curving in more before words escape, spoken so softly they’re almost inaudible, “I don’t know.”

“Sure you do. You’re Stanford Pines, right? You’re the author! I-I know you can do it!”

“You sound like Dipper.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“It isn’t one,” Ford returns bitterly, “He has too much faith in me.”

“Mr. Pines has faith in you, too.”

A pained noise leaves Ford at that, “And look what it cost him.”

Soos takes Ford’s shoulders in his hands, “It won’t cost him anything if you hurry.”

“You don’t understand…’”
“No,” Soos retorts quickly, hotly, “I don’t. I’ll admit that. But you do. You’re a genius, Ford! You made the portal, you built the bunker – you’ve done all sorts of wacko bonkers crazy things and you can do this. You can bring Mr. Pines back – you can save him like he saved you.”

Ford looks up and his eyes meet Soos’s and Soos gives him an encouraging smile, “Come on, dude…you gotta! You love him.”

Ford swallows thickly and Soos firmly shakes his shoulders once, driving his point home, “And he loves you.”

“He…he does…doesn’t he?”

Soos nods, “Like, super serious – you two could probably totally get married and no one in this town’d know or care. I did that in my second fic. White wedding and everything. I was the best man, dude!”

The sound that comes out of Ford is strange – it’s like a laugh that his body doesn’t want to release but it can’t help itself. Soos smiles and gets to his feet, he holds out a hand for Ford, “Come on. Get up – we’ll go get the others and we’ll all work together – all night, all day – as long as it takes. We’ll do whatever we have to – for Mr. Pines. And for you.”

Ford takes Soos hand and gets to his feet. He looks at him and can’t help but grasp his shoulder with one hand, “Stan’s lucky to have you for a son.”

“Oh! I’m-I’m not actually-”

Ford tightens his grip, “Yes. You are.”

Soos smiles, blushing as he tugs down the bill of his baseball cap.

THERE

Darkness.

There’s nothing but darkness.

Stan can’t see. And he can’t move. He can feel his body but he can’t move any of his limbs. It’s like he’s trapped. He tries to speak but no sound comes. He’s just a consciousness floating in black emptiness. It’s frustrating and as time goes on and on it starts to morph into something more frightening. He’s still. Too still and there’s nothing to break up this monotony.

Nothing but his thoughts and his thoughts are jumbled. He remembers leaping into the portal, he remembers the claustrophobic feel of those tendrils wrapping around him and then there had been an explosion and lights and pain and…now this.

Was he dead? Was this hell? Maybe this was what hell really was – being alive but not able to do anything at all but…exist. But then he feels something…slither over him. Then something else – like tiny little wisps of…something. It makes him think of bugs. There are…bugs on him. All over him. Touching him everywhere – crawling all over and he can’t get rid of them, can’t touch them, all he can do is feel them.

They brush his lips and his neck and they work their way under his clothes. They filter through his hair and over his eyes and near his nostrils and his ears. And there’s nothing he can do. Nothing.
They just…wash all over him. And he’s still breathing somehow and living somehow and then there’s this awful sound – like a screeching, twisted wail and a variety of colors explode before his eyes and his whole body is burning – he’s burning alive and he would scream but this is denied him and then and then…

He’s in the Shack.

Stan blinks, stunned, and he runs his hands all over himself, shuddering. He’s fine. There’s nothing on him. He’s not burning. He’s fine. He’s sitting in his armchair in the television room. He’s wearing his fez, white under shirt, boxers and slippers. Nothing is out of the ordinary. He frowns, “What-?”

“Grunkle Stan?” Mabel’s voice comes from around the corner and she bounds into the room. She looks normal; mouth bright with shiny braces but something feels…off. He can’t put his finger on what, but he tries to shake it off, “Yes?”

“Were you sleeping?” she asks innocently and she crawls on to one of the chair’s armrests.

He blinks, “I…yeah. Guess so.”

She giggles and then she frowns at him, her head tilting to one side, “Grunkle Stan, what’s that?”

“What’s what, sweetie?”

“Your teeth…” she points at his mouth and he reaches inside. His dentures are still in place and he doesn’t understand what’s wrong, “Yeah, what about them?”

“They’re fake.”

He huffs, “Yeah, and?”

“Can I see them?”

Stan frowns, eyebrows knitting together, “You…want to see my dentures?”

She nods, grinning, and it’s hard to resist that smile but…

“Why?”

“Just curious! Come on, hand ‘em over!”

“You’re not…not going to decorate them with glitter or something, are you?”

She laughs, “Of course not, silly!”

He shrugs and removes them and she snatches them from him. She looks at them, her tongue sticking out, “Oh, gross! They’re wet!”

He rolls his eyes because of course they’re wet! They were just in his mouth and in reflection it is pretty gross and he probably shouldn’t have handed them to her and he doesn’t know why exactly he-

Mabel crushes them.

With one hand.

They fall apart, turn to gray ashes and fall to the floor. She looks at him and shakes her head, tone
sad, “You shouldn’t have to have those. I know you probably had some pretty awful dental care, what with being homeless and all – but I can help!”

The fingers on her right hand curl up, arching like claws and she jerks them forward quickly and Stan cries out in agony. Pain explodes inside of his mouth, his whole skull screaming and blood dribbles out and there’s something sharp happening inside of his gums and *Jesus*, it hurts, it hurts, *it hurts, it hurts*…

He collapses to the carpet and he feels…something growing inside his mouth…

It seems to last an eternity, but when it stops his tongue touches…teeth. He…has teeth. Real teeth.

Mabel beams, “See! Good as new! I don’t like my toys broken!”

Stan spits out blood and rubs his aching jaw, “How-?”

“Psh! I can perceive the universe as a mass of quantum strings! Makes it easy enough to pull and twist them to alter the fabric of reality! Regrowing your teeth is child’s play.” Her tone has become…thinner. Squeakier. And her eyes…they’re yellow. Feral. She grins and shows him sharp, needle-like teeth, “I can make yours like mine. If you want.”

Stan scowls at the thing that is clearly not Mabel. Dipper comes into the room and he has a similar look to him – but instead of yellow eyes his are a bright orange. They have the same cat like slits and his teeth are also sharp. When he speaks his voice is deeper than Dipper’s voice could ever hope to be, “We’ve heard a lot about you, Stanley Pines.”

The thing that is not Mabel – which Stan has decided to call Thing One –smiles and the smile is demented and stretching far past the capacity of her face, breaking the skin, “Oh yes! All about you! Your brother Stanford said your name a lot. He had a lot of memories to play with!”

“You…stay away from him…” Stan spits, more blood coming out.

“But he’s mine!”

Stan gets to his feet and he glares down at it, “Like hell!”

The thing that is not Dipper –Thing Two –snaps his fingers and the sharp sound of breaking bones hits the air as Stan’s knees shatter. The sound that escapes Stan is one of deep, animal pain but he won’t give them the satisfaction of more. Thing One’s eyes seem to almost grow bigger, glowing, “Oh! He’s a fighter! I like his spirit! He’s gonna be fun! Just like his brother!”

“You sure you don’t want the other?”

“Eh, we can go get him when this one breaks!”

“Do your worst!” Stan hisses and Thing One comes closer, looks into his eyes with its twisted version of Mabel’s face, “Don’t worry. We will.”
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Warning - blood, violence, fisticuffs, child abuse, disturbing imagery/trippy nightmarish moments, mentions of prostitution, drug use, alcohol, homelessness, teenage angst…the later chapters won’t be this dark, I hope but better to cover all possible triggers I should think than to skip something…

THEN

“This was no accident, Stan; you did this! You did this because you couldn’t handle me going to college on my own!” Ford shouts and Stan flinches at each word.

He does his best to explain, “Look, this was a mistake! Although if you think about it, maybe there’s a silver lining…huh? Treasure hunting?”

Ford’s eyes widen, “Are you kidding me? Why would I want to do anything with the person who sabotaged my entire future?!”

Ford shoves Stan and he stumbles, hurt – Ford has never raised a hand to him in anger. Never. And then suddenly their father is there – he’s there and he’s a furious force of nature as he grabs a handful of Stan’s shirt, “You did what, you knucklehead?”

A baby wails and his mother appears, “Stanley? What’s goin’ on in here?”

Stan is growing desperate, panicked, as the whole household turns on him, “Wait, no, I can explain; it was a mistake!”

But he can’t explain. In a flash he’s out on the street and his father is throwing him to the sidewalk, pointing at him as he shouts, “You ignoramus! Your brother was gonna be our ticket out of this dump! All you ever do is lie and cheat and ride on your brother’s coattails. Well this time you cost our family potential millions! And until you make us a fortune, you aren’t welcome in this household!”

He chuck a packed bag at Stan who catches it, stunned, “What?! Stanford, tell him he’s bein’ crazy!”

Stan looks up at his brother, who watches from their bedroom window. Ford is holding the West Coast Tech pamphlet and his eyes are full of sorrow. He clutches the pamphlet tighter and shuts the curtains. Stan feels like someone tore his heart directly from his chest as he gasps, “Stanford-?… don’t leave me hangin’. High six?”

Mr. Pines slams the door closed and Stan is left alone, tossed out of the house – tossed out of his life. He scowls; anger raging inside of him, “FINE! I can make it on my own! I don’t NEED you! I don’t need ANYONE! I’ll make millions and you’ll rue the day you turned your back on me!”

He’s talking to Ford more than anyone else as he gets into his car and he drives away, drives like a maniac – hitting trashcans and there are tears clogging his vision and…and then the car stops, it
slowly lurches backwards…

It reverses and he grabs the wheel, tries to stop it, but it’s beyond his control. It’s pulled by an invisible force and he’s in front of the house again. The driver’s side door opens and somehow he’s tossed out. His father is standing there, arms crossed, and there’s a reflection on his glasses – making it impossible for his eyes to be seen. Stan is on the sidewalk and the concrete rolls beneath him, coming to life and it grows sticky and wet, clinging to him like glue.

“Wh…what?” he breathes and he sinks into it, trapped. He looks up and the curtains have been thrown back. Ford is looking down at him, the white of his eyes is burning bright–his pupils and irises are dark black as he speaks in a sinister whisper that he can somehow hear through the glass of the window, “You ruined my life, you miserable mistake.”

“No…Ford, I didn’t-!”

“I should have devoured you in the womb.”

“FORD!” Stan gasps and their father comes closer, hulking over him like a monster. He grabs Stan by the collar of his shirt again, drags him up from the pavement he was sinking into and the action is like someone’s peeling his skin off. He raises Stan up, strikes out at him, a sharp right hook meeting with his son’s chin as he growls, “All you do is lie and cheat. All you do is ruin this family. You are a disappointment.”

“Pops…”

“You’re a disgrace. A loser. You’re weak, an utter embarrassment, I just want to get rid of you and I have, I have, I have…” Mr. Pines hits him again and again and Stan stumbles back, he falls to the pavement again but it’s solid now. The concrete scraps his skin and there’s a sea of glass waiting for him. It wasn’t there before and the tiny, sharp chips cut into his flash.

He cries out but doesn’t have much more time to react before his father is over him again, hitting him. He punches him over and over and for some reason Stan can’t fight back. His arms won’t work and he’s being beaten to a bloody pulp right in the middle of the street. And then Ford is there, standing by his father’s shoulder, just…watching…not doing anything and Stan feels one arm rise weakly, hand reaching out for his brother, eyes pleading as he moans Ford’s name.

But Ford does nothing. Nothing but look down at him grimly and slowly, slowly a smile starts to creep up his face but it’s…too big…too many teeth…

And Stan’s sees stars at the next strike, knuckles tearing at his eyebrow until there’s blood in his eyes. He blinks and he can feel the viscous liquid clumping in his eyelashes and it stings. The next blow cuts open his cheek and the following one impacts his jaw, dislocating it and there’s something in his mouth that feels like teeth and this…this…this isn’t what happened…

This isn’t then…this is…

THERE

The blows stop.

Pops’s fist is raised but it doesn’t make another impact.

Stan spits out a mouthful of blood, licks his lips and his arms have life again. He hits his father square
in the face. He rolls over, groaning and coughing. Broken teeth and gore falls from his mouth as he gags and he clutches at his aching sides. He looks down at his hands and watches as their youth slips away. They wrinkle before his very eyes and he feels his whole body morph, growing older. His teenage visage falls away and he’s his real age again.

But he’s still beat to shit and he closes his eyes, huffing dryly, his words coming out in a jumble because it’s hard for him to talk in his current, mutilated state, “That all you got?”

He hears a laugh, “You might just be my new favorite.”

Good, he thinks. Good. He’ll be this Thing’s fucking favorite toy forever so long as it never goes anywhere near Ford again. He can take this. He can take it. He’s been taking it for… god, how long has he been here? He doesn’t really know anymore. It feels like… months. But maybe it’s just been days. And it’s always like this. Always pain and blood and horror.

But he can deal with it.

He’s dealt with worse.

The Things – both One and Two – have had their various fun with him. Thing One likes him the best though – comes to him quite often in its Mabel get up and it confides to him in its mockery of her voice, “You’re lucky you’re here, you know. Our neighboring dimension is made of nightmares and they’re itching to get into your world. Even sent an emissary to put things in motion. You think we’re bad…they’re really nasty customers!”

Thing Two, always as the twisted version of Dipper, agrees, “But they like to travel. We don’t. We like to bring our toys home, play with them here. Your brother managed to sneak away. But you found him for us, kept him in one place!”

“Yes, we couldn’t get him to when he first escaped…there was a breach and we had to repair it. And then he moved around and around and around.” Thing One’s head snaps and twists, literally moves in circles as it says this, Mabel’s face still in place as it does so, “We were worried we’d never find him again! But then you kept him safe and thanks to his portal, your dimension is so much easier to cross into.”

Thing Two snorts, “Unless you’re our neighbors.”

“Oh, they’ll get there soon enough. They just play by different rules,” Thing One giggles, tiny legs kicking out in childish glee much as Mabel herself would do, “Besides they sure do know how to party.”

Thing Two tugs on Dipper’s cap and shrugs, “True. They’ll raze 46\ to the ground. Violate every part of it.”

Thing One claps its hands together, rubbing them, face full of glee, “Yes, yes…so much better for you here. We’ll keep you forever and ever and play with you and have a lot of fun! And when you break, we’ll get your brother back!”

Stan snorts and runs a hand along his mouth, pushing the blood along his cheek, “You won’t touch ‘im. ‘Cause I ain’t gonna break. Not ever. If this is your best so far, color me unimpressed.”

Thing One looks delighted, “You really are gunning for the top spot, aren’t you?”

Stan isn’t, but he doesn’t think there’s anything these schmucks can do that’ll be any worse than what he’s already suffered. And as time drags on, it really seems like he’s succeeding. In fact, Thing
One starts showing a loss of patience as Stan just…takes it. He deals with every hand he’s given – every punishment, every torture, every conjured dark fantasy. He rolls with each punch and stays the same – unflappable in the face of darkness.

Because deep down, he knows it’s not real. Oh, yes – it hurts like a son of a bitch. Seeing the things they do with Mabel and Dipper. The walks down the memory lane of his past. There’s not too much he wants to remember or relive in his long life and they make sure to plunder all of it. They go over when Ford broke up with him, when his father kicked him out, when he had to spend his first winter on the streets – when he was starving and thirsty and exhausted. When he was dirty and drunk and high on drugs.

They spend a particular amount of time on his lowest points – his time in prison, his selling his body for cash. Oh, they love those two in particular. The humiliation, the shame – the way his eyes took on a dead look because that’s how he got through it all, that’s how he survived. He died a little. Each time, each horrible thing…a part of him just shriveled up and was gone because that was the best way to handle it. Better that then to experience it. To think about it.

And time has helped him to forget – time has helped to soften and blur the memories, but they make sure to wash them off and bring them clear to the front and center of his mind. They make him remember and re-experience it all over again and again with high precision – all in an attempt to break him.

But he won’t be.

He refuses to be.

He’ll stay strong and defiant until they either get bored of him or grow the stones to off him for good. He’ll hold out and he’ll endure because he has to protect what’s his. He has to protect the kids and Soos and Wendy and Stanford. He has to protect Stanford and they’ve used him before – given him altered versions of his brother and now he understands a whole lot better the issues Ford had.

Stan remembers during one of Ford’s attacks how he had thought Stan was fake – that he had thought Stan was one of them playing a sick joke and now he gets it. Because these moments are the hardest. The ones where this fake Ford comes to him – looking just like him and sounding just like him and telling him he doesn’t love him, that he could never love him. This Ford looks in his eyes and explains succinctly why Stan is unlovable – explains that, of course Ford would turn his back on him and shut the curtains because why would Ford want anything to do with him?

Stan is a waste. He’s dumb and shallow and worthless. He has no admirable qualities. And Ford would do anything to not be involved with him. He would erase Stan’s mind to make Stan not remember him because then he could be free – free of this leech that’s been holding him down his whole life. Free of this cancer of a twin. How he can escape using the portal device he’s created – how he’d rather be in any other dimension than one Stan is in.

And the kids – oh, the kids – Mabel and Dipper – they’re lucky. They’re lucky because they only have to deal with him until the end of the summer and then they’ll be gone. They’ll be back to their regular lives, their better lives – the lives without Stan. The one where they won’t have to see him every day, have to talk to him and so far that leaves only Soos and Wendy, but Wendy’s a teenager and she’s not going to waste her whole life in Gravity Falls and Soos – he has Melody and he can start a family with her and move on and that’ll leave Stan alone, all alone like he deserves.

Because no one should have to be burdened with Stanley.

No one should have to love him – or try to love him. Because that’s what it is. A trial, a hardship – a
fucking misery. And yes, these are the hardest ones to ignore and the ones that tend to crack at Stan’s exterior a little, but he just reminds himself over and over again that it’s all bullshit. He won’t be broken. Not by them. Never by them. There’s…there’s no truth to what they say or what they show him, even if-if sometimes he thinks there might be.

There just might be.

NOW

Wendy adjusts a coil on the makeshift portal, blowing a piece of her red hair out of her face as she does so. She’s been put in charge of making sure all the parts are securely fastened. Soos is hefting around the heavy materials, Dipper is flipping through textbooks and highlighting important data, and Mabel is in charge of checking up on everyone – making sure they’re doing okay, asking if they need a break or food or water because none of them will take one without her prodding.

And Jackass?

Jackass has been working at the computer nonstop and every now and then Wendy looks up from her work just to glare at him. But he doesn’t notice her. He’s too focus on typing and muttering to himself and sometimes he’s not even muttering in any kind of human tongue. He’s talking to himself in some weird ass language that sounds fake and it takes all of her willpower not to go over and just…just kick the crap out of him.

Instead she pours her energy into the portal, whacking it with a hammer and turning screws and it’s about the size of a small doorframe. They’ve been working on it for a couple of days, using parts from the older model. Apparently the plan for this doorway is to hotwire it to the smaller personal portal device, expanding its radius or whatever. She doesn’t really understand all the mumbo jumbo that comes out of Jackass’s mouth and she really doesn’t want to.

She just focuses on her work and does her best to grin now and again for Dipper and Mabel’s sake because it’s beyond tragic that these two twelve year old kids have to put up with this kind of garbage. All they should be worrying about this summer is bug bites and sunburns; instead they have to deal with all this supernatural mess – like losing their Great Uncle to a friggin’ tentacle monsters on the other side of a portal.

And Mr. Pines…god only knows what horrors he’s facing. She’s always viewed her boss with respect – yeah, she’ll occasionally sneak out of work or swipe a pen or something, but overall she likes her job and she likes Mr. Pines. He’s been good to her. He never asks her to do too much work, he always pays her on time (even though he grumbles about it), and working for him is a hell of a lot better than busing tables at the Greasy Diner or being a check out girl at the grocery store.

Or, heaven forbid, any of the numerous jobs her Dad has recommended. She’s not interested in lumberjacking or in watching her brother’s full time. She’s got better things to do – things that are far more fun and working at the Shack is fun. The weirdo tourists that show up are always worth a laugh and this summer in particular has been a blast. It was totally boring before Dipper and Mabel showed up.

Once they arrived, all sorts of awesome things started to happen and she was so happy to meet them, to make them her friends. Until…until things took a nosedive into darker territory. But she doesn’t blame them for that. Oh no. She doesn’t blame them at all and she nearly jumps out of her skin when a voice close behind her says, “You plugged that into the wrong port.”
She looks over one shoulder, eyes narrowed to see Jackass standing there. She rubs a hand at her sweating forehead and she knows she probably has left a smudge of grease on her skin as she tightens her grip on her wrench, “Yeah?”

He nods, “It needs to go in the one down here and it needs to be tightened at a perfect ninety seven point four angle.

“’Kay. Thanks. I’ll just go do that.” She mutters and she starts loosening it. He walks around, inspecting the rest of her handiwork and he frowns, “Actually…we’ll also need to adjust this one here…and this one…and this one and-”

She tosses her wrench down and it clatters loudly, “Hey! YOU were the one who gave me the directions, so maybe if they’re wrong, it’s YOUR fault.”

He blinks, looking startled by her outburst, “I wasn’t saying-”

“Yeah. Whatever.” She grumbles and she stalks out of the room. She can feel Dipper and Mabel’s eyes follow her and she wishes they hadn’t seen her like that. She didn’t mean to get so…

But she’s angry. So goddamn angry.

She’s in the next room eyeing the various computer monitors when Jackass walks in, looking contrite, “I apologize if I came off as too critical.”

Wendy shakes her head, huffing, “Yeah, well - feel free to stuff it, old dude! Make sure to turn it sideways first and just-just really jam it up there!”

He leans in the doorway and his hands are in the pockets of his trench coat as he eyes her thoughtfully, “I take it we have a problem.”

“You think?”

He gives her a weak smile, “Is this just normal pent up teenage rage or-?”

“Are you serious?!” she snaps, “Are you joking?! NO. This has nothing to do with my age and everything to do with the fact that ever since you’ve shown up everything’s gone to shit!”

Wendy realizes her voice rose and she looks out of the glass window pane, just to make sure Mabel and Dipper didn’t overhear her. They’re talking to one another, and neither reacts, so the likelihood is that they didn’t hear. Still, this time she makes sure to quietly hiss, “You know, I didn’t know what to make of you at first. Soos called me and kept me up until three in the morning trying to explain your whole sorry deal and, past my exhaustion, you know what I got? I got the story of a conceited jackass that turned his back on his brother because one time, one time, he messed up!

“You could have forgiven him and been the bigger guy but, oh no, you were a big old crybaby about it! My brother broke my project! I lost out on my dream school! Well you know, what? Boo-fucking-hoo! Okay? He was your brother and, apparently, he was MORE than that and you should have stuck by him! You should have helped him! Instead you ditched him for ten years but the first moment you need help?! That’s when you call! That’s when you want him to come running and what do you do? You thrust a book into his hands and tell him to fuck off and you want to know why we have a problem?!”

Wendy pinches the bridge of her nose, “Mr. Pines is more than my boss. He’s my friend. And those kids in there?! They’re more than that – they’re my family! And I will fight to the death for my family and I will protect them! Especially from a lunatic, know-it-all!”
“Are you finished?” He asks quietly and her eyes narrow further, “Hardly! I’ve barely begun! I mean, I don’t even know where to begin! How about your cryptic journals? How about the trouble they’ve put us in more times than I can count? How about how Dipper - an impressionable, sweet, great kid - has blind hero worship for a man who continually puts his family at risk? Who doesn’t even seem to really care about them in the first place because if he did, he would have never, ever, EVER put them in this kind of situation?”

She shakes her head, “But, you know what? Never mind! Who cares?! Because you have to have your dumb mysteries and be the man to change the world and get some kind of validation because you were born with extra fingers and that’s made your life so hard, except –wait, no, it hasn’t because the people who should matter the most to you don’t even friggin’ care about it! Chief number one being your brother, your twin, and – apparently – apparently – the man you’re in love with!”

His eyes cast to the floor and he looks guilty and that just makes Wendy angrier, “So, thanks to your foolishness and selfishness, Mr. Pines has been taken to god knows where and put through god knows what and it SHOULD HAVE BEEN YOU!”

And suddenly she realizes she’s trembling and tears have escaped and a choked sound leaves her as she turns away from him, “They wanted you…they should have…”

She trails off as she sniffles, “No…I-I didn’t…didn’t mean that.”

“Yes. You did.” He answers softly, “And you’re not wrong. Not about any of it.”

She can hear him walking over to her and then the telltale sound of a drawer opening and tissues coming out of a box. He hands her some and she takes them, wipes at her face and turns to him. He looks…defeated. Honestly; she’s still sort of amazed by her outburst. She hadn’t planned on…on ranting at him like that, but once she had started she hadn’t been able to stop. It had all poured out of her.

It wasn’t like her. To be like that. To be all loud and emotional. Wendy has always prided herself on being relaxed and chill. She has no idea what came over her. Okay, true, she’s a lot more stressed than she lets on. Her family has made her this way. But usually she can be laid back. But here she just…flipped out. And on a guy she’s barely spoken to before.

Nice.

Real nice.

She opens her mouth to apologize, but he speaks first, “You’re right. I’m…not a very good person. Never have been. Stanley, he’s always…seen something in me. And for the longest time, I thought I could see it too, but…when he broke my project I showed my true colors, didn’t I?”

He’s talking more to himself than to her, “And I kept those colors for ten years and then I called him here and…everything happened. During our fight I-he got burned. He has a scar because of me. Only fair I should go through the portal. And over there…in those other dimensions…I was awful. I was…who I naturally am. A monster.”

His eyes cast down to his hands and he idly plays with his extra fingers, “You know, one of the reasons I built the portal…one of the reasons I came here at all was because…I hoped I could…find my place. Find others like me. Others who felt…ostracized. Six fingers, a genius, gay, in love with my brother…I mean, how many boxes can I tick off, right?”
She lets out a dry sound - it’s not a laugh, but it’s something. It’s the sound someone makes when they don’t know what else to do in an awkward conversation and he looks at her, his lips twitching, “But I didn’t have to come here, did I? I didn’t have to go anywhere at all. I had Stan. He wasn’t like me, but he…accepted me. He loved me. But…I couldn’t believe that. And I was too afraid. Too afraid to just…”

He breathes in deeply, “Too afraid of everything. Feel free to add coward to my list of faults.”

“Pretty long list now.” She says dryly and she’s half joking but his face says he’s taking is seriously and she doesn’t know why, but she feels a pang of remorse. Here she was a few minutes ago – railing on the guy and feeling totally justified in it, but now…now she looks at his face, sees his desolation, and she feels the inexplicable need to pick him up and dust him off.

Wendy sighs, “Look, Jackas…Ford. I’ll admit I’m not feeling super jazzed about you right now, but…I was a little out of line. It’s not my place to judge you. And as far as I can tell, Mr. Pines’s feelings for you are genuine. I mean, he dove headfirst into an unknown void for you and that…well, it says to me that you can’t be that bad of a guy. Or as awful as you seem to think you are. You must have some good in you or he wouldn’t see it at all because, dude – this is Mr. Pines we’re talking about. He’s a pretty savvy guy.”

Ford shrugs, “I suppose-”

“No, hey, listen. If you were really as awful as you claim, he would see it. He would see right through you. And he definitely wouldn’t let you anywhere near the kids.”

“Actually, he told me to stay away from them.”

Her eyebrows rise, “Really?”

“Well…at first, but…gradually he seemed okay with me interacting with them.”

“Okay, but – see, right there. He might have been apprehensive at first and I get that – I mean, I’m apprehensive around you, but,” she brushes some hair out of her face, “If he changed his mind, he had a good reason to. So, you can’t be all bad. Though I am so not done being ticked off at you. Seriously, I won’t stop until we have Mr. Pines back.”

Ford nods, “Understood.”

Wendy chews on her bottom lip and eyes him, “Uh…and-and about…about you and Mr. Pines’s…relationship…”

“Another problem?”

“Yes. No! I mean,” She looks uneasy as she tries to think of what to say exactly, “It’s just…I have brothers. And I don’t think of them that way. At all. Like, ever. And never. I will never think of them that way. And I’ve always thought of myself as pretty open minded but…this is….new. And frankly, it’s not something I thought I’d ever be around and it-it might take me a bit of time to get used to it, but…”

Wendy lets out a disgruntled breath, “God, what I’m trying to say is-it doesn’t matter what I think or whatever. What matters is that before everything went to hell, Mr. Pines told us he loves you and I have never heard those words leave his mouth. Okay, yeah, no - maaaaaybe in regards to money. I think I’ve heard him say he loves money, but saying he loves you that’s…I just hope you know how huge that is.”
“I do. Trust me.”

She eyes him, “And he said that you love him back…do you?”

He colors and his eyes avert hers but she hears him make a sound of assent and she gives him a single, sharp nod, “Fine, so when we get him back you two really need to work your shit out. ‘Cause if you hurt him, I have an axe.”

Ford clears his throat, “Again, understood.”

She goes to leave, mind set on reworking the parts of the portal she needs to, when another thought occurs to her, “By the way – you and I will definitely have to have a talk about your bunker. And not just the paranoid creepy traps I had to go through, but the shapeshifting monster that lived down there because that thing took on my form and I had to see it get gutted.”

His eyes widened, “The shapeshifter? You-?”

She waves a hand, “Dude, it’s a long story and we need to get back to working on this portal, but just know – you and I are gonna talk about it later.”

Wendy walks away and thinks about how she might actually be able to start thinking of him as Ford instead of just Jackass. She looks back to sees that he’s hard back to work on the computers and she can’t help but smile a little. Alright, fine – Ford it is.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

WARNINGS: Disturbing imagery - like, hella hella disturbing. Mentions of abuse, obsession, insanity. ANGST.

I’m sorry these last few chapters have been so heavy - I swear it’s all gonna wrap up next chapter.

Like - not the story itself, but in case anyone’s worried I’m going to drag out Stan being gone for too long, I’ll just spoil it a little here and say that that’s gonna end soon.

NOW

Ford is blocked.

He’s blocked.

He’s looked over the figures and numbers, the science…he’s run it through his mind again and again. He’s tried a variety of different approaches and…nothing. He keeps coming up with nothing. And it’s been too long. Too long. He knows what it’s like where Stan is. A day might well equal a year’s worth of time over in that horrible place. Every day that passes and Stan’s not home…

But he can’t afford to think about it. Can’t let himself think about the tortures Stanley is going through – can’t think about Stan suffering. Because if he starts he’ll have an attack, he’ll breakdown, and there’s no time for that – there’s no time! He has to stay focused! Everyone is counting on him. Soos, Wendy, the children, Stanley…Stanley…this is Ford’s fault. His fault. If he could have just-just accepted how he felt for his brother, maybe none of this would have ever happened.

Or maybe if he had just…been different. Been better. Never felt this way at all…

But that not an option, is it? It never was. This is who he is; this is how he feels and now he has to deal with the consequences. The consequences of trying to run from himself. Trying to run from Stan. God, what would have happened if they hadn’t interfered? Would he still be in Stan’s arms? Would they have finally started building a bridge over the divide between them?

And like Stan said – everyone knows now. Everyone who matters knows how they feel about one another. So, potentially they could…could be together? Ford doesn’t know. That doesn’t seem true. It’s not something he should hope for, because hope is deadly.

Hope is, without a doubt, one of the deadliest things ever. Hope has led to more deaths, more destruction, more sorrow, than anything he can think of. Hope, the very word makes him let out a weak laugh and he wanders upstairs, considers going into the kitchen for some coffee.

He’s exhausted and strung out and he can’t think. He can’t think.

Back when he’d first hit a roadblock in his work in Gravity Falls, when he’d first come here – he had contacted Fiddleford. Because Fiddleford had a way of getting him out of his own way. And he was just as brilliant as Ford – in some ways more so. And they could bounce ideas off of one another and
together they found answers, solved puzzles, but that’s not an option anymore.

Fiddleford is just as gone as Stanley is, albeit in a different capacity. Yet another one of Ford’s many sins.

So, Ford has to try and solve this by himself, all alone, and he’s honestly starting to think he won’t be able to. That he’s going to fail and failure is not an option. He can’t even imagine facing the kids and telling them that he can’t do it, that he can’t bring their Grunkle back and that this is the end.

No, no – that can’t happen.

That won’t happen.

And he bypasses the kitchen and he knew he would. He knows exactly what he really needs and it’s not coffee, it’s…

His feet lead him into Stanley’s room. His legs shake and he runs a trembling hand over his mouth. The weight of it all settles over him, crushing and overwhelming, and as he approaches Stan’s bed he just…collapses on it. He buries his face into his pillow and he breathes in Stan’s scent and he wants to cry but he can’t. There are no more tears left. He lies there, feeling numb. Was this how it was for Stanley? When Ford had first gone through the portal, had Stanley walked around and felt the echoes of him? Had he felt Ford hovering around him like a phantom? Had he searched for traces of his brother and just buried himself deep inside of them?

Ford is. Ford is breathing Stan in and he swears he can feel the warmth from when his body last pressed here and for a few wonderful seconds, he doesn’t feel so lonely. So lost. But as he takes in another ragged breath he knows Stan is gone. He’s gone and he’s not coming back unless Ford hurries and Ford’s been working hard. Calculating and planning and he’s pretty sure he can power the doorway but it’s risky.

Stan would love that.

Stan loves risks.

But then, he’d probably love them less where Ford is concerned. And Ford had been scrabbling before – crunching numbers too quickly and gambling on a thin possibility. The possibility that some of the rift’s energy can power the portal device. It might not work at all. It might kill him; it might rip the universe in two. But Ford doesn’t care. He doesn’t care at all. He understands Stanley so much better now, far better than he ever did before.

Stanley had told him he’d tear the whole of reality apart to get him back and here’s Ford – doing the exact same thing. He knows he should be responsible. He should think of the town, of all the people. He should think of Wendy and Soos. The children – he should think of the children. Dipper and Mabel. Twelve years old. They might not see thirteen if he does this. They might not see anything ever again. He’s jeopardizing them - jeopardizing everything and all for Stanley.

And he doesn’t care.

He needs Stanley back.

He has to have him back.

Because he loves him, he loves him, he loves him.

He’s loved him his entire life.
And now that he’s let the word out, he can’t stop thinking about it. Can’t stop thinking of how true it is.

He loves him and he’ll never love anyone else the way he loves Stanley. And it doesn’t even matter if he can’t have him; if they can’t be together…he just has to have him here. Without Stanley there’s no point. No point to anything and Ford knows he’ll do exactly what Stan would have done if he hadn’t gotten him back. He’ll end his life without a second thought because he will not, cannot, live without him. And that’s sick. That’s dark and twisted and not love. That’s obsession and madness.

Ah, well.

He was always mad. After all, it runs right alongside genius. Frankly, he tipped over from genius to madness long before he went through the portal. Hell, it’s probably how he survived his whole trek throughout the multiverse to begin with. He is absolutely insane. And that’s fine. That’s okay, he can live with it. So long as he gets his brother back.

But there are still some unanswered questions and equations and as he sits up on the bed he notices Stan’s punching bag. He sees a bunch of scribbled post it notes stuck to it and he gets to his feet to inspect them. It’s Stan’s handwriting – scrawling and rushed – like Stan’s angry to even have to write it down. Stan never was much of a writer. He’s always hated holding pens and pencils, claiming they felt clumsy in his big hands, and it’s clear in his work. All scratches and jagged scribbles. Ford reads over the formulas and is proud of Stan’s work.

He really did figure out some pretty impressive physics. And as Ford browses them, the wheels in his own mind begin to start clicking and whirring. Stan’s work is…actually beyond good. It’s brilliant. And Ford starts snatching the notes off one by one as a half-crazed laugh bubbles out of him. These are – these are –!

He rushes downstairs and compares them with his own work and it’s like a jolt of lightning is working through him. Stan’s work intertwines perfectly with his own and the answers are just flooding all over him. This can work! He can make this work! He can open the portal and bring Stanley back! He can bring him back and Ford is still laughing. Sounding like he’s the lunatic he is.

Soos and Wendy look up now and then, faces full of concern at Ford’s weird turn in mood. Mabel and Dipper also wear similar expressions, but they’re too focused on their own tasks. Ford works and works and types and types. Fingers dancing over the keyboard with wild energy. Then he starts digging through his things, he digs and digs and he finds his electrified gloves. While the computer is crunching the new information he’s keyed in, he starts working on them, and a grim determination has settled firmly within him.

He’s going to get Stan back and in order to do so he’s…he’s going to have to change. He’s going to have to be who he truly is and this thought makes him realize that he really needs to talk to Dipper. But first things first and he draws out a tool he picked up from his travels – it’s an omnitool with far better precision than any regular tool he could find in this dimension.

He uses it to tighten and amp up some of the features on the gloves. They flare and power on and off and Ford knows he’s kind of playing with fire here, but he doesn’t care. They need to be calibrated just right for this to work and as he’s reaching the end of his adjustments he calls out for Dipper.

His nephew wanders in, looking apprehensive, “You called?”

Ford looks up at him and gives a sharp nod, “My boy, I need to ask a favor of you.”

“Really?” Dipper snorts, “Because the last time you asked me for a favor it was so you could take
the memory gun and erase my mind.”

Ford pauses in the middle of his work, having the decency to look ashamed, “I…I know. I’m sorry.”

“Are you?” Dipper mumbles, “Because it seems like my entire summer has been nothing but people lying to me. Lie after lie after LIE.”

The young boy leans against the doorframe, arms crossed, face sullen and Ford puts the gloves to one side as he licks his lips, “I can’t speak for Stanley, Dipper but you must understand…I didn’t lie to you so much as withhold information.”

Dipper rolls his eyes, arms unfolding as he holds up his hands to shake them in Ford’s direction, “There’s no difference, Great Uncle Ford! You kept things from me! You used me to help you try to – try to hurt my family! My sister!”

“It…wouldn’t have hurt.”

Dipper eyes narrow at him and Ford breathes out loudly, “No, no – you’re…you’re right. It was wrong of me. I know that. I always knew but…do you see why I was doing it? Can you see from my perspective as to how-how I was trying to protect you?”

“Protect us from what?”

Ford pushes his glasses up, rubbing at his eyes, “Dipper…Stanley was…he was telling the truth. About me. About him. About-about how we feel about one another.”

Dipper looks distinctly uncomfortable, “So, you two…like…love one another.”

“Yes.”

“Like…more than siblings.”

“Yes.”

“Like…you feel for him the way I feel, I mean, felt for Wendy?”

Ford’s eyebrows rise, “You have feelings for Wendy?”

“Wow,” Dipper huffs, “You really are bad at reading emotions, aren’t you?”

His lips twitch, “I have many skills, Dipper. I’m very talented at a variety of things and I have an extremely high IQ but…yes, I am quite dimwitted when it comes to affairs of the heart. It’s…well, it’s really how this whole thing started in the first place.”

His nephew swallows and rubs at one arm, looking away, “Have you two…I mean…like, I’ve thought about kissing Wendy…”

The innocence of the remark makes Ford feel incredibly old and he looks at his hands, plays with his fingers, “Do you truly want me to be honest with you?”

Dipper nods.

“Yes. We’ve kissed.”

Dipper turns bright red and Ford would be lying if he said his own cheeks didn’t grow warm. Dipper’s teeth chew at his lower lip, “So it-it is romantic love?”
“Yes.”

“But…he’s your brother.”

“Yes, he is.”

“Isn’t that…I mean…it must be…awkward.” Dipper mutters then starts jabbering on quickly, clearly worried about what he’s just said, “Not that I’m saying it’s not okay, I mean – well, it’s not okay or no! NO! I’m not-I’m not saying that I’m saying that it’s not okay, but to everyone else it’s not – and, I mean, y’know, Mabel’s my twin and my sister and I’ve never-! I mean, I’m just saying I don’t feel that way about her and it’s hard for me to imagine it, but that doesn’t mean you can’t do it but it is kind of hard for me to wrap my head around and-”


He does as instructed; bending over a little and Ford can’t help but smile a little at the sight. The boy is just a bundle of anxious nerves. Just like he used to be. Ford talks softly, “I’m not expecting you to understand or to accept this. But you know now and you wanted the truth, so I’m giving it to you. I love Stanley. As more than just my brother. And he, for some unfathomable reason, feels the same. We’ve struggled against it our whole lives but now it’s out there and-and the only thing I’m sorry for is…if I’ve-I’ve disappointed you.”

“D-Disappointed me?” Dipper asks in wonder.

Ford nods, “You’ve been the first friend I’ve had in a long, long time. And I know you’ve looked up to me. You’ve spent this whole summer reading my journals and probably building up some fantastic ideas as to what I might have been like. The Author of the Journals…”

He says this last bit with a hint of self-deprecation before continuing, “You probably pictured me as-someone better than I am. And I’m just sorry to disappoint you. To be…to be me.”

“You’re…worried you’ve let me down?”

A lump forms in Ford’s throat as he nods, “Yes.”

Dipper is quiet for a long time. Then he finally says, “You haven’t disappointed me, Great Uncle Ford. I-I like you. Just the way you are.”

The lump squeezes tight and Ford can barely answer, “Thank you, my boy.”

“As for…ah…the other thing…you and Stan…I just…I’ll need some time…”

“I understand,” Ford returns and he picks the gloves back up, starts working on them again and Dipper asks, “So…what favor did you need from me?”

Ford looks up from the gloves and remembers why he called him in in the first place. He puts the gloves down and gets to his feet. He lowers himself to Dipper’s height, putting a gentle hand on the boy’s shoulder, “We should be able to open the portal soon.”

“That’s great news!”

“Yes, but when we do, I’ll-I’ll need to pull Stanley out. The…things you saw…they will undoubtedly interfere and I will…have to deal with them. There is only one way I can do this. I’m… I’m going to change, Dipper. I’m going to be…something else when I face them.”
“You mean someone-?”

“No,” he returns firmly, darkly, “Something else. And when that happens, I’ll be…unrecognizable. And no doubt…scary. I am worried it will alarm your sister so my only favor, my only request, is that you shield her from it. Do you understand?”

Dipper nods and Ford rises to his full height, “Good. I knew my trust in you was well placed. Now run along, we still have much work to do.”

Dipper leaves and Ford picks the gloves back up. He looks at them and lets out a heavy breath. There’s no saying any of this will work – powering up the doorway, using these gloves on them – but he has to try. Even if…even if it means giving into that part of him he’s tried so hard to forget. That horrible, awful, hideous part of himself that has always been there, hidden just beneath the surface. He was a monster and soon…soon they would all know it.

THERE

There is a reason Stan is so hard to break.

It’s because he’s damaged.

He knows this – has always known it.

He was damaged long before he was kicked out. He’s been damaged since birth – he was formed in the womb, this imperfect thing. A being born of ruined potential. It isn’t something he often dwells on. It’s just a fact, after all. There’s no reason to get bent out of shape about it. Even though deep down his dream, more than anything, is to become someone else other than who he is.

But he is also a realist.

Dreams don’t come true

Besides, being damaged has its advantages.

And this is one of them.

Because damaged people can be dangerous – they know they can survive.

And so, Stan is surviving. Yes, some of it seeps in. Some of it corrodes and wears thin, but he is unbroken. He is constant. He is fearless and he knows there’s nothing to lose. Because everyone he cares about is safe. Safe because of his sacrifice.

But the Things here only see that as a challenge and they have all the time, all the power. They try a variety of angles and while their impatience is clearly growing, so is their curiosity. What kind of creature is Stanley Pines that he is so resilient? So willful? Is there no way inside? Is there no way to penetrate that hard shell and feast on the soft, gooey warmth that waits deep within?

His confidence, his overall demeanor – they are clearly fake. He is obviously weak and not just because of his age. In fact, his age is not a hindrance so much as a virtue. Age has refined him, made him tougher. No doubt he would have been much easier to wreck back when he was younger. Perhaps this is why his brother, Stanford, fell apart so quickly. After all, Stanford was much younger when he arrived.
This is where the idea forms. The difference between these brothers. These two people so close to one another, interconnected on a level beyond any classification. More than familial, more than romantic or sexual, even more than spiritual. A connection so deep and strong that neither time nor distance can impact it. This is what keeps Stanley going. This is what he clings to.

Anything can happen to him, but gods forbid something happen to Stanford.

And it’s this revelation that provides them the key they need. The key to unlocking the strong box that is Stanley Pines. Thing One, in its Mabel form, sets up the proper scenario. It pulls Stan from the cage first and then transports him to his armchair in the Shack. Stan sits there, unmoved, arms crossed, “So? What’s it going to be this time, you little trolls?”

“Now, now Grunkle Stan! It’s not nice to call us names.”

“I’m not your ‘Grunkle’!” he snaps.

“Ooo! Have I hit a nerve?”

“I’ll hit you square in your ugly face, you hold still long enough,” he mutters, “Tear off those tendrils of yours one by one.”

“You think that’s my true form?” Thing One giggles, the sound a strange blend of Mabel’s normal, innocent giggle and something far more menacing.

“I don’t know and I don’t care,” Stan sighs, bored, “Now are you gonna go ahead and play with me or what? ‘Cause if not, I can go ruminate in my cell some more.”

“Is that what you call it when you’re sniveling in there?” Thing One hisses, voice cold as ice, “When you scream?”

Stan shrugs, nonchalant, “Yeah, it sucks but I’ve told you before and I’ll tell you again – I’ve had worse.”

“Oh yes, I know.”

“Yeah, I’ll just bet you do. So, is that it then? You’ve picked apart my brains loads of times. Taken out my memories and played Jenga. That the plan for the day? Which ones you want to go over, hmm? There ain’t anything you haven’t hit yet or hit more than once that I can’t take. I can take it. Whatever you got.”

Thing One has been leaping and jumping around him in its Mabel skin, the effect eerie because sometimes it looks almost…blurred. As if underwater. Its skin slinks over its bones and its brown wave of hair (so like Mabel’s) floats and moves – writhing and curling around as if alive. It smiles with a mouth full of shiny, sharp metal –like Mabel’s braces but not, and then there are the eyes of course. The yellow, burning eyes with the sharp black pupils.

And those pupils are terribly dilated now, its excitement almost a tangible thing as it goes to Stan and crawls onto his lap and he wants to push it away but he can’t. He’s frozen to the chair and when he looks at Thing One’s eyes again they’re an exact replica for Mabel’s.

They’re watery and big and her bottom lip trembles as she cups his face in her too soft hands, “Poor Grunkle Stan, thinking your whole life that your brother is better than you. But he’s not. You’ve bested him. You’ve won! Would you like to know how?”

“Eat me!”
Mabel beams and shakes his face gently, ignoring his outburst, “You’re better than he is, because you’ve lasted. He broke, you know. When he was here. He broke so quickly and so easily. He was like glass. So very fragile. But not you – oh no, not you! You’ve seen through it all. You’ve endured. Like you said, there’s nothing we’ve done to you that you haven’t overcome.”

She releases his face and leans her head on his chest, cuddles close to him and she’s burning him – not with heat, no – she’s cold. So very, very cold. She’s freezing and it burns. She traces gentle fingers along his arms as she snuggles in, voice a thin, sing song, “You see through us. You see us as we really are. I love you for that, you know. And that’s what you’ve always wanted, isn’t it? For someone to love you.”

Stan closes his eyes, voice coming out in a tired rasp, “Shut up.”


Stan opens his eyes, glares at Thing One, “Shut UP!”

Thing One looks into his eyes, expression tender, “I love you. You’re my favorite. It used to be that brother of yours, but in reflection…he was no fun. He was too easy to manipulate. We shattered him. Disintegrated him. And then we put him back together again. Turned him into a wretched, dreadful creature. Do you know what he’s like inside? Do you know what he is now? What he’s made of? He’s nothing more than staples and rubber bands.”

“Shut up!” Stan shouts and he struggles but he can’t get lose, “Shut up, shut up, shut up!”

“You’ve seen it, haven’t you?” Thing One purrs, “You’ve seen his eyes go blank, seen him change.”

Stan wants to deny it. With every fiber of his being, he wants to deny it. But can’t. Because he has seen it. He’s seen Ford change. Seen Ford almost attack the kids, seen Ford look lost and confused and terrified when Stanley saw his scars, seen him lose total control and tear everything apart around him. And each time, he’s seen how unresponsive he is when this happens, seen his eyes just lose all their color, all their life. He’s seen it – he even thought to himself that his brother was gone in those moments, possessed.

Thing One takes in a deep breath, “That is not a sturdy composition – what he’s made of. He’s compiled of just bits and pieces. Those staples will lose their hold, those rubber bands will snap and when they do, he won’t be able to retain who he is anymore. He’s barely doing it now.”

Stan shakes his head, ignores how his eyes have grown hot.

“And you know what I think, Grunkle Stan?”

He refuses to rise to the bait. It doesn’t matter.

“I think he’s been doing it for you.”

Oh god.

“I think he’s been trying oh so very hard to keep himself together for you. Because he likes to believe he’s in love with you, but I think we both know better. He doesn’t love you, does he? Not really. He’s not capable. Think about it – he only said it when he asked you to let him go. When he wanted to come back to us. It had to be forcibly dragged from him. Is that how love is supposed to work? Is it supposed to be that difficult? That hard? If he truly loved you, without any shame, he would just say it.”
A tear forms in one eye – it dances precariously along his eyelashes.

“But there is shame. There is regret. There is out right refusal. And even if he felt lingering strains of it, it wasn’t formidable. Look how easily it fell apart. When you were kicked out – did he try to find you? Did he contact you? No. Not for ten years. Ten whole years, Grunkle Stan! And when he called for you – you came. Immediately. You dropped everything; you spent what little money you had left. All to get to him. He calls and you come running.”

“And what does he do? He turns you away. Again. He turns his back on you. He chooses his research, his mysteries, over you. His work is more important, it will always be more important. Do you honestly think he’s trying to get you back right now? That he’s looking for you?”

Stan licks his dry lips, heart aching.

“He will not sacrifice everything he’s worked so hard for, for you. You know this.”

Stan sucks in a loud, shaky breath and he sniffs, sucking that tear right back in as he growls, “You’re full of shit, ’Mabel’. Everything you say is a fucking lie. Everything you show me is an imaginary horror you’ve cooked up. You can go to hell.”

Thing One carefully crawls off of him. Its face, Mabel’s face, is blank.

And then it grins.

It grins a big, nasty grin that breaks its face in two as its jaws unhinge. Thing Two wanders in then, wearing Dipper’s face and it looks at its other, “Are you ready?”

Thing One nods and looks at Stan, “You see, that’s the secret, Stanley. That’s the key. That’s how we’re going to get to the heart of you. The truth.”

“What are you talking about?”

Thing Two walks up, hands in its pockets, looking for all the world like Dipper, “You’ve always wanted to know what happened to Stanford, haven’t you? You’ve wanted to know what happened to him here. What we did to him.”

A tremor starts to form in Stan’s spine, tiny quaking fissures in his bloodstream at these words. He feels light headed, a heavy weight settling in his stomach like a stone.

“He’ll never tell you. He’ll never show you.” Thing One whispers and then its black pupils…part. Almost like blinking but deeper, inside the actual eye itself and there are…teeth there. Thing One’s eyes move, slithering like snakes out of its skull, the tiny mouths with jagged teeth inside each eyeball gapping and gnashing as they moves towards Stan’s forehead, its voice reverberating, “We’ll show you. You can see the truth, the reality, for yourself. We’ll pour it all directly into your head.”

Thing Two’s eyes are performing the same actions and Stan tries harder than ever to break lose but he can’t, he can’t and the eyes touch him. They sink deeply into the flesh of his skull and his own eyes and his mouth and he lets out an unearthly scream as his mind’s eye explodes with unspeakable images – memories – from both Things.

Of Ford.

Of what they did to him.

Of what he endured, what he suffered, what he…did.
And that's when Stan breaks.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Warnings: Violence, LOADS of violence, death, blood, gore, mentions of self mutilation, torture - think I covered it all.

NOW

Mabel’s really reached the end of her rope.

No more sparkles, no more stickers, no more big goofy smiles. She’s mad and bad and raring to go. It’s not often she puts aside her silly, positive outlook on life but today’s the day they power up the portal and get her Grunkle Stan back and she’s more than ready to fight. She has her grappling hook ready and she’s even dressed Waddles up in armor.

Okay, yes – the armor is basically kitchen supplies – steel colander strapped to his head, soup ladle on his back, two spatulas affixed to either side of his body but still – he’s ready and she’s ready too. She’s got on her skull and crossbones sweater, which she normally only breaks out around Halloween, and she has her war paint on. Alright, so the war paint is basically little fire flames painted on her cheeks but, again, not the point.

The point is; she’s sick and tired and done with all of this. Her summer, for the most part, has been fantastic. She’s made great friends, she’s had lots of fun – but she’ll be darned if it hasn’t had its sour points too. Most of them, honestly, have been caused by Dipper. She loves her brother, but sometimes she just wants to slap a big Mr. Yuk on his forehead, because his obsession with mysteries, conspiracies, and the supernatural has pretty much caused nothing but trouble.

Though she recognizes her own part of the blame – after all, had she pushed the button like he’d asked her to, maybe Grunkle Ford wouldn’t have come back and Grunkle Stan wouldn’t have been lost. She knows this isn’t a very nice outlook to have. In fact, it’s pretty nasty and she likes to think of herself as a good person.

And she loves Grunkle Ford. She really does – he’s her sweater pal! But both he and Dipper’s casual disregard for the dangers of the unknown are really what’s put them in these sticky situations. So, it’s hard to not be kind of nasty about it. But she hates feeling nasty it’s so – so icky! She’s a good person – a warm, friendly, sweet girl and she absolutely refuses to let this drag her down.

Besides (despite what some people might think), she’s mature enough to understand the bigger picture. Her Grunkles are in love with one another. In love! LOVE! Love is, hands down, her favorite emotion in the entire universe. She loves love! She’s been waiting for her big summer romance since – well, since the summer started! And she’s had some brushes with it (Mermando, Gabe) but she’s had yet to find her special someone and when Stan told them how he felt about Ford, it allllllllllicked.

It all made sense to her. Of COURSE her Grunkles are in love with one another! It explains so MUCH! It explains EVERYTHING! It most especially explains the look she’d seen in her Grunkle Stan’s eyes when he’d begged her not to push the button – when he’d told her everything he’s worked for, everything he cares about, it's all for the family!
Ford is his family.

And he’s more than that too. He’s Grunkle Stan’s soul mate! Mabel, more than anyone, understands this. Waddles is her soul mate! And some day, she’ll meet some dreamy person who’ll be even more her soulmate than her dear pet! And when that day comes, she knows she’ll sacrifice anything and everything for them. Just like Grunkle Stan did for Grunkle Ford.

But Grunkle Ford...

What has he sacrificed? And this worries Mabel, this causes her smile to turn upside down and she worries, because she’s just not so sure. Does Grunkle Ford really love Grunkle Stan the same way? All Grunkle Ford has done since coming here has been unfriendly to her beloved Grunkle. He’s been dismissive and-and a big old buttface! He didn’t even thank Stan or hug him or anything!

What was Mabel supposed to think?

But he’s been working so hard on the portal – trying his best to bring Stan back and she has to believe it’s because he loves him, has to believe that this will all have a happy ending because if doesn’t…if it doesn’t…

She shakes her head and refuses to even think about it.

She takes Waddles and descends into the basement. Dipper, Wendy, and Soos are already there, waiting around the portal doorway and looking anxious. Ford is at the computer console, typing and occasionally peeking into a tiny alcove on his work console. Mabel can’t see exactly what’s inside – from what little peeks she can get it looks like there’s a snow globe in there. But a snow globe with some blobby, starry blue looking substance inside.

Wires are hooked to it and Ford must have heard her behind him, because he covers it all up very quickly before turning to her, clearing his throat, “Oh! Hello, Mabel.”

She gives him a nod, “Grunkle Ford.”

He looks at Waddles and his lips twitch, “I-I don’t think it’s really necessary for you to bring your pet down here. Although I will say, he is quite aptly dressed.”

“She’s ready to do battle!” Mabel assures him, “Me too, check it out!”

She flashes her earrings at him and he sees she’s wearing little spiked maces. The twitching lips finally fall into the smile they’re fighting against, “It’s a very flattering outfit. You look wonderful.”

She waves a hand at him, “Psh, and you say you don’t know how to talk to girls!”

Ford shakes his head and goes back to his console, “You can join the others, if you’d like. We should be ready in less than five minutes.”

Mabel goes towards Dipper, Waddles following behind her, and he gives her a little grin when he sees her. Wendy and Soos both give her their own respective acknowledgements and she returns them. Wendy is armed with an axe and Soos has a bat. They both look deadly serious. She looks at the portal doorway. It’s humming loudly and the symbols around it are flashing. She lets out a shaky breath and Waddles nudges at her legs, clearly trying to comfort her, sensing her anxiety.

Ford comes out, a dial in his hand. He clears his throat and looks at all of them, “Alright, we’re ready. Now, I’m going to turn this knob here and the portal should power up. Having had the most experience with multidimensional travel, I will venture through the doorway – alone – and look for
Stanley. Your job is very simple – if anything, ANYTHING, other than Stanley or myself should emerge from this portal, you all must do your best to contain it. Is that clear?"

Everyone nods and Ford lets out a heavy breath, “I’m praying nothing will, but if it does, I have faith in all of you. Your strength and courage in light of these…unusual circumstances are beyond reproach. I thank all of you for all your hard work and dedication to this and—and I would like to…apologize again for its origins. I take full responsibility for what happened. I am completely aware of my culpability in all of this and when I go through this doorway I don’t know if…”

He trails off and looks lost. Mabel wants to hug him. She pulls Waddles close and hugs him instead. Ford takes a deep breath and nods to himself, “But I’m bringing him home.”

“And once you two are out, I get to chop this thing to bits, right?” Wendy asks; her axe raised and clearly eager to smash the doorway to smithereens.

Ford gives her a confirming nod before he looks at the portal, one hand on the knob, “Brace yourselves.”

He turns the dial and a loud, electrified hum fills the air, followed by a snapping wail and a big boom as the signs around the doorway start flashing with wilder fervor. A bluish portal opens but then it shifts and alters, becoming a sick, slimy green. Ford shudders and Mabel notices an odd ripple along his shoulders and back. But as quick as she saw the movement it’s gone and his back and shoulders are straight – normal.

Ford pockets the dial and walks with determination into the portal.

**THERE**

It’s just as hellish as he remembers.

Ford looks around and for a moment he’s overcome with panic. He wants to turn around and run. Run, run, run and never stop running. Another part of him feels like he’s come home. He honestly prefers the former to the latter. Especially as all of his scars begin to ache at once and his eyes hurt and he knows what’s coming, but he tries to keep a handle on it – not yet, not yet…can’t change yet.

Trying to get a hold of himself, he charges up the gloves and hears their comforting hum. He walks forward, walks into the maw of a gruesome landscape only for it to morph and change. Of course. This dimension is never just one thing. It changes and alters; shifts and shapes to their whims. He’s not even sure if they know what it really looks like anymore. Honestly, they might not even know their own real forms anymore.

Regardless, the environment quickly changes into an exact replica of the Mystery Shack basement. Almost as if he walked through the portal only to come right back out of it. But there are radical differences that differentiate the two. For one thing, Wendy, Soos, and Waddles are not present. For another the Dipper and Mabel that come into view have those eyes. Dipper’s are bright orange and Mabel’s bright yellow – catlike black slits flashing at him as they both smile. ‘Mabel’ speaks first, “You came back! You came back!”

He tries not to shudder at the sound of that voice. That thin, high voice that’s haunted him for decades. Instead he glares, keeps his tone stony, “Where’s my brother?”

“Did you miss me?” ‘Mabel’ returns, “I missed you!”
Ford stalks forward, gloves raised, eyes narrowed, “I won’t ask again.”

‘Dipper’ looks at the gloves, unimpressed, “What do you think you’re going to-?”

Ford dodges forward, lightning quick, his glove touching ‘Mabel’’s face. He’s not even sure if this will actually work so he’s gratified beyond belief when she screeches. Her form withers, changing – her skin melts like candle wax, sharp jagged teeth revealing themselves, the pupils of her eyes not holding together, her limbs stretching and altering wildly as she struggles.

‘Dipper’ lets out an eerie bellow and comes at Ford but he dodges, grip still firm on ‘Mabel’ as he shouts, “WHERE IS HE?!”

“I’ll tear you apart!”

“You’ve done that before,” Ford snaps coldly, “And I survived! I learned a lot while I was away. Enough to finally know how to hurt you! Now tell me where he is!”

“Oh,” ‘Dipper’ drawls, “I know what you learned. We may not leave this dimension, but we’ve heard of your travels and what you’ve been up to since you left us. Are you actually going to stand there and claim you’re any better than we are?”

Ford ignores the question. Instead, he sinks his fingertips in, the power ratcheting up to a higher level and ‘Mabel’ is barely keeping a consistent form. Tendrils and spiked bones jut from every orifice and she hasn’t stopped screaming, the sounds of pain rising in intensity. ‘Dipper’ hisses, a long, prehensile forked tongue snapping out of his mouth to swipe at Ford.

It catches the sleeve of his coat and tears it, sending out a spray of blood and Ford curses, but he doesn’t loosen his grip. If anything it grows stronger and as ‘Dipper’ rushes him, he feels himself finally let go. It’s been a long time. Too long. But he feels himself…change.

He hasn’t fully changed since…well; he has to be in the right place, the right dimension, to change. When he was home, he came close to changing several times – he had attacks, episodes – but he wasn’t in the right place to physically transform. He could only react emotionally - his body unable to shift into the proper form. And most of those had been caused without his consent and yes, that’s how it often happens, but there are the rare occasions where he can bring it on himself - when he can chose to - to fall into it. Chose to let himself go.

And this where the change began. This is where the first parts were…put into him, and it’s where it’s at its strongest and he feels all of his scars burning and he hears that awful sizzling sound. He feels his skin ripple, bones scrapping together. He closes his eyes and he feels himself slowly rising up into the air as black smoke spirals come forth, falling from his scars and taking shape, forming into coils.

They propel him upwards and they pierce themselves into the ground, parts of them becoming just solid enough to anchor him, and the gloves respond to this change in him. The electricity sparks and shoots out, wrapping around the coils and his body and he’s sparking and glowing and he’s damn near on fire. He looks like an avenging archangel.

Until he opens his eyes.

He opens them and reveals they’re bright red, catlike black pupils in place and the archangel image gives way to what he truly is. A demon. A monster. A creature of death and destruction that looms over his former tormentors.

‘Mabel’ is still in his grip but his change made it so that the constant flow of power from his gloves
scaled down slightly in force. It allows her to speak, her voice a slur, “Beau-beautiful…turned out just-just like I imagined.”

Ford glares at her, gives her dilapidated form a deadly squeeze, but he doesn’t say anything. Her words sting. The humiliation of what he is…it stings. Because they started this, yes, but he finished it. They worked over him for – god, he doesn’t know how long. They dismantled him – all of him, every atom and particle – and they put these…pieces into him. They sewed all of it into his being. They cobbled him together like a Frankenstein but he escaped…he escaped to other dimensions and what did he do?

He added…more.

He expounded upon their additions and in doing so, he became this-this abomination. He’s tried to escape it. He really has. And when he came back to his home dimension, he hoped to forget it. But now – here it is. Who he is. Who he truly is. Not Stanford Pines but this…this Thing.

This Thing that’s just like them.

And he feels his rationality slipping, his sentience, and he is nothing more than a wild, raving creature. He’s what they made him – what he made himself. And ‘Dipper’ not to be deterred, snaps his fingers and from the very earth hundreds upon hundreds of warped, wretched beasts burst up. Most likely they are other ‘toys’ – toys freed from their cages and cells and boxes. Freed to fight. Freed to bleed and die and Ford tears into them without mercy.

It doesn’t matter that they are no different from him, from the way he once was. It doesn’t matter if they’re as innocent, as unfairly tortured, as he was. They’re nothing more than a distraction, a deterrent. They’re keeping him from what is his – they’re keeping him from Stanley. They’re keeping him from potentially destroying the monsters that began his transformation into this.

So, they have to pay.

They have to die.

With his mind gone, it’s so much easier to fight. Ford drops ‘Mabel’ and while some of his smoky coils keep him suspended others whip out, cutting through the air like blades and in the motion they lose their shadowy intangible state. They become deadly sharp, capable of splitting beasts in two. Blood, gore, and bone fill the air as well as pitiful death cries, but he’s beyond caring, beyond recognition. If anything he revels in the slaughter he’s committing. His fingers arch and twist, bending almost completely backwards before knotting in on themselves. They then unfurl, revealing sharp talons that cut through the material of his gloves.

His newly clawed fingers clasps one of the beast by its throat – tears it open before finding another, gouging its eyes out. His movements are fast, coordinated, his attacks concise and almost graceful in their execution. He glides along the battlefield, his trench coat flowing behind him, his visage streaked with blood. He fights as if he was born this way, as if he’s always been fighting – he fights as if he was never human.

And maybe he wasn’t.

Maybe humanity was never something within him, but as the beast’s numbers dwindle, thoughts begin to form and there’s something living within him, some spark of fire, of passion. Of…love? He’s…here for a…reason. Something specific. No, someone. He’s here for someone. He blinks and tries to cool his bloodlust, tries to remember and it’s in this moment that ‘Dipper’ strikes out again.
Not that it matters.

Ford easily deflects the attack, one of his coils whipping out to impale him. Just like ‘Mabel’, him – or, it would be better to say - it - is unable to hold its form. It seizes and starts thrashing about. It’s still got some of his great nephew’s features – brown hair, ruddy complexion – but it’s as if someone’s let all the air out of him and beneath – beneath the ‘skin’ – is a horrid collection of devilish parts. They shift and struggle and try to take the proper form again but can’t.

‘Mabel’, forgotten in the earlier melee, is still a spasming mass. But still, she manages to speak, voice thin and high, “Good, good…did such a good job with you. Like us now, “

“I am NOTHING like you.”

A voice sounds from the shadows, “I don’t know about that.”

Ford freezes, blood running cold as Stan appears, “You look like Thing Three to me.”

“Stanley…” Ford whispers and he blinks, once, twice. His red eyes dissolve and become their normal hue. His mind slowly starts to trickle back to him and he feels as if scales are dropping away from his eyes. He can see. He’s not…he’s not this. Not this.

‘Mabel’ slithers over to Stan. Stan, who looks normal and fine. Stan—in his Mr. Mystery suit, tie, and fez—looking as if he hasn’t been touched. He hovers over her, “Are you okay?”

‘Mabel’ moans pitifully, “He hurt me, Grunkle Stan.”

“Stanley,” Ford manages - voice a grating, withered husk, “I –I don’t know how long you’ve been here…on their timetable…but they’re not Mabel and Dipper. You know that.”

Stan brushes a gentle hand along ‘Mabel’s’ forehead, “Do I?”

“Stanley…”

“They love me, Ford,” Stan looks him in the eyes and, much to Ford’s horror; he looks completely sane, “Finally I have…I have people who love me.”

“You have people who love you at home and these…things…they’re not ‘people’, Stanley. They’re–they’re something else.”

Stan shrugs, “I used to call ‘em Thing One,” he gestures to ‘Mabel’ and then ‘Dipper’, “And Thing Two. You look like they used to.”

Ford looks at himself and while his eyes have returned to normal his six fingers are still curved, sharp talons that click against one another. He’s still suspended by the smoky tendrils that have escaped his scars, which have perforated hundreds of tiny holes throughout his trench coat to come forth. He licks his lips and winces as he starts to draw it all back in, draws it all into himself.

It feels wretched.

He pulls back in every last part of the darkness he has to keep contained inside himself now.

He pulls and pulls until it’s all gone and he’s…’himself’ again.

He’s Stanford Pines.

The way he’s supposed to be.
A human being.

Not…not a *Thing*.

Thing Two, who had been impaled by Ford earlier, falls to the ground in a twitching heap. It slowly slinks over to Stan’s side and Stan runs a gentle hand along it. Seeing this makes Ford feel sick, “Do I look like them now?”

“I told you, they *used* to look like that. But now,” Stan draws ‘Mabel’ into the cradle of his arms, “They’re my family.”

“No, Stanley.” Ford shakes his head, “They’re not. I’ve…I’ve been at this stage. The one you’re in. This is how it starts. They…tear you down to your most basic, lowest point and then they make you theirs. You…you don’t want that. You *don’t*.”

Stan just looks at him, “Why not?”

Ford feels a lump form in his throat. The fact he even has to ask…

Still, Ford answers; “Because, you’re better than that. Better than me. And I’ve come to take you home.”

“I *am* home.”

Oh god. Ford was afraid of this. They took too long. Too long. He closes his eyes, ignores the burn of tears and tries again, “No, Stanley. You’re not.”

“Stanley Pines is dead,” Stan reminds him, “Remember? He died in a fiery car crash. No one will miss him if he’s gone. No one in Gravity Falls even knows he existed.”


“I don’t have a-!”

“Soos.”

Stan freezes and for a moment, the spell over him breaks. He blinks, confused, “Soos?”

“Jesus ‘Soos’ Alzamirano Ramírez. Your son.”

“He’s-he’s not my actual…”

“He’s your *son,*” Ford insists, “And he misses you and he wants you home.”

Stan starts to look swayed but the Things cling closer to him and his eyes grow glassy as he succumbs to their influence again, “But what about you? You don’t want me.”

Ford deflates and looks so small, so sad, so old, “I want you, Stanley. More than anyone. I love you.”

‘Mabel’ lets out a weak whimper and then a laugh. The laugh is twisted and shrill and makes a jolt of fear shoot down Ford’s spine. She curls herself tightly around Stan’s feet, holds him in place like quicksand, “Did you hear that, Grunkle Stan? He says he ‘loves’ you. But what does he know of love? He’s not even the same anymore, is he? He’s not the brother you grew up with. You’ve seen for yourself what he is now. He’s a *freak.*”
This word has been tossed at Ford his whole life. First for his six fingers, then his genius, and then…
then for what he became. What he is now. And he knows it’s true. He’s always known it. He’s even
said so himself – he is a freak. But he looks at Stan, looks at him, and vows he won’t let it end like
this as he speaks, “Maybe. But I still love you.”

“He’s a liar.”

“I am not,” Ford cries and he charges over to Stan, takes his brother’s face in his hands and looks
deeper into his eyes, “Stanley, I promise - I love you. I always have. I’ll admit; I was a goddamn fool
about it – I let logic and society and our parents and every other stupid excuse in the world come
between us. I pushed us apart from one another, I did that! I know that! I know this is all my fault
and if you don’t want to forgive me or love me back…if you’ve stopped loving me…I’ll understand,
but I’ll still love you. And I’m sorry I didn’t say it sooner, I’m sorry I made you ever think any
differently and I’m just– I’m just… I’m sorry, okay?”

Ford presses his forehead to Stan’s and rubs his hands tenderly down the back of his brother’s neck
as he closes his eyes, “I’m sorry.”

Stan blinks and the Things around him recoil slightly, reacting negatively to whatever is happening
between the brothers and Ford’s voice is a hushed breath, “You’re the only one I’ve ever loved,
Stanley Pines. And I’m going to take you home.”

“Ford,” Stan gasps and he seems to be coming back to himself, a hand reaching out.

But then he shudders, he convulses and Ford looks down to see Thing One has melted away, turned
to liquid and she’s sinking into Stan’s body. Thing Two is also nothing more than a vile sludge that
is creeping its way onto Stan and Stan’s eyes close and he lets out a pained grunt, his arms wrapping
around himself, holding his sides as he doubles over in pain.

Ford tightens his grip, starts shouting Stan’s name, tries to snap him out of it but it’s too late. When
Stan opens his eyes, one is bright yellow and the other is bright orange and he draws back a strong
fist which he plants right into the center of Ford’s face.

NOW

Mabel Pines isn’t the type to chew her nails but she’s pretty much feasting on them now, “It’s been
too long.”

“It hasn’t,” Dipper argues but his tone isn’t very convincing, “It hasn’t even been five minutes.”

“Three by my count,” Soos says, looking at his wrist and Wendy frowns, “You know you’re not
wearing a watch, right Soos?”

“I can dream!”

“It doesn’t matter how long it’s been!” Dipper says loudly, “Great Uncle Ford is coming back and
he’s coming back with Grunkle Stan! We just…we have to be patient.”

“Patient!” Mabel cries like it’s the worst word she’s ever heard. And to her, it really is. There’s no
worse word than ‘patient’. Especially not when she’s so worried about her Grunkles. And it’s been
forever since she’s seen them! It’s been – she doesn’t know – about five billion years since she’s seen
Grunkle Ford and seventeen billion since she’s seen Grunkle Stan! She can’t stand it! She just can’t
stand it! She can’t just take standing here and doing nothing and she has no idea how everyone else
is doing it.

How can they be so calm?!

Who knows what’s going on, on the other side of that portal?

There could be ghosts! There could be monsters! There could be…there could be *claymation*!

Mabel shudders and then gets a very determined look on her face. She starts walking towards the portal but Dipper takes a firm grip on her right arm, “Hey! Where do you think you’re going?!”

“What’s it look like, Dipper? They’ve been gone too long! We have to *do* something! I’m not going to just stand here while our Grunkles are in danger!”

Dipper tightens his hold, “Mabel, stop! We can’t just go charging in there! Great Uncle Ford said-”

“Grunkle Ford isn’t here, Dipper! And neither is Grunkle Stan! And I’m not going to wait a minute longer if they need my help!” Mabel tries to pull away but Dipper has a good hold on her and he keeps saying these short, aborted words like her name and ‘wait’, ‘stop’, and ‘I promised!’ and Mabel doesn’t know what the last one is about and she doesn’t care.

Dipper might be willing to sit back on the sidelines but she’s not going to! It’s time for action. She reaches out a foot and gently nudges Waddles. Seeing her struggling, Waddles jumps into action. Much like he did to Robbie, the pig trundles forward and with his considerable bulk he knocks into Dipper. This causes the boy to lose his hold and Mabel squirms free.

Soos and Wendy, who had been dutifully watching the portal, have no time to react as Mabel dashes forward. Dipper reaches out a hand, calling out to her but it’s too late – Mabel charges head first into the doorway and the unknown.

She closes her eyes, arms held protectively in front of her as she leaps, expecting…well, she doesn’t know what exactly, but wanting to guard herself as much as possible. She comes out to find herself…in the Mystery Shack basement.

She looks around, confused. It-It looks just like the room she left but there’s no Dipper, Soos, Wendy, or Waddles. The place is also a wreck. Equipment has been tossed everywhere. The concrete floor has been broken, large chunks of it lying about and when she looks up she can see the sky – someone (or something) has ripped through all the levels of the Shack.

And it’s quiet.

Creepy quiet.

Mabel gathers up the end of her long brown hair. Running her hands over it apprehensively as she asks, “Hello? Is-Is anyone there?”

No answer.

“G-Grunkle Ford?”

Still nothing.

“Grunkle Stan?”

Just silence.
Mabel cautiously walks forwards. The whole area is in shadows. The sky above is uncomfortably dark – no stars, no moon. It’s night but it’s…not. It’s like being in a pitch black void. But she can…see? It’s an odd place to be and she looks behind her. The green, slimy portal continues to swirl and she highly considers going back through it. Maybe Grunkle Ford and Grunkle Stan aren’t here. Maybe she’s ended up in some other dimension entirely.

She should leave now.

She should leave before she gets trapped here.

She takes in a deep breath and shakes her head. No. No, they’ve got to be here. She has to find them and she has to bring them home. For Soos and Wendy. For Dipper. She thinks of her brother and her lips twitch. She wishes he was here. She wishes he had followed her through. She’s kind of surprised he hasn’t. In fact, she’s still sort of stunned she went through.

The whole supernatural thing…it’s really more Dipper’s arena.

But family – well, that’s hers. And Grunkle Stan and Grunkle Ford are her family. She’ll do whatever she has to, to protect them. To get them back. Even if it means venturing further into this dark, scary dimension. She walks carefully, almost tiptoeing about. She finds the elevator and it appears to be working albeit unsteadily. It looks sort of dented and the lights above it flicker ominously.

Still, she gets inside and pushes the button to go up. It lurches and groans but it raises her up to the Gift Shop. She exists to find that – again – it’s almost a perfect representation of what she left. But it’s…demented. Everything is coated in a layer of ash and dust. The different items you could buy – magnets, post cards, snow globes – they’re all damaged in some fashion. It’s as if they were abandoned and left to deteriorate to the elements.

The wood floor is dark and warped and there are deep pits and holes. She moves about with a cautious air – not sure what exactly she’ll face next. She goes outside and the world is still a bleak void. She sees a large gaping maw in the ground – looks down to see that that’s where the basement lies. What could have had the force to-to burst up through the ground like this?

And then, as if to answer her question, she hears a loud cracking sound – like trees being torn from the earth and something comes flying towards her. With a fearful cry she dodges away from the object, hiding behind a moldy pile of stacked wooden logs. The object hits through ground with a loud, sickening thud and a pained groan and she realizes it’s—it’s a person. A body.

Mabel peeks over the top of the wood pile and see Grunkle Ford. He’s in a heap on the ground and he’s bleeding. He’s bleeding…everywhere. One of the lenses on his glasses is completely shattered and his face – it looks awful. It’s covered in open gashes and cuts – it’s swelling in spots – lip busted, one eye turning an ugly black. He lets out an animalistic sound of pain as he rolls over and spits and gags – thick, bloody bits falling from his mouth.

She feels herself trembling and she presses a hand to her mouth, eyes watering. He looks so hurt! She has to help him! And then-then something comes from the darkness of the woods. It looks like a hulking beast and as it draws closer she recognizes Grunkle Stan, but something’s wrong with him. Very, very wrong. His eyes…one is yellow and one is orange and he’s…smiling.

But his smile is wrong. It’s cruel and unnatural. He looks a little like he did when he saved her and her sibling from the zombies, but instead of looking strong and heroic he looks...strong and scary. His fez and tie are gone, his suit torn and ripped in places and he's covered in blood…and she's...she's pretty sure it's Ford's.
And when he speaks his voice comes out so strange, echoing as he grumbles, “You’re no fun anymore, Sixer. You’re not fighting back.”

“W-w-won’t.” Ford wheezes and Stan laughs – the sound raspy and awful, “Why not? Because you love me?”

Ford’s one working eye closes and he looks so beaten. Stan charges over, takes a hold of one of Ford’s arms and swings it back, presses a foot down on his back and there’s this unpleasant snapping sound – like a twig breaking and Ford lets out a sharp cry of agony. Stan doesn’t let go though, if anything he yanks harder as he snarls, “Come on – come on! Put on your little show again!”

He presses harder and Mabel watches, shocked, as smoke curls out of Ford’s back and shoulders – as his one eye shifts from red to brown and back again and his fingers stretch – changing to talons and then another stretch and they’re normal again. Ford lets out a grunt and he looks like he’s concentrating and sure enough it all stops – he’s himself – not some strange creature.

Stan tsks in disappointment, “Pathetic.”

Stan is still working Ford’s arm but Ford isn’t fighting. He’s letting Stan hurt him and Stan rolls him over, drags him up and punches him in the face, again and again and Ford’s face is pretty much a pulp at this point but Ford holds on to the wrist of the hand holding his shirt, touch gentle, “S-s-Stan…I’m…w’th you…won’t leave…”

“No,” Stan pulls back, punches him again, “You won’t.”

He lets Ford go and Ford collapses at his feet. He’s trembling and Stan stands over him, glowering, “Can’t believe you didn’t even take one swing at me. Why? You think this is just because they’re in here with me? No…it’s not just that, Stanford. I’ve wanted to do this to you for a long time. This is what you get. What you deserve. You see…”

Stan squats down lower to him, whispering, “I know.”

Ford looks up at him as best as he can, tone ragged, “You-?”

“They showed me.”

“Sh-showed you…what?”

“Everything,” Stan confirms; tone dark and silky.

Ford turns his face down and a choked noise leaves him and Mabel knows it’s a sob. She walks out from behind the wood pile, heart breaking as a single tear escapes Ford and Stan doesn’t see her, doesn’t hear her as he continues, “And you were right. I do hate you. How could I not? You’re disgusting.”

Ford doesn’t sob again, but it doesn’t matter. He looks absolutely gutted.

And Mabel can’t take anymore as she speaks; her voice a tiny squeak, “Grunkle Stan?”

Stan turns to her and all the evil dreadfulfulness seems to drop away and he looks…miserably shocked, “Mabel-?”

“Grunkle Stan,” she sniffs, tears forming in her eyes, “What…what are you doing?”

“Mabel…sweetie…” the last word leaves him as if he’s remembering something and when he says it,
his voice is different. It’s normal. Then he blinks and his eyes do so very slowly - almost as if his eyelids have to carefully peel apart from one another.

“Grunkle Stan,” Mabel rubs a hand at her eyes as if she’s upset that she’s crying and her bottom lip quivers. A very resolute look crosses her face and she balls her hands into fists in front of herself, “I know you’re not my Grunkle Stan! My Grunkle Stan would-would never do this! He loves his family! And he loves Grunkle Ford! He loves Grunkle Ford more than anybody in the whole world!”

Stan draws away from Ford, falls onto his backside and his legs kick out, he pushes himself back from Mabel as she stands tall, her voice firm, “And I believe in him! I believe in my Grunkle Stan and I – I trust him! Grunkle Stan, please…I trust you.”

Stan clutches at his head and lets out an earsplitting sound – a sound no human person should be able to make. Mabel darts forward and covers Grunkle Ford, protecting him, worried for him and his bruised, broken body as Stan keeps letting out this hideous noise. She clings to Ford and watches with big, wet eyes as this revolting thick, tar like substance gushes from Stan’s nose, mouth, eyes and ears. It’s black and indigo and it keeps coming and when it finally stops, Stan coughs and sputters and rubs at his mouth and his eyes…they’re normal. They’re back to their normal brown.

The black and blue liquids separate and draw away and try to take some sort of shape but it’s as if they don’t have enough strength to. One looks like a mutated version of Dipper and the other is Mabel and Mabel looks at the one that’s supposed to be her and glares with unabashed hatred. Mabel didn’t even know it was possible for her to feel such an emotion – she doesn’t particularly like it, so she instead directs her attention to Grunkle Stan, “We have to get out of here. We have to go home.”

“Mabel…” Stan starts but she shakes her head at him and tries her valiant best to pick up Grunkle Ford. He’s no longer conscious and she’s so much smaller than him. She’s not having much luck when suddenly she hears Dipper calling out to her. She looks up and sees Dipper and Soos rushing over, “You guys?! What are you doing here?! No, wait – scratch that! What took you so long?!”

“Dude, what are you talking about?” Soos asks, confused, “We went through the portal right after you did!”

Dipper looks around, frowning, “Time must be different here…”

“Oh, it doesn’t matter! Help me!” Mabel grumbles; struggling with Ford and Soos easily picks him up, carefully cradling him close. Stan struggles to get to his feet, knees cracking and he stumbles slightly, still confused – hair a mess, face streaked with grime and dirt and blood.

He looks at Ford and he’s never seen someone look so…finished. Ford looks like he isn’t even breathing and he staggers closer, just to make sure and yes, his chest is rising and falling although very weakly. It’s clear he’s clinging to life by a thread and these horrible images flash before Stan’s eyes – no, not images. Memories. Memories of his own hands doing this and Ford just taking it and taking it and begging Stanley…begging him to snap out of it.

But Stan couldn’t. He couldn’t. He was screaming in his own head, trapped, as he felt his brother break apart beneath his fingers. As he watched himself single handedly (and brutally) demolish the person he cares for the most. Killed him…he had almost killed him…

God, for all he knows – Ford might still die. Stanley might have just beaten him to death and he sees Ford’s gloves and his eyes narrow. Those gloves…they had hurt those Things. If they could hurt them…
“Soos, wait,” Stan takes a gentle hold of Ford’s hands and with shaking fingers he gently removes the gloves. He puts them on and instead of humming with the blue electricity they normally showcase, they instead change – in his hands they morph to an orange red, yellow glow – molten heat surging through them and he looks at the two mutated Things that are still writhing on the ground.

He turns to Dipper, Mabel, and Soos, expression grimly, “You all take Ford – I’ll be down with you in a minute.”

The twins say ‘But Grunkle Stan-!’ at the exact same moment Soos says ‘But Mr. Pines-!’ but Stan’s voice is a deep growl that brokers no argument, “Now.”

There is no further dissent. The group leaves Stan, who turns to the Things. The gloves burn hot as his fingers form into tight fists. They feel like they’re on fire as he stalks over towards them, murder in his eyes, and he plants one big heavy foot down on both of them, holding them in place. They squeal beneath his weight as he hisses, “This is for me.”

Then he lowers his hands towards them, “And this is for Stanford…”

Twin high pitched screams rent the air. They scream and scream and scream until their very voices break over the sound.

Then there is nothing but silence.

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The portal is still swirling and they easily cross the threshold. Dipper comes first, hand in hand with Mabel. They’re followed by Soos, who carefully carries Ford and finally Grunkle Stan. There are splashes of dark, ugly liquid all over Stan – it looks like fresh, like blood but not quiet. It doesn’t matter. His face is set like stone.

Wendy doesn’t wait for explanations. The moment everyone is clear, she starts tearing away at the portal. The axe bites into the doorway and sparks shoot everywhere. The portal snaps and collapses with a boom. Wendy doesn’t stop. Not for a second. She expends little to no effort in destroying it. The doorway falls beneath her onslaught and soon it is nothing more than harmless parts.

Mabel, turns to Dipper and hugs him tightly – no awkwardness in the action– her eyes tightly closed as relief washes over her in waves. It’s done. They’re home. They’re…safe?

But are we? Her thoughts whisper and she thinks of Ford’s transformation – of the words she overheard Stan say. She thinks of what Stan must have…must have done after he told them to go on ahead before him. She bites her bottom lip and feels the threat of unshed tears.

Are they safe?

She doesn’t know…she just…doesn’t know.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Everything comes in interminable, little gaps of time.

The first real, somewhat conscious moment is blurry, bright lights coming into focus and pain – sharp, jarring, unbelievable pain shooting throughout his entire body. The air is tinged with a metallic, antiseptic scent and he’s gripped with panic and he hears a voice bellowing and it’s hard to understand, only bits leaking through:

He’s seizing…

Christ! Get me a-!

We’re losing him! We’re losing him!

Nurse, hand me that-

And there’s this horrible, droning sound – on and on and it starts off low but gets higher in pitch and his ears ache from the ringing, the very screeching of it and then, then it all fades, grows soft and distant and black and there’s nothing. He’s lost again and he doesn’t know for how long. Nothing has any permanence until the next moment of sentience and this time everything is cooler and calmer, albeit still unclear.

…don’t know when the swelling will go down…

…lucky you got him here when you did…

Then out again, gone again. He floats in the ether, not truly existing until he finally takes in a deep, shuddering breath and breaks the surface of consciousness, this time in a more fixed way. He opens his eyes…or at least, one of them opens. The other…he feels it, but it won’t work…it’s hindered by something and he realizes there’s gauze all around him.

It almost feels as if the gauze is inside him – cushioning him, making him feel fuzzy. He sucks in a breath and blinks and he hears a loud scraping sound and then there’s a hand on his forehead, a gruff voice whispering, “Sixer?”

All he can manage is a sound and then the hand is gone and people are flooding in and it such a hassle that he wants to go back to the dark. Wants to go back to the incomprehensible nothingness because there’s a doctor in his face asking him questions and flashing a light in his one working eye and it’s…hard to answer. Difficult because while the pain is gone there’s this weird numbness, this fuzziness in his mind like cotton.

“Professor Pinesbury, can you hear me?”

It’s a struggle to ask, “Who?”

“Professor Lee Pinesbury,” the Doctor repeats.

“I…?” he doesn’t know how to answer, it’s on the tip of his tongue and it teeters there before finally falling off, “Ford…”
“It’s a nickname,” the gruff voice breaks in, familiar but distant, “You know, he’s big on the sciences. Always forging ahead…”

The doctor returns skeptically, “Then wouldn’t you call him ‘Forge’?”

“Look, Doc, what am I paying you for? Commentary? Is he okay or not?”

Ford tries to keep up but can’t, drifting off again. The next few returns are also brief and he only hears strange bits and pieces in between:

…‘one. Once upon a time, not so very long ago…beautiful girls in fairy stories are as common as pebbles on the beach. Magnolia-skinned milkmaids rub shoulders with…for fuck’s sake! How do you read this garbage, Sixer?

…‘number one, I didn’t even kiss you. Number two, I couldn’t follow up a kiss – if I had gone that far – with deflowering’…psh, okay Piers, keep telling yourself that. Man, can you believe this joker, Ford? He is already head over heels for this girl…

…‘he thrust a knee between her legs. The words died in her mouth. Every sensation in Linnet’s body focused on the sweet spot between her legs. Oh, she moaned, please’…man, I better look around, right bro? Make sure no can, uh, overhear this, ‘cause this story is really start to heat up…

Hey kids, come on in…

…just been sitting here…

Soos taking good care of…

…told ’em it was a car crash…

…should hopefully be awake soon…

But finally a day comes where he fully wakes. His left eye still won’t open, but this time he feels more grounded, stronger. He blinks up at a white, drop ceiling and there’s a constant murmur. Talking. Someone is talking…

“…She looked like a boiled lobster, perhaps permanently. Not a beauty any longer. Not by any measure. More like a monster, she thought. A scaly beast and, as such, she must continue to keep him away. Yes, she caught Piers’s face when he looked at her and she understood that she was hurting him. She did understand that. But it doesn’t matter. It can’t, she told herself. She cannot be a duchess. Never. It’s inconceivable. She had made up her mind not to marry him, as she would not marry anyone who pities her…dammit, Linnet! How can you be so stupid! Piers loves you, for god’s sake, he doesn’t care what you look like!”

Ford’s one working eye blinks rapidly as he becomes fully anchored to reality and he lets out a questioning hum. It must carry a decent amount of volume because he hears a chair scrap along linoleum and then Stanley steps into his field of vision. He looks totally wretched. His eyes are red rimmed and his five o’clock shadow could really be classified as a something beyond five o’clock. His hair is a ragged mess, like he ran his hands through it bunches of time but when he sees Ford’s one working eye blink he grins, “Hey! Hey, Ford!”

“Stan?” Ford asks and his voice sounds scratchy, like he hasn’t used it in years.

“Yeah, hey, let me go get the Doc…”
Ford’s limbs feel heavy and one of them…his left arm…doesn’t want to move at all, but he manages to shoot out his right hand, wave it at his brother, brushes something, maybe his front as he gasps, “No…”

“Ford, you’ve been in and out of it a lot in the last couple of days. Doc should really get a look at you.”

“No,” Ford breathes out, “No…stay with me…”

“Okay,” Stan says simply and takes Ford’s right hand in his, brings it up and kisses the back of it. Ford licks his lips and it hurts to talk but he does so anyway, “What…happened?”

Stan’s brown eyes are full of sorrow, “You’re at Gravity Falls General. Had to check you in under one of my old aliases. Professor Lee Pinesbury. Long story about that particular identity. Doesn’t matter. Anyway, no one knows you’re my twin. They couldn’t…couldn’t tell when we first brought you in ‘cause your face, your face was…”

A stifled, wet noise escapes Stan and Ford feels his brother’s grip tighten on his hand, “Sorry….uh, allergies. Anyway, you were pretty bad off. Busted up mug, broken arm, punctured lung, internal… internal bleedin’…you…you were…we lost you. We lost you for a bit.”

The last part comes out so quietly, Ford almost doesn’t hear it at all and Stan’s face is clearly struggling, trying to keep on a neutral mask. But the mask slips too much, is too false, and Ford can see an incredible amount of hurt beneath, the absolute misery and Stan kisses the back of his hand again, presses it to his cheek, “But you’re a fighter. I told ‘em. Told everybody. Said you’d be fine. And here we are…”

“Can’t…open one of my eyes…”

“Your face is bandaged all to hell. Doc said you should be able to see out both like normal once the swelling goes all the way down. It’s—it’s getting there. Looks a lot better than it did when…I should—I should go get him.”

“Broken…arm?”

Stan nods, “They gotta it in a cast. Our girl Mabel’s already seen to it. You probably can’t see it from the angle you’re at, but it is coated in glitter. Looks like a rainbow. Dipper signed it too. And Soos and Wendy.”

“Y-you?”

“No,” Stan mutters, “I caused it. Seemed in poor taste to sign it.”

“Not…you,” Ford says on a breath, exhaustion starting to overtake him, “Them…them…”

Stan lets out a derisive snort, a ‘yeah, right’ under his breath and he lets Ford’s hand go, “I’ll be right back.”

Stan leaves and returns soon enough with the doctor. He introduces himself but blithely remarks that Stan has dubbed him ‘Doctor Medicine’, and that Ford can feel free to call him the same. Ford doesn’t comment as he is dutifully checked over. The doctor makes light chit chat, casually remarking that Stan has been in Ford’s room around the clock – day and night. Sitting by his bedside, reading to him from some trashy romance novel or watching television with him and the nurses find it very sweet.
“You know, I went to the Mystery Shack once, long time ago,” the doctor says brightly, “Loved that whole Mr. Mystery bit. Had no idea he had a domestic partner.”

“Domestic-?”

“Well, you’re healing up rather nicely, Professor! Reaction time is still a little slow, but that’s to be expected with how long you were out. Still, the extra rest has done you a world of good. I’ll set you up for a round of tests, just to check everything, see how it’s all coming together.”

The doctor leaves and Ford goes over his last few words. See how it’s all coming together. Yeah. He’d like to know that himself.

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Once Ford is fully conscious, Stan disappears. Instead Soos starts to come to check on him. He doesn’t stay long. Just carries a written list with him and reads from it, asking the doctor everything that’s been listed for him. The doctor dutifully answers and Soos takes notes and Ford keeps trying to get his attention but every time he tries Soos just shakes his head and looks away, face sad.

Then one day Wendy comes. She also has a written list, but when she enters Ford’s room she crumples it up into a ball and tosses it in the garbage. She crosses her arms and looks at the doctor, “How’s he doing?”

“You could just ask me,” Ford returns dryly, “I am capable of speech.”

In fact, he’s capable of a lot more than that. Both eyes are now functional and his face has cleared considerably. It still hurts a little to breathe and his left arm is still encased in a plaster cocoon, but the doctor has actually started talking about releasing him.

Which he does now, “As you can see – and hear – quite well. I’m not sure why Mr. Pines stopped his visits, but I do believe we can release the Professor this week.”

“He’s stopped his visits because he’s a stubborn asshole. Just like the jackass in the bed over there,” Wendy says tartly and the doctor’s eyebrows rise. Ford can’t help it. He laughs. It’s the first time he’s laughed since he’s woken up and the sound is very rusty.

Still, Wendy grins, “You like that?”

Ford clears his throat and nods, “I do.”

The doctor looks between the two of them as if they’re crazy and Wendy jerks a thumb over one shoulder, “Don’t you have some doctoring to do or something?”

He rolls his eyes and leaves with a sigh. Wendy flops down on the bed next to Ford, “So, since you’re so chatty – how are you doing?”

“Better. No Soos?”

Wendy shakes her head, “I managed to make it my turn. Got Dipper and Mabel to distract him with a laser pointer. They wanted to come, but I told them it would be better if it was me. Brought the list just to appease Mr. Pines.”
“I take it he’s been the one writing them?”

She nods. “Soos is a good guy, follows them to the letter. Me? I get the real scoop. And, more importantly, I get two dumb old dudes to fix their issues.”

“I take it you are referring to Stanley and myself?”

“Mr. Pines has been a total wreck since the portal. Those…things. They did a number on him. I can tell. So can the twins. He totally refused to leave you when we first brought you here, but once you were up and about, he bolted.”

“I noticed.”

“He blames himself for what happened to you. Which I think is hilarious, because it’s obviously not his fault.”

“Agreed.”

Her eyes widen, “Wow? Really? Thought I was gonna have to fight you on that.”

“Why on earth would you think that?”

“Okay, this from the guy who blamed himself for his brother breaking his high school science project like, what? Fifty million years ago?!”

He sucks in a loud breath and eyes her critically, “You’re not the least bit afraid of me, are you?”

“No. Why would I be?”

He shrugs, “You’d be surprised. Some people are. In some dimensions my name is never spoken aloud, the fear too great.”

“Okay, but that’s those dimensions. Here, in this one, you’re just some decrypt goober who’s in love with another decrypt goober.”

Ford’s lips twitch, “Wendy...I am sure this will upset you greatly to hear, but…I find I really do like you.”

She shrugs and tosses her long, red hair over one shoulder, “Of course you do. I’m awesome.”

“And humble,” he jokes, “I can see why my great nephew had a crush on you.”

“Dipper does have excellent taste. He’s going to be a total lady killer when he gets older,” Wendy laughs, then nudges him lightly, “And…I guess you’re not too bad, yourself. So long as you talk to Mr. Pines and set things right.”

Ford rubs at his left shoulder, voice soft, “That might be easier said than done.”

“Look,” Wendy huffs, “There’s no more excuses, okay? No more distractions! I swear, you two just need to sit down and hash this shit out. You owe it to yourselves and, more importantly, you owe it to Dipper and Mabel. Poor kids have been going nuts since this all happened.”

Ford lets these words sink in and Wendy pats one of his knees, “Whelp, I’d best get back. I’m gonna tell Mr. Pines you’re doing okay. Don’t really think I need to dictate everything off that damned list. Also, you might want to reassure the nurses that you and your significant other are doing alright. They’re pretty damn invested in the soap opera that is your love affair.”
His eyes grow wide, “I-I don’t understand. The swellings gone down…clearly they can see we’re identical twins…right?”

“Dude, you clearly don’t know this town very well. There’s a guy married to a woodpecker here. You and Stan being an item, but having the same face? That’s pretty low on their weird meter. Catch you on the flipside.”

Wendy leaves and Ford sits there, just absorbing everything.

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Ford signs himself out of the hospital. The doctor and nurses keep asking again and again if he wants them to call someone to pick him up or at least get him a cab but he refuses. He’s been bedridden for far too long and he just wants to walk and get some fresh air and think.

His broken arm rests in its cast in a sling around his neck and he can feel it itching and aching as he walks. As soon as he gets back to the Shack he can fix it. There was a dimension he went to where broken bone serum was at every corner drugstore. It should be easy enough for him to recreate. Once he has that in his system he will be relatively back to normal. Or at least as normal as he’ll ever be.

Although ‘normal’ is starting to take an entirely different definition to him. He’s always found the strange properties of Gravity Falls to be appealing, but he’s never known how much so until he starts walking around the town. When he’d first moved here, he had never spent much time amongst the populace. He kept to himself, heard hushed murmurs about how he was ‘mysterious’ but never really given it much thought.

Not until now – now he’s moving around, looking at the quaint shops and the smiling people and he can hear a gentle murmur rising up. Can catch little whispers. Things like ‘Isn’t that that Professor they had to rush to the hospital?’, ‘Look, sweetie! He has six fingers! Isn’t that nice?’, and ‘Heard he lives up at that Mystery Shack with that Mr. Mystery fella – make a mighty fine couple’.

The last one throws him for a loop. He looks around, trying to find out where exactly he heard that one, but he knows he did. Just like he heard it from the nurses who pressured him to talk more in detail about his ‘boyfriend’ and it’s like he woke up in an entirely new world. Maybe he died. Maybe he’s gone to a new dimension, a new world…how can everyone here be so-so casual about all of this? So complacent? It’s illogical, crazy…

But as he walks the darker remarks do start to seep in. He hears a few hisses about his extra finger, some nasty chuckles about his ‘relationship’ and while they certainly sting, they aren’t…important. No more important that the accepting ones, honestly. They’re just…unnecessary commentary. They’re like buzzing bees floating around him, easily swatted away and as he goes through the town he begins to realize how badly he wants to go home.

The Shack is his home.

The Mystery Shack. He had wanted Stanley to close it, to end all its nonsense but now he finds he really, really misses it. He misses it far more than he does any vague memories of how it used to be before he went through the portal thirty years ago. He rubs his head, frowning, god…how had it even looked thirty years ago? He can’t remember. All he can remember is how it looks now – a kitschy mess with taxidermy animals and question marks and…just…it’s…home.
The Mystery Shack is what he thinks of as his home, but he wonders as to whether or not he deserves it after everything he’s done. After all, Stanley’s seen him now. Seen who he is under the skin, under the scars, the false veneer of humanity. He’s seen him in his true form – the form they made, the form he made for himself. And what’s more – Stanley knows what he’s done now. All those dimensions, all those beings, those people…

He hadn’t been lying to Wendy, hadn’t been bragging. In fact, if anything, he’d been making light of something very dark and very serious. In some worlds, he’s considered a plague, a scourge, a destroyer. He has layers upon layers of blood on his hands. His past is a red drenched mess and it isn’t something he can ever forget; ever forgive if forgiveness is even a question, which it isn’t.

He knows what he’s done – and he knows, deep down, he wouldn’t change a thing – no matter how horrible.

What does this say about him? That’s probably the true reason Stanley didn’t come back once he awoke. Yes, Stan no doubt feels a tinge of guilt about hurting him but moreover, Stan is probably repulsed by him. How can he not be? And Ford still remembers his voice, still remembers him hissing: \textit{I know. They showed me. They showed me everything. And you were right. I do hate you. How could I not? You're disgusting.}

It had been his greatest fear – for Stan to know. For Stan to truly hate him. And now he does.

Just as he’s starting to get winded from the walking and thinking about how a cab might have been a good idea after all, he notices he’s walking right past the junkyard. He slows his pace, looks at the aged sign hanging above it. He’s not far from the Shack now, but the junkyard stands before him and he thinks of who is inside.

He hasn’t spoken to Fiddleford in years. He saw him one night, covertly, during one of his rounds. But he hadn’t spoken to him, hadn’t had the courage to. But now, with the sun out and shining brightly, he finds himself wanting to talk to him. Wanting to talk to the one true friend he had once… once, before he ruined everything…

Fiddleford McGucket. Christ. He ruined the man’s whole life. He lives here now, of all places. In a junkyard, half out of his mind. Yet, Ford finds himself wandering inside, walking around, inspecting the broken vehicles, and thinking about how he should just leave. How he has no right to be here, how he can only make things far worse and just as he’s truly considering leaving for real he turns and Fiddleford is there.

He’s hunched down low, dirty brown suspenders on, hat crooked, a Band-Aid on his beard and he’s rubbing his hands over one another, looking squirrely as he eyes Ford up and down, “I-I know you…”

Ford bites his bottom lip, “Yes.”

Fiddleford fidgets. It’s clear he’s torn between fight or flight. His eyes become unfocused and then focused again, before he mutters, “…you make me…uncomfortable.”

“I’m sorry,” Ford breathes and he steps back, prepares to leave, but Fiddleford holds up a hand, “Now, wait-a-second, fella. I…I know you and you…you kinda give me the jibblies, but that ain’t no reason for you to go.”

Ford’s eyebrows rise and, much to his astonishment, Fiddleford eases closer. He puts on a pair of green spectacles and takes a hold of Ford’s good hand. He toys with his extra fingers, looking deep in though. He runs one of his own fingers under his lip thoughtfully, “Six fingers…remember that
sure enough…but your name…”

He shakes his head, “It ain’t coming to me. My memory…it’s a right mess. Been coming back little by little…but can’t remember…”

“You shouldn’t,” Ford hears himself say, “I’m not a good memory to have.”

Fiddleford looks up into his face and Ford feels his cheeks burn. He wants to look away, but he forces himself to meet Fiddleford’s gaze. He owes the man that much. Hell, he owes him a lot more than that. Fiddleford had tried to warn him, had tried to stop him – and Ford hadn’t listened. He hadn’t listened to his assistant, to his friend, his partner.

He had brought Fiddleford here. He had destroyed his life. And here he was…doing what exactly? Looking for forgiveness? Understanding? His friend? He didn’t deserve any of those things. Couldn’t ask for them. Yet here he was, staring at this sweet, kind man who was slowly piecing himself back together. He really should leave; he could be a detriment to Fiddleford’s progress.

But instead he just stands there and Fiddleford huffs out a breath, “Reckon you should come with me…meet the missus.”

He turns and waves a hand over his shoulder, indicating Ford should follow him. Ford does. They end up in a little ramshackle hovel. Ford manages to find a clear spot to sit and Fiddleford lightly pokes his cast, “Looks like you and me match.”

He holds up his own bandaged arm, “Mine ain’t broken, but it’s right warm and cozy.”

Ford hears a strange chittering sound as a raccoon appears. Fiddleford beams, “There’s my girl. This is my Raccoon Wife. Raccoon Wife, this is…”

“Lee,” Ford finds himself answering, “Professor Lee Pinesbury. But everyone calls me ‘Ford’.”

He doesn’t know why he lies. Or, worse, he knows exactly why. But if Fiddleford sees the lie for what it is, he doesn’t say so, instead remarking, “Well, what d’you think of him?”

The raccoon just looks at him.

“Yeah, felt the same. Does look an awful lot like that mystery man,” Fidds looks at Ford, “You know him?”

“He’s my broooofriend,” Ford has no idea why this is coming out of his mouth, why he dragged out the right word and then let it morph into something else entirely, “My boyfriend. He’s my boyfriend.”

It is, without a doubt, the stupidest thing he has ever said aloud.

But he…said it. He said it and it feels…

It feels like something overdue.

Something…truthful.

But it can’t be. He and Stanley never agreed to…and they still have so much between them – this gaping, insurmountable maw. There’s so much – too much, and he feels as if it will never have any proper resolution whatsoever. That it will always be between them, keeping them from ever truly connecting with one another.
And the term ‘boyfriend’ is incredibly insipid. Childish. Immature. He’s got gray hair, for fuck’s sake – he can’t have a boyfriend. He’s long past those sweaty, awkward, acne-prone teenage years. He can’t just claim someone as his ‘boyfriend’ of all things. Not that any other term seems appropriate. They all feel like exceedingly pathetic labels. But then, it’s not the label or title that matters – it’s the fact that here he is – saying it aloud. Here he is…proclaiming Stanley as his.

If he expects some sort of reaction from Fiddleford, he doesn’t get one. Instead the man merely nods as if this is a given. He turns to the raccoon, whose tiny head cocks to one side and he speaks to her as if she made some commentary, “I know, I know…but I had to bring him home! Sure, he makes me feel a little hibblydee bibbledee, but he’s also…sad.”

He takes a seat across from Ford and the raccoon gets on his lap. He pets the creature and cuddles it close, “And I understand sad, sure’nuff.”

Ford’s eyes cast down as Fiddleford asks, “So, why’re you sad, mister?”

“It’s…a long story.”

“Don’t got much else to do.”

Ford looks up at him. He looks up at the one person he considered his friend (his only friend) past Stanley, looks at the one person who was as smart – if not smarter – than him. Actually, scratch that – Fiddleford was smarter. Hell, probably still is. He knew what they had been messing with was dangerous, that Ford was playing with fire, with forces he didn’t truly understand. Fiddleford’s the true genius, the true visionary. He’s kind and loyal and has a heart of gold.

Even now, even as broken as he appears, he’s the best. He’s Ford’s better. And Ford finds himself doing something he thought he would never do with anyone. He finds himself opening up. He tells Fiddleford everything. Everything.

He starts at the beginning when he first arrived at Gravity falls. He admits to knowing Fiddleford, into dragging him here – he tells him how he hurt him, how he left and he moves on from there. He talks about his fight with Stanley, his trip through the portal. He divulges every dark, awful secret, he tells him about there, about them. He tells him unflinchingly what was done to him and what he, in return, did to others.

Fiddleford doesn’t interrupt him, not even once, and Ford talks for so long that the sun begins to set and his voice starts to grow thin, throat parched from his nonstop speech. He doesn’t cry, he doesn’t get emotional – even when it would make sense to. Instead he recounts it all in the same, level tone as if it’s a story – as if it’s some fictional tale that never happened to him, was never real.

The bad, the ugly, the truly despicable and the tiny, tiny shreds of goodness that happened. Little bits of light in other worlds that were fine and pure and made him forget all the dark, horrible, hideous things. The times where he was lucky enough to shred everything off, forget who he was and lose himself in the wonder of being in a world totally unlike his own.

Then he goes further – he tells him all about Stanley. He confesses all of it – every little kiss, every little stolen second, every secret rendezvous and every single sin. He admits their true relationship – admits their twin brothers and that they’ve been intimate with one another, been incestuous with one another. He admits that he’s never actually called him his boyfriend before, not until earlier today, with Fiddleford of all people and he fleetingly thinks about how odd, how strange it is, that this is the man he should air all this out to.

By all rights, this should be Stanley.
Or maybe a therapist or a priest or a judge and jury…

He doesn’t really know. Not anymore. And he finds he doesn’t care. It feels good, feels right that it’s Fiddleford. Fiddleford, the friend he betrayed. Fiddleford, the one he can never truly forgive himself for. It’s not that he forgives himself for any of the others – oh no, not that. He’s wronged many in his time – Stanley, chief among them.

But Fiddleford, poor Fiddleford…

Eventually the words drop off, the stories – all of them – end, and Ford is empty. It’s all out now. All of it. And Fiddleford takes off his hat, presses it to his chest, his balding head bared as he looks down, “Well…I’ll be.”

Ford sits there and his chest feels tight, like he can’t breathe, and his next words leave as if they’re being punched out, “I know this isn’t enough…but I am sorry, Fiddleford. I’m sorry for what I did to you, I’m sorry for what I did to the ones I told you about, sorry for Stanley and just…I’m beyond sorry and I know that my apologies don’t fix anything, don’t mean anything but-”

“No, hold on, right there…” Fiddleford reaches out as if to pat Ford’s shoulder, but he stops halfway, looking a little apprehensive. He pulls the hand back and instead takes a firmer grip on the brim of his hat, playing with it as he talks, “…now, I might not be the feller I used to be, the one you talked about. I mean, I remember some of this, but not all – the society saw to that. Heck, I saw to it. I wanted to unseen what I’d seen and that…that was mighty foolish of me.”

Ford goes to argue but Fiddleford waves him off, “No, no – now, let me finish! It was foolish, ‘cause in life…bad things happen. Some things so bad that they’re better left forgotten. But some of ‘em…you gotta have ‘em, experience ‘em, to become stronger and better. You can’t run, not forever. Sometimes you gotta look your demons in the eye.”

“But…what if the demon is you?”

He shrugs, “Well, you’re acknowledging it, ain’t ya? That’s better than most. Yeah, apologies – words – they don’t fix much. On their own, they’re pretty damned empty. But they’re still worth breathing, not holding inside where they really won’t do anyone any good. You say the words, and then you do something about them. You live them. You put weight behind them. You’re the demon? Okay, fair enough, now you know it – now you can do something about it.”

“You’re talking about…what? Atonement?”

“Reckon so.”

“But…isn’t there a point where there’s no coming back? No redemption?”

This time, Fiddleford does pat Ford’s shoulder, and his expression is firm, eyes lit with a strong sense of sanity, “Not for you. You can come back, Stanford Pines.”

“You-you do remember me?”

“Once you started telling me everything, it fell into place. Bit hazy nonetheless, but it’s there.”

“Can you?- Can you ever forgive me?”

“Gonna take some time, but it’s more than theoretically feasible.” Fiddleford gives him a tentative smile, “After all, you seem like you’ve got a lot less of your head up your ass than my shoddy memory can recall.”
Ford lets out a sound somewhere along the lines of a laugh, “Well, I don’t know about that. But I think it’s coming along at long last.”

Then, much to his surprise, he feels the raccoon climb up his back. The animal perches on his shoulder and Fiddleford shakes his head, “‘Sides, you got my Raccoon Wife on your side. Don’t like no one that’s truly gone to seed.”

“Well, I don’t know about that. I still have a lot to do…a lot to make up for.”

“True. Think it best you get back to your Stanley. He’s been needing your concessions lot longer than I’ve needed mine.”

Ford gently takes the raccoon off his shoulder, passing it to Fiddleford who draws it close again. Ford gets to his feet and starts to leave, only to look over his shoulder and ask cautiously, “Is it…is it okay if I come back here and-and see you again sometime?”

“Long as it ain’t to talk about buildin’ another transuniversal polydimensional metavortex, you’re more than welcome.”

“No, it won’t be about that. Think I’m long done with those.” Ford assures him as he leaves. He exits the hovel to find it’s now dark, the sky full of stars. He draws in a deep breath and looks to the woods, looks to the path that will lead him to the Mystery Shack. To Stanley.

He nods to himself and starts the long trek back, pondering the possibility of atonement as he goes.

Chapter End Notes

Stan is reading to Ford from Eloisa James's 'When Beauty Tamed The Beast'. 
“What do you mean he’s gone?!" Stan shouts into the phone, panic seizing him, “He checked himself out? Can he do that?”

The voice of the nurse on the other end of the phone is starting to sound reedy to Stan’s ears, his heart racing, mind going a mile a minute. Ford’s gone. He’s gone, he’s gone, he’s gone. He’s disappeared. The hospital doesn’t know where he is. No one knows where he is. Ford’s worked so hard so many times to leave Stanley and now he’s finally succeeded and a torrent of anger and sorrow and anxiety are welling up within him, fighting for dominance and-

In the distance Stan hears the distinctive sound of the vending machine buttons – he hears the machine creak open and close. His grip tightens on the phone. Anger wins as he growls out, “It’s fine. He’s here. Thanks.”

He hangs up the phone without so much as a goodbye and starts charging towards the machine. By the time he gets to it and goes down the stairs Ford is long gone. The elevator is waiting for him, totally innocent, not at all cognizant of the fact that it’s just aided and abetted an aggravating dipshit. Stan punches at the button that will take him down to the floor Ford is no doubt on.

Stan enters the basement to find it just like they left it the night they escaped them. It’s a complete wreck. Tools and broken equipment everywhere and on the floor…on the floor he spots trails of dried blood. A lot of it. Ford’s blood. Dammit. He hates this place. As far as he’s concerned, if there was a way to detach it from the Shack and destroy it, he would. Instead he marches through, shouting his brother’s name.

He gets no answer. Cursing, he searches through each room. The portal room is dark and empty as is the room with all the computer equipment. He ends up going towards a laboratory room that he can literally count on one hand how many times he’s been in and of course this is where Ford is. He’s using his one good hand to gather up beakers and vials and when he turns and sees Stanley he looks sheepishly, “Oh, ah, hello.”

“‘Hello’,” Stan snaps, “That’s the first thing you say to me?”

“Well, it is the most common way to greet people,” Ford offers and Stan finds his fists shaking at his sides, “Shut up! You don’t get to be a smart ass after you scared the livin’ daylights outta me!”

“Scared-?”

“Soos gets to the hospital to check on you and you ain’t there! I talk to the nurse and she says you checked yourself out and they have no idea where you are and-!”

“Calm down,” Ford returns but that just makes Stan more livid, “Calm? How can I be calm when I didn’t know where you were! AGAIN?! Again, Stanford Filbrick Pines!”

At this Ford can’t help but ask, “My full name? Who are you? Mom?”

“Can it!” Stan shouts, “I didn’t know where you were for thirty years and you thought it was okay to go up and missing yet again and why? Why, why do you always ALWAYS leave me without giving me the decency of telling me you’re going to do it in the first place! You’re-! You just! I can’t-!”

His words short circuit on themselves, his fury so great, and Ford puts the items down, walking over towards him with his one working hand raised in surrender, “Stanley…I-I didn’t mean to worry
“Then why-!”

“I just,” he gestures to his broken arm, “I wanted to fix this first.”

The very idea draws Stan up short, dampens the flames of his rage, “Fix…?”

Ford nods over towards the beakers and vials, “I can whip up a cure for broken bones, no sweat. I just…thought it’d be nice when you saw me again if I was…if I didn’t have this.”

Ford lifts the cast as best as he can and Stan looks at it, looks at his brother. While he certainly is much improved, there’s still an air of exhaustion about him. A beaten aura. Scabs on his cheeks, one over his eyebrow, cut on his bottom lip and he just looks so…done. And Stan did that. He caused it. His anger drains away completely as he remembers why he’s been sending Soos in his stead, remembers in a flash the sight of his brother lying still, damn near dead under his hands – because it had been his hands that caused this.

The memories make his head throb and it’s like there are pockets inside him that ache – that recall how it was to have them inside of him. Both things…crawled, no, burrowed their way into him. Creating holes inside his very being, cavities in his soul and he shudders, needing to think of something else– needing some kind of focus, so he goes directly for the simple and benign, “You can fix broken bones?”

“Stanley…”

“Hey! I broke that bone; I should damn well be the one to fix it! ‘Sides, I made your stupid portal work – I learned physics –I can whip up your miracle serum long as you direct me right.”

Amazingly his brother actually concedes. He puts down what he’s currently holding and sits in the chair. He clears his throat and starts instructing Stan on how to make the serum. It takes a lot of patience and time and neither of them talks about anything else. They just focus on the task at hand. Soon enough Stan has a syringe full and Ford’s coerced him into sawing through the cast.

Ford does note that it’s a shame to cut through Mabel’s fine craftsmanship, but the rainbow glittered cast has to go before the serum is administered. Once it’s off, Stan hands Ford the syringe, not looking forward to the idea of injecting it into his twin. Ford does the honors and – sure enough – his bone mends and rights itself.

He flexes his hand several times and moves the arm gingerly. Stan watches him with apprehension, “How do you feel?”

“Good. Better than I have in a long time, actually. Serum tends to do that.”

Stan makes a noncommittal sound and, looking at Ford, he can’t help but say, “You know, when we
took you to the hospital…that was one of the ways I picture’d it be when I first brought you back. I thought – maybe he’ll come out beaten to a bloody pulp and I’ll have to fast track him to the hospital. Instead I got you healthy and whole with sideburns and a punch to my face.”

Ford smirks sadly, “The punch to the face is accurate, as for the rest…”

They both look at one another in silence. Stan is leaning against one of the tables, his arms crossed. Ford sits across from him, hands flat on his legs, which he absently rubs, palms sweating. Neither seems to know what to say. Finally they both go to speak, but their words rush together. Stan starts off with, ‘So, I-’ and Ford begins with, ‘Stan, I-’ and then, hearing each other, they both continue to talk together, this time both offering up the exact same phrase ‘No, wait, you go first!’

For some reason they both grin, amused by the symmetry. It’s been a long while since they’ve said the exact same thing at the exact same time – shared that connection only twins share. That connection has been stretched taunt over time, damn near shattered in some cases. More often than not they’ve been at each other’s throats or in each other’s arms and this is the first time they’ve really just…been.

No fighting, no sex – nothing but the two of them together – talking.

Or, at least, trying to talk.

Ford lets out a sigh, “Is it…is it okay if I go first?”

Stan shrugs, “Well, age before beauty…”

“I’m not that much older than you. Fifteen minutes.”

“Yeah, but you always liked to brag about it when we were kids.”

Ford’s lips twitch, “Maybe a little.”

Stan snorts, “You were always calling me ‘little’ brother.”

“Sure, when I was six…I grew out of it.”

Stan eyes him critically and Ford relents, “Okay, so…I may or may not have held on to it a little later. Some people say I have a bit of a superiority complex.”

“Some people?”

He huffs, “Fine! Everyone.”

“There you go.”

“Now may I continue?” Ford mutters and Stan waves out a hand, gesturing he can continue. He draws in a deep breath before saying, “I’m…sorry I worried you. I checked myself out because I needed some time to think. And I didn’t imagine you’d come pick me up yourself, seeing as you’ve been sending your son as your errand boy.”

Stan opens his mouth to correct him again about Soos being his son but lets it drop. Instead he lets Ford continue, “I intended to be back sooner, but I ran into an old friend, Fiddleford McGucket.”

“Whoa, whoa – you were friends with Old Man McGucket?”

“I thought you knew?” Ford looks at him curiously but Stan’s face suggests it’s truly a surprise,
“Well, I went to him and we…talked. I told him everything.”

“Everything?”

Ford nods, “I-I don’t know why it just…felt good to confide in someone.”

“You could’ve confided in me.” Stan’s tone is hurt but Ford shakes his head, “But you already know it all, Stanley. Don’t you remember…they showed you…”

“I can’t trust anything those damned things showed me, Stanford!”

“No,” Ford whispers softly, eyes downcast, “What they showed you…I’m…quite sure that was the truth. No imagination is ever as horrible, as terribly cruel, as reality.”

Stan digests this slowly as Ford supplies in a dull timbre, “And now you…you’ve seen how I truly look. Beneath all,” he waves to his face, his body, “Beneath all this. I’m beyond a freak. I-I don’t even think there’s a word for what I am.”

A humorless laugh leaves him and he rubs at his eyes, “And to think…I used to be worried about having one extra finger.”

“But they made you that way,” Stan argues, “It’s their fault.”

“Would that make it easier for you?” Ford sighs, “To blame them? They might be a cause or a symptom, but once I left them…everything else…that was all my own doing. I’m not proud of it, but I’m not going to apologize for it either. I can’t apologize – apologies won’t rectify what I did. Nothing will.”

“So, what are you going to do then?” Stan asks gruffly, “Keep punishing yourself?”

“Oh, as if you don’t have that trait,” Ford returns dryly, “Isn’t that why you stayed here?”

“No, I stayed here because I love you, you moron!”

For some reason this makes Ford grin. It’s not a particularly happy grin, but he can’t stop it either. Stan isn’t the kind to toss that phrase out so cavalierly, but lately it seems to be all he can say. And while Ford still has a hard time believing it, he can’t help but confess, “I told Fiddleford you’re my boyfriend.”

Stan’s eyebrows rise, jaw dropping and Ford looks away, “I know, I know. It’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever said. Still don’t even know why I said it. It’s not true.”

“It’s not?” Stan asks and Ford’s gaze shoots to him. Stan looks a little abashed, “I mean, yeah – it’s a stupid thing to say. We’re in our sixties. Think you stop having boyfriends when you’re like, in your late twenties or whatever. I don’t know. I don’t know the rules. Are there rules? Still…”

Ford’s mouth moves like it wants to smile, but doesn’t have the strength to make the motion, “It really doesn’t matter. It really doesn’t help much of anything. How you and I feel about one another, it’s…”

He gets up and starts walking around the room, eyeing this and that. Stan watches him and finds he’s glad this conversation is happening here. He’s never used this room much and he doesn’t think Ford has either. The air has a stale, metallic quality to it - like it’s been sealed up for a long time- it feels like neutral territory.
Finally Ford says, “God, we finally have a chance to talk to one another…to try and get some of this out and I don’t even know what to say. Where to start…”

“That’s because normally we’re interrupted by kids or supernatural weirdness or us shouting down the walls or jumping one another’s bones.”

This gets Stan another smirk as well as a question, “Where are the children?”

“Upstairs. And they better damn well be asleep. Long past their bedtimes.”

“You’re instituting bedtimes? Enforcing them? How responsible of you.”

“Ugh, don’t remind me,” Stan mutters but Ford latches on to this, happy to talk about something less serious – wanting to avoid the issue at hand just a little longer, “You’ve grown up. All responsible, paying bills…”

“Keep it up. I’ll rebreak that arm.” The words hold no heat or humor. They actually seem a little sad, like Stan doesn’t want to go through the motions so Ford forces himself to get back on track, “You’ll have to forgive me…normally I don’t-don’t shy away from…”

“That’s a load of crap!” Stan snarls, “You’ve been trying to avoid talking about this for as long as I can remember! You just don’t have the convenience of an escape route this time! I can be responsible, Sixer. I can be mature. So we should get all our cards out on the table this time.”

“What do you want from me, Stanley?” Ford grouses, “I-I honestly always thought I’d have the answer to everything. Or at least I’d be able to find the solution, but you and I…I’m not even sure we can classify what’s between us as healthy or unhealthy. Is it love or obsession? Is it both or is it-?”

Stan interrupts, “It doesn’t need a clear and cut definition, genius! This isn’t a black and white scenario! It’s never gonna be. It’s all kindsa grey and ambiguous as hell.”

At the look on Ford’s face Stan snorts, “Yes, I know. I used a big word – ambiguous. Did it give you wood?”

Ford can’t stop the genuine laugh that escapes him. “No. If I was going to be turned on by your intelligence, it would have been far more likely for me to get, ah, aroused when you were putting together the serum.”

“You think the word ‘aroused’ is less risqué than wood?”

Ford doesn’t answer that. Instead he runs a nervous hand through his hair, “Look, that’s not the point. The point is-is that I’m-I’m-” he can’t seem to get the words out and he starts pacing back and forth, hands deep in the pockets of his trench coat. Stan waits and waits but Ford doesn’t say another word, at least not one Stan can hear. He’s talking to himself under his breath and finally Stan can’t take anymore, “You’re what?”

“I’m scared!” Ford blurts out; his pacing ending abruptly as he whirls on Stan, arms waving, “Alright? Happy?!”

His arms slowly descend as his bold declaration sinks in. Stan’s seen some astounding things in his time – zombies, other worldly monsters, dinosaurs – but this takes the cake, “You-? You’re scared?”

Ford looks embarrassed as he quietly returns, “Yes.”
The admission surprises Stan. He was honestly starting to reach a point where he didn’t think it was possible for his brother to be scared. But he can tell by his face that Ford isn’t lying, “Of what?”

“You,” Ford confesses easily, “I’m afraid of you.”

Stan feels as if ice is sliding into every vein in his body, his heart twisting in his chest like a leaf on the wind, “I-I see.”

Silence settles between them for a while. A heavy, uncomfortable one and when Stan speaks again, his voice is small, “It’s-it’s because of what I did to you…isn’t it? When-when we were there.”

“No,” Ford’s tone suggests it’s ridiculous for Stan to even offer that as a possible reason, “No, it’s not that. It’s not that at all. I could care less about that! I’m scared for the same reason I’ve always been scared.”

Always been scared? Stan can’t picture it. Can’t understand it, but his brother is happy to explain, “I’ve been scared of you since this whole mess began. Because it’s easier for me to stay cold and distant, than for me to give myself to you. Especially now. I…naturally I want someone who is able to see the dark parts of my mind and still choose to stay, but what I want and what I deserve are two very different things.”

Stan blinks, confused, “Why wouldn’t you deserve it?”

Ford scoffs as his pacing resumes, “Are you kidding? How can you even ask that? After what I did to you – after how I hurt you and what you saw – the things they showed you…”

“They showed me you,” he confesses, “Yeah, they showed me some of the crap you did in those other dimensions and yeah, some of it was awful, but I’m not going to judge you or condemn you for it. That ain’t my place. And hell, I’ve got my own shitty history. I’m not going to look down on you – not ever. And the way I see it – our relationship and what you did in the past and the way you are now…they’re not as much of a problem as you make them out to be. I don’t care that you can hulk out or whatever – none of that matters to me.”

Stan licks his lips and clears his throat; he looks at his hands, his nervousness at a neigh unbearable point, “Frankly, I’m more worried about you…y’know, rejecting me, ‘cause of what I did.”

His brother looks stumped, his pacing stopping again as he turns to look at Stan, “What-what you did?”

Stan can feel Ford’s gaze on him but he doesn’t look up, face growing hot, “Come on, Sixer! You musta recognized that I-I stopped coming to visit you. That I sent Soos and Wendy to check in, because I couldn’t bear to see you when you were conscious. After all…you’d have every right to be mad at me. I…I damn near killed you.”

“No,” Ford shakes his head, “That wasn’t you. That was them. Trust me, Stanley. I – more than anyone – can understand that. They manipulated you into doing what they wanted. Thankfully you weren’t there as long as I was – you-you didn’t lose yourself entirely. I saw it…before I passed out, I saw Mabel bring you back. You rejected them. That’s-that’s more than I ever did. I got lucky, I escaped. If I hadn’t escaped – god only knows…”

He walks closer to Stan but stops within a few inches of him. Stan has had yet to look up and Ford wants to touch his face, wants to tip it up but he doesn’t feel like he has the right to, so instead he tries to reassure him, “And even when I did escape I…continued their work. I kept telling myself it was for my own protection, but you’ve seen how far I went. I can’t change here, in this world, the
“The song on the record player,” Stan offers weakly, “Yeah. They…showed me that. What happened to you when they would…” he stops himself, unable to continue, unable to think about that. Instead he takes a deep breath and forces himself to admit, “But that’s not all they showed me…”

He starts off promising but then stalls, stops. This is so hard to say. So hard to admit aloud. Stan looks at Ford and thinks about how often he’s worried about Stan hating him.

It’s almost funny.

If anyone is going to hate anyone…

Stan doesn’t want to do this. He doesn’t. He doesn’t want to voice one of his darkest, most shameful secrets. But he does it. He does it because Ford is owed it, “Y’know how I-I stayed here and I opened the Shack? Paid your mortgage, took over your life?”

Out of the corner of his eyes he can see Ford nod, so he pushes on, “Well…I did come down here and try to reactivate the portal. I did. I tried to bring you back but-but I didn’t do it every night. Not like I said. There were times I lost hope, times I-I gave up and that’s what they showed me.”

Stan sucks in a heavy breath and rubs at his eyes, “Christ…that’s what those things showed me. They showed me other shit too, but that wasn’t so bad to me. That wasn’t what broke me. What broke me was how there were these big gaps of time where I just gave up trying to bring you back home and those were the times they tortured you the worst – hurt you the worst.”

This was not something Ford had expected. He knew when Stan was there he would be tortured and ‘played’ with, but he hadn’t expected, hadn’t even guessed…

“Stanley,” Ford’s voice is tender, “It’s like you said. You can’t trust what they showed you.”

“No, you were right. Reality is worse. And that was reality, Stanford. What they showed me…I know it.”

Ford shakes his head as if he’s shaking the words away, swatting at them like they’re cumbersome flies, “Even if that’s true…I didn’t expect you to reactivate the portal. I didn’t expect you to save me. You don’t have to blame yourself for…”

“But I do,” Stan insists, “I do blame myself! You’ve tried to take the blame for some of the shit that went wrong in my life, well brother – I can do the same!”

“But-but,” Ford stumbles over his words, exacerbated by the wounded sound of Stan’s voice, eager to pacify him, “I don’t blame you!”

Stan lets out a huff, “Well then – guess now you know how I feel.”

They both stand there, feeling adrift in the recent revelations. And Stan decides if he’s gone this far, he might as well go all the way, “Besides – I will always have one over one you. After all, you never killed me.”

“You didn’t-!”

“No,” Stan stresses and he can’t look at Ford as he thinks about it, his eyes heating up as he manages in a low rumble, “I told you…you were gone, Sixer. When we got you to the hospital…they had to
use a damned army to keep me out of the operating room, but I heard that sound – that flat line noise and I saw the Doc's face and I knew…”

Everything around Stan spins and he reaches out for the table nearby to steady himself. God, he can still hear that sound – can still recall the look on the doctor’s face that said it all and Stan had never felt so wretched in all his life. He could just imagine the man coming out and telling him Ford didn’t make it and if he hadn’t made it…

Jesus, if Stanley had actually killed him…

“But I’m not dead.” Ford insists and hearing his voice now is like a balm on Stan’s very soul, but hearing it doesn’t wash away the guilt, the sin, and he breathes, “No, you’re not. You came back, but that doesn’t change the fact that I remember it, all of it, and you want to talk about how they didn’t make you do the stuff you did? Well then, you should recognize that they didn’t do any different with me. They were inside me, Stanford, but all they did was drudge up and intensify what was already there. It was like shaking a bees’ nest – everything I did – I was capable of. You died. You died and I killed you.”

Ford hesitantly moves closer to Stan, who senses it and turns his back on him, faces the table before him. Speaking to the tabletop rather than his brother’s face, “And the things is…I…I’ve done it before. In a way. When I pushed you through the portal-”

“You didn’t pu-”

“Just shut up, will ya! I’m not done yet!” Stan hisses, needing to get this off his chest, needing to finish, “When I pushed you through the portal, I thought– even then – I thought maybe I’d killed you. And part of me…an awful part of me thought it was – it was fittin’ cause of how much you hurt me. How you killed me first.”

There’s a resounding silence after this. Neither of them breathing a word – neither of them breathing at all. Stan finally turns, finally faces Ford. He raises his eyes and looks into his brother’s as he speaks, “Don’t you see, Sixer? Doesn’t your big, sciency nerd brain understand how-how much you killed me when you-when you left me? When you broke up with me that first time, without even telling me…”

Ford feels his heart thump painfully in his chest. He remembers that day. It’s impossible for him to forget it. It was, after all, one of the worst days of his life. And Stan just goes on, “Then you called me here and it-it was like you were doing it all over again. And then the portal…I-I told you earlier I stayed here ‘cause of you and that is true. I did stay to try and bring you back, but…in some ways; I’m just as responsible for your transformation as anyone else.”

Another lull falls between their talking and Ford’s starting to wonder if this will be the end of it. If nothing will be resolved yet again, but then Stan surprises him, “But there’s more than that… I mean, I get the portal to work, I finally get you back here and you keep pushing me away – over and over again. You were going to erase my memories– that’s how desperate you were to end it for good and you do things like that and I just…it’s like – it’s like I hate you as much as I love you.”

“I understand,” Ford breathes, “I’ve felt the same way only…only I always, I always try to leave, because-”

“I know, I know – we’re brothers. It’s sick, it’s incest, we shouldn’t.” Stan jumps in, believing this is exactly what Ford will say but instead his twin shakes his head like mad, face stern, “No. It’s not that!”
Stan gives him an incredulous look and Ford coughs, “Well, I mean – not just that. The real reason I leave, the real reason I keep denying this, is that I-I don’t see how we can ever be a viable option because you…” Ford’s words trail off because he feels like the oxygen is draining from the room. This is hard. So very hard. But he powers through it, “Stanley…you…”

“I’m the problem?”

“Yes. No. Gah! Let me finish!” Ford grumbles, before continuing in a more timid tone, “I mean, you-you’re so…so perfect, Stanley.”

Stan lets out a loud raspberry at that, which only makes Ford angry. He grabs his brother’s right arm and squeezes it tightly, “No! You are! I know you don’t believe me! I know you can’t accept it, but you are! There are a million mysteries out there I’ll never solve and never understand, but the number one mystery will always be why you don’t love yourself, because you should, you really should. You’re just…you’re so lovable.”

A lump forms in Stan’s throat and it strangles him, makes him shake his head, makes his eyes water but Ford just takes his other arm in hand, squeezes it as well, “And you think…you think people don’t love you or that you have to work hard to get people to love you and that’s just – it’s not true! People love you, Stanley. And you deserve love. You deserve happiness and I just…I don’t see how you can be happy with me.”

Ford lets him go, lets him go as his voice drops to nothing but a hollow wind, “How can you love me? You deserve so much more.”

“Funny,” Stan mutters bitterly, “I think the same thing about you.”

They stand there in silence, their eyes having drifted away from one another. Ford releases Stan to absently rub one hand at the bridge of his nose, moving up his glasses as he draws in a shuddering breath. Finally Stan asks softly, sadly, “We’re…we’re never going to fix this, are we?”

“No,” Ford confirms, “No, I don’t think we can.”

They look at one another – their faces mirror masks of misery. Stan tries for some kind of levity, desperate for it, “Too bad it’s not like your broken bone serum, huh? Just a quick injection and-”

“Yeah,” Ford cuts him off, unable to find any light in this situation. Wanting only to wallow in the darkness of it, “That’d be nice.”

Stan feels as if someone’s gutted him. Ford’s tone and the look on his face…he swallows thickly; “So, this is it then? This is the end? This divide between us…it’s-always going to be there.”

“No,” Ford feels like he’s finally accepting defeat, like he’s finally surrendering in a long standing, brutally fought war and the loss is devastating. He wants to fall to his knees, but he’s still standing and instead he looks up to see Stan is looking at him. Their brown eyes meet and they look into each other’s faces. Twin faces - so similar, so different.

And then – much to his surprise – Stan’s eyes take on an unidentifiable flint and he takes Ford’s face in his hands, “No. It ain’t gonna end like this. I refuse. Yeah, we can’t turn our backs on the past and pretend like it didn’t happen. I get that. We’re busted. Broken. But y’know what? I-I think…think that’s okay.”

“Oh?” Ford echoes, searching Stan’s eyes, trying to read his mind, trying to figure out what Stan is saying because what he’s saying…it’s causing this flicker deep inside him. This flicker that is suspiciously like hope. He shouldn’t trust in it – shouldn’t believe it. Hope is an insidious beast, he
knows this. But somehow Ford finds himself reaching for it.

Maybe it’s his advanced age finally catching up with him, maybe he’s not as sharp as he used to be, but instead of extinguishing the flicker like he normally would, he lets it glow. Stan’s words only incite it, “There’s no fix for this. No apologies, no magic words, no serums or inventions or science…there’s always going to be a divide. But…maybe that’s fine?”

He touches his forehead to Ford’s, closes his eyes, “Because we love one another.”

Ford closes his own eyes, relishes in the feeling of being this close to Stan and when he speaks it’s mere air, “No, we-we shouldn’t…we can’t…”

“Why not?”

“We…we don’t work together.”

“No, we don’t work apart. How together have we ever been, Sixer?” Stan questions, his argument building up steam, power, as certain realizations wash over him, “Always in the shadows, always secret…we don’t gotta be that way anymore…kids know… Soos, Wendy…hell, even the fucking nurses at the hospital know about us!”

Ford feels his throat working, eyes suspiciously warm as he whispers, “People in town…I-I overheard them…some-some of them said,” he can’t continue in that vein, can only gasp, “Everyone seems to know…”

A strange laugh bubbles out of Stan – a laugh that dances on the precarious edge between maniacal and joyous, “Hard not to know – you can just look at us and tell. Easy to see we’re twins, easy to see we’re…what we are…”

Doubts prick at Ford, “We can’t be! We can’t-!”

“Why?” Stan repeats, “Give me a reason, Stanford. And it better be a helluva good one.”

And Ford struggles to think up even one reason why not. But…there doesn’t seem to be any reason at all! All the old reasons from before – the taboo nature, their parents, society, their values and worth in one another’s eyes – none of those seem very logical or sound. They’ve moved past all those things, haven’t they? They’ve been discussed and rehashed and beaten to death and there really doesn’t seem to be any more obstacles for them to truly overcome.

At least no obstacles that they can’t tackle together if they’re both willing. Willing to finally be together for real. Finally be both brothers and a couple, but…no, no. This can’t be true. Can it? It’s too good to be true and Ford says as much, “This…can’t be right. Can’t be the answer…it’s far too simple.”

“The best things are.”

“Stanley…” Ford pulls away, just a little, and opens his eyes to see Stan is doing the same – the twin connection between them burning stronger than it has in a very long time and he licks his lips, feels his pulse quicken as Stan continues, “Look, what other choice do we have? Think about it – maybe instead of doing what we think is right, for once we should just go ahead and do what we want. Consequences be damned.”

He feels it – that fire – that drive that he used, oh so long ago, to convince Ford to kiss him in the first place. Stan feels that heated, passionate drive to win and he pushes it, exploits it for all it’s worth, “We’re running outta time, Ford – we’re not getting any younger. How do we want to spend the last
“Coupla years? At each other’s throats? Apart? Yeah, we have some trouble working together, but I think we got a pretty good shot. We can do our best to start fresh – it’s been long enough, don’tcha think? The wounds have been razed, scabbed, and kinda healed into something new.”

“Scars…” Ford returns dumbly, feeling like he’s floating, like he’s lost but not the way he felt lost earlier. Earlier, it had felt like losing a war. This feels like…falling. But in such a glorious way and his heart is beginning to race and Stan’s lips are twitching, like he wants to smile as he confirms, “Yeah, we got those in abundance.”

“Literally and metaphysically.”

“Whatever you say. I don’t got the same way with words you do.”

Now it’s Ford’s turn to let out a hysterical laugh, “I don’t know about that! Y-you’re…pretty convincing. Frankly, I’m not completely sure you’re not conning me right now.”

“Well,” Stan’s thumbs run along Ford’s cheekbones, tease the hair of his sideburns, “I am a con man. And a world class gambler and this is one helluva gamble. Come on, Sixer – whatta ya say? You at least…at least willin’ to try with me? That’s all I can ask…that you try. Because, I, y’know…”

“I know. And I do too. I love you, Stanley.” Ford whispers and Stan's bravado slips at those long awaited words - a treacherous sound managing to escape his throat, a sound like a sob and he hates himself for it, embarrassed, but he also doesn’t fucking care. He doesn’t care because he just moans, “Can you…can you please say that again?”

“I love you.” Ford gasps and the pain he’s been feeling in his heart for so long has morphed, changed into something warm and perfect and the falling is now like flying and he’s overcome with it, as Stan pleads, “Again.”

“I love you.”

“Again, again, again!” Stan begs and Ford repeats it over and over in a desperate mantra and then they are kissing one another, the kisses hot and hungry – salty, because some tears have escaped both of them and when Ford opens his eyes they’re so close to one another their breath mingles as he speaks, “You know…you can say it back.”

“What?” Stan asks incredulously, “I’ve said it hundreds of times!”

“Doesn’t mean I don’t like hearing it.” Ford pouts and Stan kisses him again, muttering like it’s a big inconvenience, “Fine! I love you.”

“Mmm, better,” Ford murmurs and then quietly adds, “I can’t go back to the way I was. Neither can you. Do you-? Do you think that’s alright?”

The question comes out imploringly and Stan nods, “Long as we’re together…I think it’ll be good. We can…can keep changing together.”

“No one in our way, huh? Our parents are probably rolling in their graves,” Ford has no idea where these words are coming from – how he can even joke, but Stan just lets out a twisted chuckle, “Pop’s probably halfway ta China by now.”

Ford can’t help it. He busts out laughing and then Stan’s laughing and they’re both laughing and then kissing one another and somewhere in between their kisses, Ford can’t help but add, “This town…”
“What about it?”

“I just…it’s so crazy. I-I don’t understand the people here…I don’t know whether or not they’re actually picking up on the fact that we’re twins. They seem to truly believe I’m Lee Pinesbury.”

“Well, that’s fitting. Lee Pinesbury started this whole mess…and Stanley Pines is dead, so—”


“You sayin’ you’d miss me?” Stan teases, nuzzling his forehead along Ford’s again, rubbing their noses together.

“I have missed you,” Ford confirms throatily, “I don’t want to miss you anymore. I love you, Stanley Pines…Christ…I love you so, so much.”

“I love you too, Stanford Pines,” Stan says with real conviction, not a trace of the con man in sight, “And I promise you – we’ll never miss one another ever again.”

Ford tugs Stanley back to him, starts kissing him again to avoid crying more, because he’s blubbering like a damned baby and – to be fair – Stan’s not much better off. They kiss and they kiss and then they kiss some more. They both lose complete track of time, but there’s nothing to keep track of. All that matters is this. All that matters is that, despite their words to the contrary, they both feel the divide between them drawing to a close.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

There will now be 21 Chapters...'cause I can't shut down like a normal person...

A choked sound escapes Stan as he bolts up right. His mouth is open as if to scream, eyes blindly searching in the dark, every vein in his body tight. His blood’s cold, his heart racing, stomach liquid as he clutches at something beneath his fingers – something soft, but it’s not comforting. Nothing is comforting. He’s still there. He’s there. He’s with them. He’s in the black void, the tangled sharp mess of the cage and the walls are closing in and there’s no escape and he can’t breathe, he can’t breathe, he can’t breathe…

A dim golden light clicks on and he gasps. His knuckles ache – they’re white and his fingertips are damn near puncturing the blankets. Blankets! That’s what the soft material is. And he’s in bed. He’s in his bedroom and there’s someone with him, someone who clicked on his bedside table lamp. They’re sitting next to him and he has the same face – a mirror creature – and it takes him far longer than it should to recognize that it’s Ford.

Of course it’s Ford, and he would feel completely foolish right now if it wasn’t for the fact that he can’t. He can’t, because he’s too consumed with how his chest aches. It’s tight and he still hasn’t drawn in a good breath and everything is starting to spin as another strangled noise issues from his closed throat. Panic is washing over him and he releases his death hold on the blankets to clutch at his face, nails scratching his skull as they weave through his hair, eyes shut with enough force to hurt when he hears his name.

It’s soft, low and soothing, a deep timbre, “Stanley.”

His whole body seizes.

“Stanley…breathe.”

He sharply shakes his head.

“It’s okay. I promise you. I’m here. Now breathe.”

There’s a loud intake, a sob, and Stan opens his eyes a fraction, moans, “Oh god. Shit, fuck…”

He pants, air whooshing loudly back into him, and Ford speaks again, “Now turn, put your feet on the rug.”

The words are commanding, but not too forceful and Stan finds himself complying. His bare feet touch the rug and Ford nods, “Good. Now make fists with your toes.”

Again, he does as told. His toes dig into the cushy material, gripping the fibers and then releasing them periodically, over and over. It’s grounding – the action; and he finds himself clinging to it, happy for it, a sense of security filling him. Then he hears, “That’s it. Now…breathe with me. In,” he hears a loud inhale, “Out,” a loud exhale, “In,” inhale again and Stan does it himself. He copies his brother’s breathing and they breathe together – in, out, in, out, in…
They do this for – god, Stan doesn’t even know how long. They just sit there in his room and they
breathe while his toes dig through the rug. Eventually he finds his heart is…calmer, blood warmer,
stomach studier. Ford raises a hand and carefully, cautiously, puts it on his shoulder. When Stan
doesn’t pull away, he grips it, “Better?”

Stan weakly bobs his head and Ford pats him before drawing the hand away. He gets to his feet and
Stan sees he has his rifle over one shoulder. He frowns, his voice a croak, “Why’d you have that?”

Ford adjusts the rifle strap on his shoulder; “I was doing my rounds. I figured I’d check on you.
Good thing I did.”

Stan blinks, “Rounds?”

“Ever since I’ve been back, I’ve done rounds on the perimeter. Made sure everything was safe.”

“You-you have?”

He nods, “I did them like clockwork when I first got back, but once you and I, ah, started addressing
our issues they sort of dropped off. But now that we’re…um, a little more settled.”

This gets him a lip twitch, “More settled? That’s how you wanna put it?”

Ford shrugs, because honestly – he doesn’t know how else to put it. After he came home from the
hospital – after her and Stanley kissed – they hadn’t done much else. It had, after all, been late. And a
long day. Hell, a long life. They were both exhausted, so they slept and they slept separately because
neither of them could seem to find the courage to broach the subject of sharing the same bed.

Not with everything still so new and raw between them.

But Ford never slept well to begin with, so when he woke he decided a perimeter check was in
order. He had, after all, been entirely too remiss in the past few days – not to mention all the time he
missed since the rescue. When he had first come back from there he had been in absolutely no
position to make sure everything was sealed up tight. But now that he was back at the Shack, he
could check and double check and triple check to make sure nothing else had come through there
to here.

However, as far as he could tell, everything was in perfect order. It seemed a fairly successful
mission – they had brought Stanley back – nothing had come into their dimension from there. All
was well. Or as well as could be expected, which was why he had made sure to check on Stanley
first, just as he had done when he’d first returned from the portal.

Wendy had cautioned that Stan had been a wreck since everything that had happened to him and
Ford was surprised. He knew the…strain of what being over there was like. He knew it more than
most. Finding Stan in the state he’d found him in was not shocking. Heartbreaking, yes – but not
shocking. So, he walked Stan through the attack and now here they were.

Still as awkward, still as...untested.

Brother. Lovers. They were both. They had chosen to go ahead and be both.

And everyone knew…

Christ…tomorrow Ford would have to see the kids…

He’d have to see them and he would have to tell them, to explain to them, that he and Stanley were
It made his face burn. It's so bizarre. So alien. There was no way they could possibly be accepting! No way anyone could really be accepting! Outright, open incest wasn’t something people just waved an absent-minded hand at and went ‘yeah, sure, okay – why not?’

It just wasn’t something that was done.

Yet here they are…doing it.

God, if their parents were still alive…

But they aren’t. His mother and father will never know there shame or, well, maybe it isn’t a shame anymore, because if it is, maybe they would stop and they both decided not to stop and-

A pillow smacks him lightly in the face. Ford’s tirade of thoughts is cut off and he sputters, blinking. He looks at Stan, who has his arms crossed and a proud look on his face. Ford frowns, “What was that for?”

“Was trying to reboot you without standing up.”

This gets him an eye roll, “I didn’t need to be ‘rebooted’.”

“Yeah, right. You looked like your giant nerd brain was working double time and close to lockin’ up before I hit you.”

Ford sighs and readjusts the strap again, shaking his head, “Well, you might be right. I should get going-”

“No!” Stan interjects this quickly and he clears his throat, looking chagrined at his vehemence. He rubs at the back of his neck, not meeting Ford’s eyes, “I’d…I’d like it if ya stayed.”

“Stanley…”

“I know,” Stan speaks quietly, voice almost a whisper, “I know earlier we sorta went our separate ways, ‘cause it just…seemed like what we should do. You just got back, I just saw you again after…” his words trail off into a disgruntled noise and it’s clear he wants to say more, wants to say something clear and distinct but his mind isn’t taking him there so he finally snaps, “Look, it’s late, I’m tired, and I want you with me.”

Ford eyes his bed doubtfully, “I don’t think we’ll both fit.”

Stan shoves all the blankets and pillows to the floor, “Then join me down here.”

“Stanley, I don’t think the floor is-”

“Wouldja just shut up and do this for me,” Stan mutters, then adds almost regretfully, “Please.”

Ford removes his rifle and carefully sets it to one side. He strips off his coat and then gets down on the floor. Stan clicks off the bedside lamp and joins him. They wrap themselves in the blankets and they face one another. At first all either can see is a dreary blackness but eventually their eyes adjust, their features becoming a little more visible and Ford finds himself sort of…moved. Moved enough to whisper; “Are you-? Y-You’re not cold, are you?”

“No. You?”
“No. Your back?”

“It’s fine.”

“Are you sure-?”

“I said it’s fine,” Stan hisses then he grunts, “Hate that you had to bring that up.”

“Well, sorr-ee-y.” Ford drags the word out in an annoying sing song tone before adding, “I just worry about you.”

There’s a silence for a while and then a gentle, unsure, “You do?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“You know why.”

“I,” there’s a hesitancy in Stan’s voice, almost as if he hates himself for asking, but still he does, “I wanna hear it again.”

Ford reaches out, finds Stan’s body and he pulls him close. It’s strange. But it’s good. It’s-it’s almost liberating. Thrilling. To be free to do this. To be close to Stan. He can do this now. He can do whatever he wants, really, but it still feels so surreal. Yet he won’t deny himself this. Not any longer. That’s what they agreed to. That’s the decision they came to.

And what’s more – Stanley deserves it.

He deserves to never be worried about it again, to never question how Ford truly feels about him. Stanley deserves to hear how much he’s wanted, how much he’s needed, how much he’s adored. Even if it’s by his monster of a brother. A brother who truly doesn’t deserve him. A brother who is terrified by all of this.

But Stanley deserves it.

So, Ford digs inside himself and tries to drudge up some bravery as he huddles (or is it cuddles?) close to Stan and says those words he fought against for far too long. The words he can now say whenever he wants, as many times as he wants, “I love you.”

Stan doesn’t answer with words. Instead he eases even closer to Ford and they sort of curl around one another, into one another, all warm and close and finally, blissfully, they fall asleep.

+ 

Stan wakes to find Ford gone.

Again, not a surprise.

Ford is always going to be the early riser in this relationship.

Relationship, Stan huffs a laugh at the thought. He slowly rolls into sitting up, shocked to discover
he’s not suffering from any random body pains. Maybe a good night’s sleep on the floor was exactly what the doctor ordered. He hasn’t slept well at all since coming back. In fact, he’s gone out of his way to avoid sleep. Not only because of the tremendous amount of guilt he felt about Ford’s injuries but because it was hard to close his eyes and not think of there.

While he knows for a clear fact that he’s in no way as severely psychologically scarred as Ford, he can easily confess some wear and tear to his own psyche. After all, that’s what they’d been angling for. That was their design, their purpose. And he killed them. Or, at least, he’s pretty sure he did. He knows he’ll never forget that sound – the sizzling of the gloves on those Things, their shrill screams…he’ll never forget it, not ever.

He’s committed several sins in his time – but murder, well…that’s new.

But he isn’t going to give it another thought if he can help it. No, not one second. They didn’t deserve that. He wouldn’t let them have it. Then they would win, then they would succeed. No – he was the victor here. Last night was a great confirmation of that and he could still hear Ford’s baritone ringing in his ears.

I love you.

The knucklehead finally said it. More than once. And it had been like sweet ambrosia to him. It filled him with an unbelievably amount of light – it was neigh transcendent, like a religious experience, hearing Stanford Pines say ‘I love you’ and mean it. God, Stan wants to hear it again – every day, every second. He wants to hear it now, so he gets to his feet and goes hunting for his brother, his lover, the most important person in his whole world.

He finds him in the kitchen, toying with the coffee maker, his back to him. Stan walks with a deliberate gait, wanting Ford to know he’s not alone and Ford does, shooting a quick look over his shoulder just to confirm the identity of the person who’s entered the room, “Morning.”

Stan just grunts. He’s not tired, exactly, but he’s still not anything close to a ‘morning’ person. However, the promise of hearing those words again is too strong and he finds himself moving forward, almost as if pulled by an invisible string. Ford’s gravitational force is too strong, drawing him in and he moves towards his brother with purpose, coming up behind him, wrapping his arms around him, burying his face into his back.

The lean body beneath him stiffens for a second then marginally relaxes, as if slowly coming to grips with the fact that this is…okay. It’s alright. They can do this now. In fact, one of Ford’s hands rises up to cover one of Stan’s and the younger sibling grins, lips moving against the spot between Ford’s shoulder blades at the action. Ford clears his throat, “I, uh, made coffee.”

He only gets a grumble in response.

“I…can attempt to make breakfast, if you would like but I should warn you, I was actually expelled from one dimension for my cooking.”

Stan snorts and finds himself feeling stupidly affectionate. He presses a kiss onto the spot he was just rubbing his face against, “I don’t know how many times I gotta tell you, Sixer, you’re lousy at jokes.”

He actually feels him stiffen again as Ford says in his most serious tone, “That wasn’t a joke.”

It takes a moment, but it sinks into Stan that his twin is actually telling the truth. He lets out a laugh and Ford turns, looking slightly put out, “Look, how was I supposed to know that Montrallian eggs
were *that* poisonous! I mean, it’s not like anyone *died*, they just got sick and really, the royal envoy totally overreacted when-!

Stan lunges forward and kisses him. Stops his nonsense words, because Stan has no earthly idea what Ford is talking about. He doesn’t know what dimension Ford was in, what food he was trying to make, what dignitaries he was trying to impress or whatever it is he’s talking about. He’s just… he’s just too dammed *cute*.

And now Stan can kiss him.

He can kiss him whenever he wants.

He’s *allowed*.

What’s more, he’s…wanted. *This* is wanted. Ford wants this…right?

As if to answer this unasked question, Ford’s arms band around him and pulls him near and they’re kissing. No, *necking* – necking like a couple of randy teens. Stan feels like his heart is about to burst, it’s so full and happy and he angles his head, makes the kiss deeper and Ford just lets out a hum of approval, his hands bunching up the material of Stan’s tank top when they both hear a loud, overdramatic yawn.

“Good morning,” Mabel mumbles sleepily and the two men spring away from one another. Mabel is still half asleep, but their abrupt movements signal her. She blinks several times as her head thoughtfully tips to one side, “What were you two doing?”

“Oh, uh, Mabel, sweetie…” Stan starts, but then Mabel points to Ford, waking more and more as the seconds tick by, “And when did you get back from the hospital?”

“Ah, well…”

“And what happened to your cast?! Is your arm actually healed! Is this some sorta Gravity Falls weirdness or what?” Mabel points to Ford’s once broken arm and both Ford and Stan are tripping over themselves, trying to answer her when her mind circles back to when she first entered and how close they were and her eyes grow huge, a joyous squeal leaving her, “*Oooohhhh!* Oh my GOSH! We’re you two KISSING!”

Ford and Stan’s attempts to answer her earlier questions immediately stop as they both look about awkwardly, standing there with the air of guilt hovering over them. Mabel looks between them ecstatically, bouncing on the balls of her feet, tiny hands shaking, “You were, weren’t you! You were k-i-ss-ing...ing!”

She sways back and forth as she sings the last bit and she can see the tale tell since of a blush on Grunkle Ford’s cheeks. Grunkle Stan is a bit better at not looking like he’s been caught red handed but not by much and if it was possible for the little girl to have actual hearts in her eyes she would as her chin descends into the palms of her hands, “Show me!”

Grunkle Stan snaps to attention, bushy eyebrows rising sky high, “What?!”

“Go onnnnnnnnnnnnnnnn!,” she groans loudly, eagerly, “Kiss one another! I wanna see!”

“Mabel…” Grunkle Ford trails off uncomfortably, not sure how to let his niece down gently. Mabel, however, is nothing if not determined, “Come on! Grunkle Stan! Grunkle Ford! You two have been through SO much to be together! I bet you just want to kiss one another all the time!”
Ford has to smother a half hysterical laugh because this is, in fact, not entirely untrue. Still, he can’t… they can’t just-just do this in front of their great niece! The-scandal! The…inappropriateness of it! I mean, giving a child a crossbow is one thing, but to let her witness them doing anything even remotely intimate…

Dipper wanders into the room and Ford latches on to it, “Ah! Dipper, my boy! How are you?!”

Unprepared for this bombardment of attention, Dipper freezes in the doorway, his own sleepiness drifting away, “Hey, uh, Grunkle Ford…when-when did you get back?”

“Dipper!” Mabel runs to her twin and starts shaking him fiercely, “Our Grunkles are gonna KISSSSSSSSS!”

Dipper pulls away from his sister, looking appropriately rattled, “They’re going to what now?”

“Kiss, kiss, kiss!” Mabel chants and she punches Dipper’s arm with each chant, making him let out little intermittent ‘ow’s’ on each impact. Grunkle Stan finally intervenes, “Alright, alright - that’s enough of that. Look, kid, I, uh, appreciate your enthusiasm, but my brother and I ain’t gonna lock lips for you to watch, got it? This isn’t some sideshow!”

Mabel lets out an offended gasp, “How can you say that, Grunkle Stan?! How can you even think I would think that! That Dipper would think that!”

Dipper looks alarmed to be roped into this, but Mabel continues her impassioned speech, “We are almost teenagers, Grunkle Stan! We both understand love and soul mates – me most of all! And we know how much you two probably had to go through – both of you on either side of that awful portal and away from one another and then fighting and then back together again and now – now, I’m sure you’ve worked everything out, right?”

When neither of them answers right away, Mabel begins tapping one foot on the ground impatiently, arms crossed, eyes narrowed as she demands in an authoritative tone well beyond her years, “Right?”

Both twins immediately answer in unison, “Yes.”

“Okay, and…?” she looks between them expectantly. Ford looks helplessly at Stan and Stan looks back, just as powerless. Ford tugs at the collar of his sweater, “Well, I…that is…Stanley, you’ve spent far more time with them than I have…”

“Oh, for the love of-!” Stan tosses up his hands, eyes on the ceiling, “Fine! We’re together, alright? That what you wanna hear?!”

“Together as in…?”

“Don’t push your luck, kid.”

Mabel lets out a pretty impressive groan, “Grunkle Staaaaaaaaaaaaaaaan!”

“We’re a couple!” Stan booms, “Okay?! We’re brothers and we’re-we’re,” he gets flustered, “I don’t know – boyfriends or whatever you want to call it! We’re dating, Mabel, ya happy?!”

Clearly she is, because the elated sound that leaves her is ear splitting. She rushes around in quick, tight little circles, shouting, ‘Yes! Yes! Yes’ over and over again. It’s dizzying to watch her. Dipper, having long since reached the maximum capacity for wakefulness, eyes them both critically, “Really?”
“Well…maybe not boyfriends,” Ford amends quietly, “I-I think we agreed we’re too old for such a childish term.”

Mabel’s running ends in a near audible screech, “Oh no! You have to be boyfriends! And brothers, so– oh! You can be broyfriends!”

Everyone but Mabel winces at this term. Mabel is still a little bottle of energy, dancing where she stands, “Okay, okay but now you have to kiss! You have to! And you have to let us see!”

“Mabel,” Grunkle Stan starts but she waves him off, “No, no – Grunkle Stan! Every romantic film and book I’ve ever read has a big kiss – like a, ‘we finally made it to our happily ever after’ kiss and that’s where you and Grunkle Ford are, right?!”

Looking at Dipper, Ford thinks up an easy retort, offering casually, “Look, Mabel, while you might be interested in seeing Stanley and I, ah…engage in such an activity, I highly doubt your brother would.”

Dipper looks between both Grunkles and then sticks his hands deep in his jacket pockets, “Actually, uh, I-I wouldn’t mind.”

“Wh-what!?” Ford breathes, nearly swallowing his own tongue. Dipper’s cheeks color as he tugs at the end of his baseball cap, avoiding his favored Grunkle’s eyes, “Well, ah…you-you two did go through a lot to be together and-and I suppose I should…should get used to the idea of you two being together.”

“Not that we’re gonna tell Mom and Dad!” Mabel interjects briskly, lightly punching Dipper’s arm again, “We both agreed on that! Right, Dip?”

Dipper nods, “Yeah, Mabel and I decided after you told us about your…ah, interest in one another that it’d be best not to tell our parents.”

While Ford is relieved to hear this, he still can’t wrap his mind around the idea that Dipper is okay with witnessing them kissing. Frankly, he’s stumped that Mabel wants to see it. Yes, at her core, Mabel is a romantic soul, but surely she’s old enough to realize the implications of their actions – the taboo nature. But then, he thinks, he should really stop being surprised by things. He’s been investigating the supernatural for almost his entire life – surely there are weird and wilder things out there than this. He’s witnessed them for God’s sake.

Still, he looksquestioningly at Stanley, lost as to what they should do. Stanley, for his part, seems just as adrift. Mabel puts her hands on her hips and looks between them, “Well? We’re waiting!”

Stan lets out a huff and turns to Ford, “She’ll just keep on until we do. She’s relentless.”

“It’s true,” Dipper confirms, “You’ll be better off just getting it over with,” then he adds gingerly, “And, uh, quickly if that’s okay.”

The last bit is added with an air of hesitancy. It’s clear that while Dipper wants to be accepting, he’s nowhere near as comfortable with this whole situation as Mabel is. Which is be to expected – it’s what’s normal as far as Ford knows or has known. His fingers twitch at the very thought – ha. Normal. Like he’s ever been that. The only thing now is, is that he’s just trying not to care about it – deciding not to, really.

Stanley, for his part, is much more at home being the odd man out. Hell, he embraces it – and he gives Ford a nonchalant shrug, “Well, whaddya say, Sixer? Want to plant one on me?”
“Me?” Ford’s eyes widen. Stan wants him to initiate this? He must, because he turns to Ford and over exaggeratedly bats his eyelashes at him. Ford shifts his weight from foot to foot, hands still twitching but he squares back his shoulders and nods to himself. What’s there to be afraid of? He’s traversed the multiverse – he’s made many powerful enemies – this is…this is just a kiss.

He edges forward and gives Stan a swift, chaste kiss on the lips.

There!

Done!

Apparently not though, as Mabel rolls her eyes, “You call that a kiss?”

“Yeee-ah,” Dipper draws out, “I mean, not to judge, but that was kinda pathetic.”

“Pathetic?” Ford parrots, stunned, eyes darting from niece to nephew who both nod sagely, Dipper adding, “It just…wasn’t that impressive.”

“Here, here – I got it,” Stan grouses and he takes Ford’s face in his hands, pressing their lips together. While this kiss is longer, it still stays relatively tame – no open mouths, nothing too risqué. When Stan lets him go, Ford is blushing a little deeper, but he’s pleased. Surely this satisfied their audience.

Apparently not.

Mabel stomps a foot on the ground, fists shaking at her sides, “I thought you told me you two love each other?! That was NOT a romantic kiss! That was—that was—!” she struggles for a word and Dipper, looking deep in thought, finally snaps his fingers and offers, “Cheap?”

“CHEAP!” Mabel cries and her expression shows her relief – clearly happy that Dipper found the word she was looking for. Stanley’s eyes narrow and he wags a finger at Mabel, “Hey! I’ve been called a lotta things in my time – but cheap ain’t one of ‘em!”

The laughter that leaves Ford is unavoidable, “I HIGHLY doubt that!”

“Well, not cheap the way they’re saying it!” Stan argues, “They’re questioning my actions – not how I spend my money!”

Mabel looks unapologetic, “I can’t help it if you lack flair, Grunkle Stan. I mean, you told me once that you were out of the game and clearly that’s true, if that’s how you kiss the love of your life…”

“Oh ho! So, you wanna performance? That it?! Well, hang tight, kids! ‘Cause you two’re gonna get one!” Stan practically roars and the next thing Ford knows, his brother has roughly dragged him forward into his embrace and is dipping him down low like they’re waltzing. He angles his head and captures Ford’s lips savagely, parting them with his tongue. Ford lets out a startled noise as Stan explores his mouth, as he encourages his brother to kiss him back, and Ford’s eyes (which up until this point had been bug eyed) slowly start to slant closed as the noise turns to something more…content.

The kiss is hot, hungry, and it is quite effectively clicking the ‘off switch’ in Ford’s brilliant mind. He finds himself sort of…melting. And, what’s more, he finds himself kissing back. While his kisses are far more tentative, Stan lets out a proud growl against him – clearly happy that Ford has started to reciprocate his actions. The two are so consumed with one another that neither picks up on Mabel’s ecstatic whooping or Dipper turning to shield his eyes with a soft, “Hoooookay, that’s—that’s enough for now. Still-still a little weird…”
Stan finally tugs Ford upright and releases him. He completely ignores how his love-struck twin wobbles on his feet as he glares archly at Mabel, “There ya go! No one questions my showmanship!”

“I told you, Grunkle Stan, I don’t think of your relationship as some kind of sideshow,” she offers sweetly, “That said – THAT was the kiss I was looking for!” She presses her hands to her cheeks, expression soft and dreamy, “So romantic!”

“Hey, it’s like you said,” Stan looks at Ford with a tiny half smile, “He’s the love of my life.”

+ + +

“Hey, Mr. F.” Wendy casually greets Ford from where she sits at the gift shop counter, eyes down cast on her magazine, boots propped up. He’s just exited from behind the vending machine and as he catches sight of her, he lets out a heavy sigh, “Must you call me that?”

“I can’t call you, Mr. Pines – that name’s taken and ‘Ford’ just seems a little too informal.”

“Wendy, you have – more than once – verbally torn my head from my shoulders. I think that’s earned you the right to call me by my given name. How would you feel if I addressed you as Ms. Corduroy?”

She visibly shudders, “Point taken. Still, you have to give me some props for trying to be respectful.”

“You? Respectful?” he snorts out a laugh and she flips him the finger. His laughter grows as he shakes his head to himself, crossing his arms as he leans against the vending machine, “And to think…I once suggested to Stanley that I would take you on as an assistant.”

“Oh, gross! I would never work for you!” she tosses out the words but they have no heat to them. They’re clearly playful and he walks over to her. He eyes the magazine to see it’s called ‘Slacker Quarterly’. Charming. He chews on his bottom lip and tries to think of how best to go about this when she notices his hovering, “Dude, what do you want?”

“What leads you to believe I want something?”

“You’re floating over me like the ghost of Christmas past. And you’re waaaaay too quiet. Normally you’re spouting off about something or other like magic or science or how you’re the world’s brightest idiot.”

“I’ll have you know I have several PhDs.”

“Is one of them in being a withholding turd?” she jokes but seeing how he’s still looking so uneasy she relents, putting her magazine down, “Okay, okay – fun’s over. What’s up, Mr. F? What do you need?”

“Is there-is there any way I could persuade you to take the children for the evening?”

Wendy sits up, attention caught, “Yeah, that shouldn’t be a problem. But why?”

“I-I would prefer to spend some-some time with my brother,” he gulps, “Alone.”

Much to Ford’s surprise, Wendy’s pale skin begins to take on a hue similar to that of her hair, “Oh! Ah, uh…so, I…I take it you two-?” She can’t seem to finish and Ford merely nods in confirmation, saying dryly, “Yes. We are.”
She chews the inside of her cheek and tips her chin down, “Wow. Gotta say, I’m…sorta astonished. Kinda expected you two to dance around it even longer despite my warnings.”

“More like threats.”

“Hey, a girl’s gotta do what she’s gotta do to be heard,” she retorts starchily but her tone quickly relaxes, growing softer, “Guess this means congratulations are in order.”

“It’s not required. I…I’m aware of how our…involvement with one another is more than unconventional. To some it’s downright revolting.”

“Whoa, hey!” she waves her hands, “I was the one who told you to get over all the bullshit, right? I’m not saying I disapprove, it’s just…y’know…strange. And not just because of the sibling thing. I mean, Mr. Pines? In love? It’s…kind of mind blowing. Not something I thought I’d ever see.”

Ford can’t help himself, whether she likes it or not, it’s just – it’s nice to have someone to talk to and he can’t help but gush a little, “He said it to the kids. This morning. He told them I’m the love of his life.”

“Holy shit,” Wendy can’t help but scoff, “You’re joking.”

“No.”

Wendy’s face heats up more and she finds she can’t keep herself from smiling. And Ford’s smiling too and it’s the craziest, wildest thing in the world. Here they are, just the two of them, hanging around and being…sociable. Almost cliquish and Wendy wonders how she’s gone from thinking this man is a total jackass to thinking he’s actually pretty alright. Cool, even. Good lord – they’re…they’re friends! The realization sort of hits her over the head. She’s friends with the Author.

What has her world come to?

Still, it’s clear Stan’s words earlier have put Ford on cloud nine and she can’t bring herself to knock him from it. If anything she’s damn near physically itching with the need to know more, “You’re telling me Mr. Pines said the ‘L’ word?”

“To be fair, you’ve heard him say it before.”

“Yeah, but that was like - a high stakes situation where you had a gun in your hand.”

“True,” Ford mutters, “But this time he just…said it. Unwarranted.”

“That’s…trippy,” She concludes, not sure if any other word can do the idea of Mr. Pines telling someone he loves them justice. Not that she doesn’t think her employer is incapable of love. He clearly loves Dipper and Mabel. Hell, he probably loves Soos and Wendy, but the idea of the man actually saying it aloud is mind-blowing. And the idea of him saying it in a romantic fashion? Hoo boy. Not something Wendy ever expected would happen in a million years.

Not unless, of course, cash somehow took on a physical form. Which, in a town like Gravity Falls, isn’t completely impossible. Regardless, he said it and he’s said it to Ford and these two old (occasionally stupid) twin brothers are in love with one another and are, apparently, a raging hot couple. Totally outrageous – the very thought makes her snicker, but the sound is a happy one as she thumbs the tip of her nose, “Wish I coulda been there.”

“I can probably get him to say it again.” This is said with far too much whimsical enthusiasm and she almost groans aloud. People in love are kind of the worst. She’s already had her fill of goo goo eyes
and other overly smitten behavior à la Tambry. Granted, Tambry’s was a little tamer, in that it was mostly contained to text messages (love emoticons) but they were about Wendy’s ex, of all people, and she’s pretty much reached her limit as far as sappy sentiment goes.

With this in mind, she holds her hands up in defeat, “No, that’s cool. You guys feel free to keep it in your pants around me. Too much love stuff makes me gag.”

“Am I to take it, then, that you will not be able to take Dipper and Mabel?”

“I didn’t say that,” she argues sweetly, “I can take ‘em off your hands for the night. Maybe see if Soos wants to join us, which – by the way – you should consider talking to him. Or having Mr. Pines do it. He should know you two are officially an item so he can start openly shipping it.”

Ford frowns, eyebrows knitting together, “Shipping what?”

“It’s one of them newfangled internet terms,” she teases, “You do know what the internet is?”

“Yes, yes. I’m aware.” He snaps but, again, no heat to the words. She beams, “Okay, well – shipping stands for ‘relationship’ and when you ‘ship’ something it means you’re a big fan of that ‘relationship’. It ties pretty heavily into fan fiction and I know you’ve heard that word from Soos.”

“I have indeed. I know what that one means.”

“Right, so, Soos writes fan fiction and a lot of the times it’s about ships he likes. Like Princess Aiel and Hans Loner in ‘Space Battles’.”

“Oh! Soos likes ‘Space Battles’?!” Ford interjects and Wendy rolls her eyes, adding under her breath, ‘oh my god…nerds!’ before continuing, “Yes, he likes that and he likes that ship. And I know for a fact he ships you and Stan, so someone should tell him his ship’s sailing.”

Ford nods to himself, “Okay. Alright. I’ll-I’ll see about someone telling him…”

He slowly backs out of the room and Wendy retakes her position of her feet up on the counter, magazine in hand. She idly flips through some of the pages and grins to herself, knowing that Ford is probably the one who is going to tell Soos – or at least try to. She’s pretty sure now that the genius is going to get distracted talking to the handyman about the ‘Space Battles’ films and shipping.

And as she keeps skimming the pages she has to admit to herself that – honestly, secretly – she ships Stan and Ford too.

Stan is sipping a Pitt Cola and rounding a corner when he’s stopped by the sight of Soos hefting a large mattress down the hall. The handyman is moving in the direction of his breakroom, but when he sees Stan he stops and does his best to try and shield his employer from what he’s doing, “Oh! Uh, hey, Mr. Pines! Did you need something?!”

His tone is overly bright and his eyes are extremely shifty. Normally, Stan appreciates shifty eyes but at this particular moment he finds it a little off putting, “No, not really. What about you?”

“Wh-wh-what?” Soos breathes out, looking close to full panic mode as Stan points one finger at the
mattress, “Looks like you could use some help moving that.”

“Moving what?”

“Soos…”

Sweat beads on Soos’s forehead as he stretches out his big arms, still trying to hide something that’s too big to be hidden, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“The mattress, Soos.”

Soos turns and looks at the mattress before letting out a weak attempt at a laugh, “Oh – ha! Yeah, that…”

Stan barely manages to get out ‘Look, you don’t have to tell me’ before Soos bursts out with a loud, “I’m doing something for Mr. F!”

This declaration makes Stan blink repeatedly, “Who?”

“Your brother. Wendy’s taken to callin’ him Mr. F and she said I should do the same – she said he likes it.”

He scratches his chin thoughtfully, “Mr. F, huh?”

“It was either that or Mr. S, y’know, for ‘Sixer’. But we felt that might be a bit too personal, on account of that being your name for him.”

“Well, what did ‘Mr. F’ want you to do?” Stan asks but Soos starts looking nervous again so he shakes his head and sips his drink, “Never mind, never mind. Ya don’t have to tell me.”

Soos sags in relief and Stan tries to infer for himself what it could be. The mattress Soos is lugging looks suspiciously like the one Ford’s been using downstairs. Maybe Ford has given it to Soos? That seems odd…unless Ford is making the decision that he and Stanley should share Stan’s bed. Stan’s not quite sure how that will work but the idea of them sharing a room does cause a warm fire to start kindling in his heart.

They haven’t shared a room since they were kids. It would be nice to share the same space again, to be that close…

…speaking of…

Stan clears his throat and looks thoughtfully at Soos, who has started struggling with the cumbersome mattress again. This is such a strange thing to broach – especially with Soos of all people, but some of Ford’s earlier words keep ringing in the back of his mind and Stan feels the oddest…well, obligation. Obligation. To Soos of all people. Yikes.

“Hey, uh, Soos?”

The younger man turns to him, stopping his work and Stan scratches the back of his head, shoving his fez about a little, not meeting his eyes, “Listen, I’m-I’m not sure if my brother told you but he and I, well…I mean, before I went through the portal I know you heard me sayin’ I…well, that I…”

“That you love him?” Soos supplies and Stan tries to avoid coloring and fails spectacularly, “Yeah. That.”

Stan risks a peek at Soos, but the man’s face is curiously blank so Stan lets out a hefty sigh and
pinches the bridge of his nose, feeling several shades of uncomfortable and embarrassed as he forces himself to continue, “Okay, well, now that I’m back and he’s better, we sorta worked some stuff out and we…we came to a decision…”

“Oh! That you two are dating?” Soos returns as if it’s no big surprise, “Yeah, Mr. F filled me in.”

Stan deflates slightly and finds that there’s a sour taste in his mouth. He doesn’t know why Ford telling Soos about them bothers him, but it does and – in unexpectedly intuitive moment – Soos continues, “But don’t be too upset with him! I kinda got him to admit it. I mean, I had my suspicions but then the dude came to me and wanted to ask me for a favor and when I pushed him about it, he said he didn’t want to tell me anything, because he felt it wasn’t his place. He said he thought you should tell me and could I just do this favor for him no questions asked. So, I didn’t ask any more questions but it was pretty obvious.”

The older man grunts, “Oh. Uh. I see.”

Soos beams and looks like he wants to reach out and comfortingly pat Mr. Pines shoulder but he restrains himself, instead saying in a soft tone, “I’m…I’m really happy for you, Mr. Pines. You and your brother both.”

A peculiar heat enters Stan’s cheeks, a strange squirming in his stomach as he gruffly asks, “You’re not-not…upset?”

“Why would I be upset?”

The question is asked in the most innocent of tones and Stan feels outside of himself as the words escape him, “Because he’s my twin. Because he’s a man and I’m a man and we’re related and-”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” Soos holds up both hands, pushes them out in a stopping gesture, “You’re-you’re worried about…my opinion? My approval?”

A silence settles between them for a bit and Stan’s eyes are downcast as a hefty sigh leaves him, “Believe it or not, Soos….you’re….you’re the closest thing I have to family. You’ve been with me a long time. Longer than most. And you’ve done a lot for me and your opinion is…it’s…it’s important.”

The last couple of words come out very slow, nearly dragged from him and Stan feels like a complete fucking idiot. God, he hates these sorts of big, emotional announcements. These huge, messy dramatic moments. But then he hears a sniff and looks up and Soos’s eyes are glassy and his lips are quivering and he looks – Christ, he looks so fucking happy.

And he thinks those words he almost never, ever, ever thinks - even internally - because they can’t be true, because he doesn’t have the right, but here – in this moment - he thinks them anyway.

He thinks: My son looks so fucking happy.

And while Soos can’t hear his thoughts, he can’t keep control of himself physically for one second longer. He throws himself at Mr. Pines, nearly knocking the old man over, as he clutches him close in a big bear hug, gasping against him, “You’re my family too, Mr. Pines! You’re my family and I-I totally approve! I approve and I-I…”

His words break off and it’s clear he’s overcome with emotion, unable to speak and Mr. Pines – who normally shies away from these kinds of interactions, who normally shudders in revulsion or pokes fun at the very idea of ‘uplifting’ moments, finds himself drawing Soos close and hugging him back just as tightly.
They’re just finishing up dinner when there’s a loud knock at the front door. Grunkle Stan rises from the kitchen table with a grunt, “Now who could that be?”

He opens it to find Wendy standing there. Behind her is a minivan packed full of teens (who for some godforsaken reason are chanting ‘Thompson’ over and over) and Soos. Wendy has her hands in her jean pockets and beams when she sees her boss, “Hey, Mr. Pines. I’m here for Dipper and Mabel.”

“Eh?” this unintelligent answer is all he can come up with, as he’s totally in the dark as to what is happening. The kids, however, are not and suddenly come thundering up behind him, backpacks over their shoulders. He didn’t even know they had packed! Where did those come from? But neither of them seems troubled. Instead Dipper explains, “Wendy invited us to a slumber party at her place! You and Great Uncle Ford said it was okay for us to go, remember?”

“We did?” Stan scratches the left side of his face and starts to wonder if he’s finally experiencing some form of senility, when he notices that Ford looks far too knowing. Crap. There’s some sort of nefarious plot going on here. Normally he’s all for nefarious plots, but only when he’s part of them – not when he’s the intended target. He scowls at the young twins, but they’re giving him the full on cute-kid-service. Big eyes, bright smiles, and bodies barely containing all their youthful energy.

Damn.

“Fine, fine – you kids have fun.”

Dipper and Mabel both hoot and holler their excitement but before she goes, Mabel runs up to Stan and hugs him around the neck, whispering in his ear, “We’ll see you lovebirds later!”

Then she trots up to Dipper and lightly punches him on the arm. He punches her back in the same fashion and they’re both looking at one another in a conspiratorial way. Wendy and Soos also look suspiciously (and obnoxiously) pleased with themselves as they all leave. Stan shakes his head to himself and shuts the door only to turn and see Ford waiting for him. Ford looks…nervous.

Of course.

Stan crosses his arms and leans back against the door, “I told them they could go to this thing?”

“Wellllll,” Ford looks away guiltily, “I may have spoken for both of us in that regard.”

“Uh huh,” his tone is dry and Ford huffs, “Look, you’ve sent them away plenty of times for your own gain. It’s my turn.”

“Your turn for what?”

Ford clears his throat and rocks back and forth on his heels, hands clasped behind his back, “If-If you’ll just follow me…”

While Stanley is not a huge fan of surprises, he’ll admit he is very intrigued by whatever his brother has up his sleeve. He follows Ford upstairs and finds they’re headed towards Soos’s breakroom.
Stan’s never been a big fan of this room, considering it’s where he went after he first lost his brother. He covered it up for that exact reason and was unhappy when Soos unearthed it. Not that he hadn’t done a good job of pretending otherwise – the twins fighting over the room had certainly helped to distract him, but when he’d seen that pair of glasses…

He recalls sitting in his armchair, looking at them – remembering; thinking of what might have been. And now here they are. Together. Together, but still getting reacquainted. Together, but still finding their footing. Together, but still…still. It’s a weird place to be. A place where he’s tossed between being uncomfortable and being right at home.

They stop outside the door and Ford’s looking highly anxious. The sight is undeniably attractive on him – harkening back to when he was a teen and it makes Stan’s chest constrict painfully, fondly. Ford coughs into one hand and has the other on the doorknob, “Now, ah, before I show you this – keep in mind, I-I did my very best and-and if you don’t like it or don’t want it, I’ll completely understand and I won’t-”

“Sixer?”

“Yes?”

“Just open the damn door.”

Ford grimaces, but does as Stanley asks. Stan enters the room and his eyes grow dinner plate sized. The room…it’s-it’s been completely transformed. Into their old one. It’s damn near an exact replica of the room they shared as teens. Oh sure, there are some difference – the most stark one being the singular bed, but otherwise it’s damn near uncanny. The pictures on the walls, the various items scattered here and there. Momentos, toys, chachkies…whole piles of things from their youth.

It’s as if Ford preserved them, saved them, just for this and he quietly explains, “I-I took some things when I moved out. And Mom sent me others. I stored them away in spots I don’t think you checked for in the Shack, even with how long you’ve lived here. And of course, there’s, ah…”

He waves his hand towards one of the most important features. Right there, dominating one whole corner of the room, is Fort Stan. This Fort Stan is, without a doubt, the most elaborately constructed Stan’s ever seen. It’s better than the one he haphazardly threw together in the Shack after dark. It’s better than the one they had as teens and as kids. It’s…spectacular. Smooth, soft sky blue sheets raised high, lovingly draped over a sturdy cord and filled to the brim with cushy looking throw pillows.

There’s a collection of novels and textbooks to one side and to the other there’s a neat collection of magazines (Boxer’s Weekly, Gold Chains for Old Men, The Sailboat Secular). There’s snack bags and some cold beer and Pitt Cola, condensation already starting to bead on the aluminum cans. Stan turns to Ford, whose cheeks and ears are both a blazing hot pink as he clumsily offers, “I’m afraid I ruined your lovely attempt at this earlier and I-I merely wished to make it up for you.”

Stan turns back to the fort and sees that Ford used the very same set of Christmas lights that he used. All the bulbs appear to have been repaired but he easily picks out the one that he fussied over. It seems to twinkle at him as his eyes grow hot and misty, his gaze moving up towards the sign affixed to the wall above it all. It not only reads ‘Fort Stan’, but it’s been autographed by the kids, Wendy, and Soos. He licks his lips and feels…shaky.

“You…did all this for me?”

“Yes. And that’s not all,” Stan hears a ruffling sound behind him and turns to see Ford withdrawing
a sad bunch of flowers. They might have been nice at some point, but being stored within his trench coat they’ve taken on a withered look, slightly crushed but still vibrantly colorful. Stan boggles at the bouquet, “You got me flowers?!"

Ford looks embarrassed, “It—it seemed like the appropriate thing to do. The proper gesture. It’s common in courtships for—"

The laugh that escapes Stan is unavoidable, “You’re courting me?!"

The questions (and Stan’s general attitude) make Ford puff up and it’s clear he’s torn between being flustered and angry, “Look, all I know is that it’s a gift and you shouldn’t laugh at me!”

“I’m not-!”

Ford shakes the wilting offering at him, “You’ve been spouting off about how we’re a couple and Mabel’s been calling us that hideous ‘broyfriends’ term all day and I felt it only right that I make up for our last encounter and get us some time alone to maybe attempt to breach the stretches of dissent between us! Not to mention find out what exactly we both plan to do with our respective futures and it’s not like I paid for these damned things aanmpf!”

His diatribe is cut off by Stan’s mouth and while it is, by no means, an elegant kiss - it is a heartfelt one. Stan ends it just as shortly as it started, but the desired results are achieved. Ford shuts up and Stan takes the flowers, drawing them up to take a sniff. They smell sweet and fresh and perfect. He clutches them tightly, lips twitching about his face because he doesn’t exactly know how to react – that unusual combo of happiness and tears battling with one another and he wishes he wasn’t so bloody emotional lately, “Thank you, Sixer.”

“Hmm, you’re welcome,” Ford returns, the kiss clearly placating him.

Looking his brother up and down, Stan frowns, “Did…did you have these on you the whole time?”

“I may have.”

“What else do you have hidden in that coat of yours?”

This gets him a wicked grin, “You’ll just have to wait and see.”

“Oh ho,” Stan snorts, “That better be a promise.”

Ford carefully pries the flowers from Stan, putting them to one side as Stan asks, “So, if you didn’t pay for those, how’d you get them?”

“Oh, I, ah, procured them from an overly manicured lawn with far more flora than necessary. It also had a very disturbing birdbath and a gaudy billboard out front – something about a Gideon Gleeful-?”

“You stole these from the Gleeful’s front yard?”

“‘Stole’ is a somewhat rich word for-!”

Ford gets another kiss before Stan gruffly announces, “Baby, you’re the greatest!”

Ford enjoys this praise, his smile stretching from ear to ear, “One last thing…”

He moves over towards a dresser and Stan sees a new record player sitting atop it. Ford clicks a few knobs, adjusts the needle and the sweet opening strings of Etta James’s ‘At Last’ ring out as he holds
out one hand. He opens his mouth, clearly intending to ask Stan for a dance but instead all that comes out is a collection of garbled noise, as if he’s too overcome to ask. Stan just gives him a wordless nod and lets Ford pull him close.

They fall into an easy rhythm – Ford leading, just as he did all those years ago, Stan’s face pressed against his shoulder. Neither of them speaks; just listening. Listening to the song – the softly crooned lyrics, each other’s heartbeats, and their feet moving on the carpet as they gently rock and sway together.

When it ends, they’re reluctant to let one another go but Stan does first, knuckles swiping at his eyes, trying to mask the tears that managed to get away as he clears his throat, “You chose this song?”

“No,” Ford’s voice is just as hoarse, his fingers also surreptitiously grazing over his eyes, “I came to the conclusion we would need a new song after, ah,” he stops himself, unable to continue in that vein, “Anyway, it was something of a consensus decision from our focus group.”

“Huh?”

“The, uh, children,” he confesses, “Wendy, Soos…”

“Our fan club?” Stan jokes and Ford lets out a feeble chuckle, “They’ve all been rather…involved since you revealed our relationship.”

“They haven’t spoken to me about it.”

“No,” Ford’s tone is sad, “You were…you were gone at the time. I was the one left to deal with the fallout.”

Silence rises up between them. Ah, right. Yes. He had told everyone about his and Ford’s love for one another before the portal to there opened. And when it’d opened, he sacrificed himself to save Ford. And when he’d been there, he was far too consumed with what was taking place in that dimension to think of this one. Ford would have been left holding the bag, wouldn’t he? He would have had to explain to the kids, Wendy, and Soos about their love for one another.

Stan looks at the fort and finds he really wants to think about anything else. Yes, they’ll both have to tackle it all at some point. The bad and the ugly of their pasts and there but for right now? For right now he wants to go back to them enjoying one another’s company. Enjoying what Ford’s so meticulously put together. Which Stan has to admit, has to be the best date he’s ever been on. And once the word enters his mind he can’t help but feel his spirits rise.

A date!

They’re on a date!

Ford did this – all of this – for him! The fort, the flowers, the song…

And the room! Ford’s carved out this room for them – this little sanctuary. Yes, this was the very same room that Stan went to after losing Ford, but that pain is long since gone. Because he has him back now. He has him back and they’re together. Together at last!

The thought makes him realize that he could grow quite fond of this spot - this room – their room. He turns to Ford and waves at the fort, “Shall we?”

His twin gives him a curt nod and crawls in. Stan follows suit.
“Unbelievable!”

Stan looks up from his magazine and glares at Ford. He waits for it…waits for it…

Several minutes pass without another word.

Stan cautiously returns his eyes to the magazine.

“Honestly!”

Stan curses under his breath as he tosses his magazine to one side, finally deciding to give up the ghost on reading it. He slouches down deeper into the cushy pillows, “Alright, alright – out with it, Poindexter. What’s the problem?”

Ford looks up from the textbook he was nose deep in, blinking owlishly, “Hmm?”

“Oh, for-!” Stan throws up his hands, “You’ve been randomly shouting at that book for almost an hour now!”

“What? No, I haven’t!”

This gets him a sidelong look and Ford grows pensive, “Have I?”

He gets a firm, rapid nodding and Ford puts down the book. They’ve been sitting in the fort for quite some time, just silently enjoying one another’s company. They sit across from each other, socked feet touching as if they can’t bear not to share some physical contact. Ford’s wearing his usual outfit – sweater and dark pants, but his coat has been removed and is folded up neatly to one side. Stan’s in his Mr. Mystery suit but his fez is off and his jacket has been unbuttoned, girdle gone so his belly can sag forward in the crisp, button up shirt. His tie is loose around his neck, gold chain peeking out and he waits for his brother to continue talking.

Eventually Ford grumps, “It’s just – the inventions nowadays! I thought up about fifty of them BEFORE I went through the portal! I could be a wealthy man right now.”

“I’m listening,” Stan encourages, dollar signs in his eyes. Ford scowls at him, “The wealth is not what appeals to me so much as the application of science! And some of the ways these-these amateurs approached their creations is appalling! For example, in the nineties someone created a gas powered fuel cell! I had a similar idea, but in my drafts-”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! Is this-? Is this going to get really nerdy and boring? ‘Cause frankly, if it is, I’ll save us both the trouble and cut you off now.” Stan interrupts and he cracks a beer, taking a tentative sip. He hasn’t had an alcoholic drink in a very, very long time. There was a period, a very dark period, where he had had trouble putting drinks down.

After all, nothing keeps you warm when you don’t have a home like booze does. But he overcame his love for the stuff, able to turn it to more productive things. Like crime. It was hard to commit crimes drunk or hungover. Again, not pleasant thoughts, so he takes a few more sips of the beer before cautiously putting it to one side to forget about it – instead changing tactics to focus on the snacks.
He’s sorting through the various bags of goodies around him as Ford speaks, “Hey now, you yourself admitted to having some rudimentary knowledge of physics and, that aside, I think of you as a very intelligent individual. I would think you’d like me to expound upon my ideas, especially if they have monetary value.”

“You just said you don’t care about the cash, Sixer. Not to mention this thing’s already been made, so I don’t need to know what fancy doohickey you would have put on it or in it ta make it better and – holy shit!” the joyful exclamation cuts Stan’s words off and he looks beyond thrilled as he draws out a bag of toffee peanuts, “I didn’t know they still made these!”

“Ugh,” Ford shudders, “I didn’t think they did either! I purchased a variety pack. I guess they were inside. I didn’t really check. I assure you, if I had, I would not have bought those revolting things.”

Stan opens the foil bag, “You’re crazy! These things are friggin’ fantastic!”

“Should you even be eating those?” Ford asks with raised eyebrows, “With your teeth…”

“Oh yeah! Didn’t get to tell you,” Stan fishes a hand inside and grabs a handful of peanuts, “While that there dimension sure as hell sucks ass – it did have some perks. Those Things popped my dentures out and put real teeth in.”

He bares his teeth and then flicks at them with his fingers as if to demonstrate their validity, “Now I got a whole new set to ruin. And the best way to start?”

Stan shoves a handful of toffee peanuts in his mouth and chomps down, making sure to over exaggerate his enjoyment by rolling his eyes into the back of his head and letting out an obscenely pleased moan. Ford just shudders again and thinks about how this is yet another mystery he will never solve. Stan’s love for those awful, nasty, sticky sweets. Stan pushes the bag over, “Come on, sure you don’t want some?”

“Lord, no.”

“It’s been a long time. You don’t know – your tastes mighta changed.”

“I’ve eaten a wide variety of food in my travels and I can assure you – I will never like those things.”

“Eh, your loss!” Stan chuckles and he tosses handful after handful into his mouth despite Ford’s disapproving head shaking. Stan hands the bag over, “Want to see if I can still catch them?”

One corner of Ford’s mouth kicks up and he takes the bag. He grabs one and volleys it in Stan’s direction. Stan misses and his nose wrinkles, “Dammit.”

Ford shrugs, “We’re getting older. Our reaction time–”

“Shut up and throw another one. I got this!” Stan insists. Another peanut flies towards Stan and yet again he misses it. He snaps his fingers, “Again!”

They do this a few times – Ford tossing a peanut and Stan missing it – sometimes narrowly. It’s clear Stan’s starting to get annoyed and an idea sparks into Ford’s mind. He inches closer and then leans forward, entering Stan’s personal space. Stan’s eyes widen as Ford proffers a peanut, his smile saucy, “Here…take it now.”

“You-you want me to eat it out of your hand?”

“Or I’ll feed it to you…” The words are a purr and Stan swallows. His lips trace Ford’s fingers and
Ford feeds him the treat. Ford looks deeply into his eyes, “Better?”

He gets a wordless nod and Ford gives him a soft kiss before drawing back to his side of the fort. He licks his lips and smiles to himself, “Okay, I’ll admit…they actually do taste pretty great. At least, when I taste them off of you.”

“Ugh, so cheesy.” Stan mumbles but his skin has taken on a redder pallor at the words. Ford shrugs and picks up one of the books nearby, waving it at Stan, “I learn from the best.”

Stan eyes the book, seeing that it’s another romance novel, this one entitled ‘Wolfman Bare Chest’. It doesn’t seem his brother’s normal fare and going off his expression, Ford elaborates, “Mabel gave this to me. She, ah – discovered my own personal hoard.”

“You swapped smut books with her?!” Stan asks, scandalized, but Ford puts the book down, looking unmoved, “Hey, I wouldn’t have a whole set of these if it wasn’t for you. Besides, from what I’ve been told – you read a few of these to me while I was in the hospital.”

Grunts of dissent leave Stan but he looks slightly itchy as he admits, “Well, I put you there. Seemed only fair.”

“Did you like any of them?”

“No!” This is said far too fast and far too vehemently.

“ Alright, alright – I’ll admit…some of ‘em are kinda good…” Ford looks irritatingly vindicated so Stan counters, “Still don’t think they’re appropriate for Mabel though! She’s just a kid!”

“She’s turning thirteen,” Ford argues, “Besides, in some dimensions…”

“Okay, okay – but we’re in this dimension,” Stan emphasizes and Ford holds up both hands in surrender. They fall into a comfortable silence again only for Stan to mumble, “I…I know we’ll hafta talk about all those other dimensions, those places you were…but I don’t want to do it tonight.”

“I understand.”

Stan shifts where he sits, looking unhappy, but unable to stop himself, “That said…I-I do want to know about what you’ve been up to all these years. The people you met, the places you’ve been….what…what happened to you there. I want to hear it from you, Stanford. I want you to tell me your side of things.”

Ford looks away, “It’s not pretty.”

“I know,” he whispers, “I mean…I…I’ve seen how you can…change.”

“You don’t need to worry.” Ford assures him, eyes meeting Stan’s again as his speech takes on a worried edge, “I can’t do that here. I can’t change into…into…”

He trails off and it takes him awhile to find the right words to continue, “The…episodes I had. When I nearly attacked the children, when I destroyed your earlier attempts at the fort…all of that…it was just-just me being…being triggered. It was me trying to change, but not being able to.”

Stan frowns, “But I want to know you. All of you. Maybe you should find a way to change so I can see-”
“No!” Ford cuts in sharply and he takes a moment to calm himself, “Stanley, you have to understand…it’s—it’s humiliating for me. Being that way. Turning into that…that creature. There was a period of time where I thought it was the only way I could survive. To be like that. That’s why I augmented myself in that way. You weren’t wrong…when you called me one of those Things. I am, in a fashion – they turned me into one of them and even after I escaped, I kept adding to their work because it seemed like the best way to protect myself.”

He shakes his head, “I became a monster to protect myself from monsters. I don’t want you to see me that way again. Not ever. I can’t stand the thought of it…of you seeing me like that…”

Ford’s words have become slightly choked but he forces himself to continue, “I’m not myself when I change. I’m more-more hindbrain than anything. An animal. An animal incapable of recognition, of higher level thinking…I’m stripped of everything that makes me, me…”

Stan reaches out and gently touches his shoulder, “Okay, look, look…I told you…we don’t have to talk about this right now. I’m sorry I brought it up. But just…just know; whatever you had to do to make it - I understand. I really do. Don’t forget, I did some questionable things of my own to survive. So, I get it.”

*Questionable things to survive.* Ford grimaces at the words. Yes, he did that, but what Stanley did…what he had to do…

He raises a hand and covers Stan’s on his shoulder, he finally looks up at him and Stan offers a tentative smile. Ford feels his whole heart ache. The idea of what Stan had to go through, how he had to sell himself – it tears Ford apart. But as Stanley said, it’s a conversation for another time. He manages to drum up a smile, “It…it wasn’t always bad. Going through the multiverse. Some of it was amazing.”

Stan draws his hand back, “I’m sure you’re right. Still glad you’re back here, though.”

Ford hums in agreement and just as he’s about to shift his attention to another book he has a thought, “You know, I never told you about how I was pulled through the portal to you.”

“It was our connection, right? The power of love or somethin’?” Stan jokes and his twin snorts, “No, not exactly. I was in Dimension 125B in the desert plains of Izard when the gateway opened. It opened in the middle of a sand storm – hence my coverings and when I saw it…”

He swallows, “It had this…this glow. And I could see stars and rainbow colors through it and I…I didn’t know why it was there. Why it had shown up, but I knew. I knew. I felt it. I felt…”

Ford licks his lips and looks shy, “I felt that…connection. I hadn’t felt it in so long that at first I thought I couldn’t trust it. That maybe I was just imaging it because…”

His words die again and it’s clear he’s frustrated with himself. He wants to tell Stanley and he wants to tell him right. He wants Stan to feel what he felt in that moment and it’s hard to capture. To present it properly. Still, he tries, “It felt like my soul was being lifted and there was a buzzing in my brain and my heart and my lungs and I knew…I just knew it was you. It was you.”

A rickety laugh leaves him, “I knew it was you on the other side and I rushed through that opening without a second thought.”

“Just so you could come out and punch me in the face?” Stan asks but there’s no anger in the question. Ford shrugs, “Sometimes my emotions process in an unorderly fashion. I wanted to see you, I wanted to come home – but when I came through and saw you there…I realized I was home
but that you’d endangered yourself. Anger came quite easy after that.”

“Angry because you didn’t want me to endanger myself, because yoooou…” Stan waves a hand in his direction, clearly wanting the words and Ford’s eyes roll upwards, “I take it this is you fishing, yet again, for another declaration of my affections?”

“Just say the damn words, Ford!”

“I was angry because I love you.” Ford supplies and Stan looks so stupidly happy about hearing it (yet again) that Ford can’t help but smile himself. But Stan’s smile starts to fade as he asks, “Y’know, you told me that you never…ah…y’know did-did the deed with anyone past me. But that doesn’t mean you didn’t-?”

Ford already knows where Stan’s mind is heading, “I’ve never loved anyone else either, if that’s your concern.”

Stan once more looks ridiculous pleased so Ford returns sourly, “However, I’m sure that same cannot be said for you.”

“Well, I am a passionate man,” Stan boasts, “But if you’re asking if I ever loved anyone like I loved you, then the answer is simple.”

Ford waits and Stan looks insulted that he even has to say it aloud, “The answer is ‘no’, numb nuts! I’ve never loved nobody like I love you.”

“But you dated?”

“Of course! You tellin’ me you didn’t?”

His brother shrugs, “I spent time with a variety of entities. But nothing of significance happened with them. Shaylaar of Dio’d, Haplin, Booker…all passing flings of no real note. You?”

Stan looks thoughtful and starts ticking them off on his fingers, “Let’s see…Beatrice, Stella, Gloria, Evelyn, Patricia, Doris, Blanche, Regina, Ann, Leslie-”

“You can stop now,” Ford mutters and Stan stiffens at his tone, “What? You listed a couple of names!”

“I listed three, Stanley. I was involved with only three other people.”


He gets a brisk nod and Stan laughs, still stunned, “Only three in all that time? In all those years, just three?!”

“Not all of us are so casual with ourselves,” Ford snips and Stan’s head rears back, “Hey, hey! I’ll have you know it wasn’t always casual. I mean, I married Marilyn, for fu…” he stops himself short, regretting the words as soon as they leave his mouth.

More so, when he catches sight of Ford’s face. Hurt isn’t a powerful enough word to describe Ford’s expression. He looks wounded. Deeply. He blinks several times, his voice very, very low, “Married? You were-?”

Stan feels as if someone’s socked him in the face, Ford’s speech so sad, “Oh. I…I see.”

“No, you don’t,” Stan insists firmly, “It only lasted six hours and I can promise you, none of it was
bliss.”

His brother still looks upset so Stan scoots closer to him, nudges a foot with one of his own, “It was nothing, Sixer. I swear. All those people…not one of ‘em was you.”

Ford looks up and he seems a little brighter, “Well…I suppose it doesn’t really matter now.”

Stan clings to this, “That’s right. All that matters is the present, Poindexter. And in that, we’re together,” He then offers a devilish grin, “Though now that I think about it…we sure did lose an awful lotta time. Missed out on havin’ loads of fun, if you know what I’m saying.”

He waggles his eyebrows and Ford laughs, “Sadly, I’m afraid I do. Your mind has always had a rather hefty carnality to it.”

“Don’t know what the heck that means, but just to be clear – I’m talking about sex.”

Ford rolls his eyes, “Yes, Stanley. I got the message.”

“We missed out on all our young, vigorous years – so you better get to work on that. Shouldn’t be thinking about inventions you didn’t make or old flames or whatever – you should think about making something that’ll make it so we can go at it like jack rabbits.”

The apples of Ford’s cheeks flush with color again as he giggles (god, he’s giggling) shyly and scratches at the back of his head, “I’ve-I’ve never really considered turning my genius towards those sort of endeavors.”

“Well, you better start! I want something that’ll make us feel like we’re in our early twenties. I’m talking young, dumb and full of com-!” Stan’s words are stopped by Ford’s hand, which covers his mouth, his eyes darting about desperately, “Yes, yes! I get it! Please keep the vulgarity to a minimum!”

Stan licks his hand and Ford lets out a tiny ‘Yuck! Seriously?!’ before he says, “Why do you care? No one’s here to hear us.”

“Still…”

“You’re sucha prude!”

“I am not!”

“Are too.”

“Am not!”

“Are too.”

“Am – agh! Stop it!” Ford changes tack, “Anyway, I suppose I could see about creating such an invention, since you’re so eager for it. It’s not like I have much else planned.”

“Yeah, speaking of that…” Stan shifts where he sits again, “What are your plans? I mean, clearly you mind wiping me and the kids is off the table…”

“I had a good reason for that.”

“Oh?” This is said in a highly doubtful manner but Ford begs to differ, “I felt you would all be better off without me complicating your lives. It was clear to me that you…you really should have this
house. Have the Shack.”

Stan’s eyebrows rise and Ford looks sheepish, “You’ve…built something here, Stanley. And while I may not necessarily like it or understand it, it’s clearly something you love. I don’t wish to see it taken away from you. I think…I think the Mystery Shack should remain open.”

“Holy shit! Really?!” Stan’s so delighted that it’s infectious. Ford pushes his glasses up, trying not to show how affected he is by proxy, “Still…now that I have chosen to stay, I question what role I can play. Naturally, I am quite done with multidimensional affairs. And the supernatural has been rather well documented. So, I’m not sure what I should turn my attentions to now.”

“I toldja – making us some sex juice.”

Ford’s nose wrinkles, “Ugh. Please never refer to it as ‘juice’ again.”

“Sex serum?”

“Better, but still not something I want to dedicate my whole life to,” Ford argues and Stan teases, “Well, you are Professor Lee Pinesbury, Sexologist!”

“That’s…not really what I’m the professor of, is it?”

The look of awkward guilt that passes over Stan’s face is answer enough. Part of Ford wants to know more about this identity Stan cooked up, while the other part doesn’t want to hear another word about it. He chooses the latter (for now), “Regardless, my original plans had been for you to have the Shack and my name, instead of taking them back as I had earlier requested. I planned on going to my bunker and working more on my personal transport device – go back to exploring dimensions. But now that I’ve decided to stay, it seems I need to find a new course for what’s left of my life.”

“Which is a lot,” Stan stresses, “You’ve still got a long ways to go.”

“Stanley, we’re both well over the hill.”


Satisfied, Stan sits back and thinks for a few minutes. He tosses out ideas as they come to him – most of them ridiculous. His suggestions that Ford become an astronaut, a rock musician, and a janitor are all summarily shot down. Then he has a stroke of brilliance, “Hey! Why don’t you work at the Shack?”

Ford is dismissive, “Stanley, as much as I derived a sort of twisted pleasure in taking money from your patrons for gawking at me – it’s not something I would wish to do permanently. Besides, as I’ve said – the house is yours.”

“No,” Stan disputes, “It’s ours, Ford.”

His twin looks doubtful so Stan pushes on, “No – wait, listen ta me, I thought it was a bad idea too. At first. I mean, you’re not really the type of guy to promote a stuffed Six-pack O’ Lope and push bumper stickers, but you are the kinda guy who likes being a smart ass,” this remark gets him a glare but Stan pushes on, excited, “You like to educate, people, y’know? You could do that here! We could set up a corner just for you where you could tell people about real science and real supernatural hooey – we could call it, ‘Mr.F’s Fantastical Facts Booth’!”
Ford rubs at his chin, “Well, while I still take objection to the whole ‘Mr. F’ moniker that’s been floating around, I do rather like the idea of educating people.”

“Yes! Right, see – you can be all smart on people! And make profit! It’s a win win!” Stan beams, “Besides, you’re part will add a little credibility to this whole enterprise – class it up a bit.”

“You’re saying I’m classy?”

“You’ve always been classy, Sixer,” Stan’s whole demeanor takes on a flirtatious air, “And wouldn’t j’a know it? I’m a sucker for that sort of thing. Really gets the old blood pumpin’ hot.”

As he’s been saying these words, Stan’s started moving towards Ford, who has taken to blushing again, unprepared for the sight of Stan crawling on his hands and knees towards him, “R-really?”

Stan just answers with a hum of assent and he captures Ford’s lips with his own. The kiss starts off gentle, but quickly grows heated and just as Stan’s about to thread his fingers through Ford’s hair, maybe work him into lying back down on the cushions, Ford draws away, “Oh! I almost forgot!”

He manages to easily untangle himself from Stan, who lets out an irked noise at the interruption, and disappears from the fort. Stan goes back to the position he was in before, arms folded, frown firmly in place when Ford reappears with a sheet of paper and two jars – one green and one orange. He looks so happy that Stan finds it’s hard to hold onto his annoyance. Even more so as Ford explains, “I managed to recreate our old room as much as possible, but one part was missing! Our handprints!”

Vaguely, Stan recalls the picture that used to hang near their fort as kids. Ford unscrews the jars and the scent of paint wafts into the air. He dips his fingers in the orange and writes out his name. He nudges the green towards Stan and Stan’s lips twitch, amused as he follows suit. They write their names and then take little handfuls of the paint so as to make nice, full hand prints beneath their names. Carefully Ford takes the paper away and out of the fort. He returns with a grin, carefully getting down to his knees, “I put it on the dresser to dry! We can hang it up later. We should probably go wash our hands before-”

Ford’s words are cut off as Stan reaches out and cups his cheek with his green, paint covered hand. Ford lets out an abortive little ‘Hey!’ as Stan tugs him close and gives him a quick peck on the lips before pressing their foreheads together, “I’ve marked you as mine.”

The words come out in a heady rumble and Ford shivers slightly as the truth of this sinks in. The paint is cold against his skin, wet, and Stan’s hand is…it’s trailing down. It moves down his neck, cool fingers leaving streaks of green along the column of his throat. Then dipping beneath the collar of his sweater and tugging the material back enough so he can find bare skin, unmarked skin. Skin he licks first, then gently bites and Ford lets out a choked sound of pleasure, unprepared for this sensual assault.

Ford’s own hands shoot out and one hand, the one coated in orange paint, finds its way onto the front of Stan’s chest, right where his shirt gaps into a ‘v’. Ford’s initial reaction is to push Stan away, but instead his fingers curl, tighten in the collection off springy hair there as his eyes slide closed, his own voice a husky wreck, “Marked you too.”

“Mm, good,” Stan grunts and his mouth rises, finds Ford’s and captures it. And this time, unlike earlier, it’s clear he means business. His hands go to the bottom hem of Ford’s sweater and tugs at it insistently, drawing it up and Ford gasps, not wanting to break their kiss but needing to help and he pulls back just enough to quickly discard the article of clothing. He shivers slightly at the feel of air on his skin, winces at the memory of his own scarred flesh, but Stanley doesn’t seem to care.
No, if anything, Stan seems beyond thrilled with this turn of events as he finally manages to get what he wanted earlier, pushing Ford down and back onto the throw pillows, damn near mounting him. Their mouths are locked in heated, hungry combat as Ford tugs at Stan’s suit jacket, his shirt, tangles his fingers in Stan’s loose tie and tugs, feeling it unspool from around his brother’s neck and between his clutching fingers.

They try as little as possible to break contact, but slowly they manage to work off their clothing until they’re both glorious naked and it’s such a sweet, perfect unity. They’re in sync, movements easily matched (much like earlier when they were dancing) and Stan looks down into Ford’s eyes, quietly panting, “Love you, Ford. Gonna take my time. Nice and slow…gonna make love to you.”

“Yes.” The word leaves Ford with an unparalleled amount of desperation, of begging. He wants this, needs this – before it’s always been rushed and hot and heavy. It had to be. It was the only way he thought it could be acceptable. If it was in a passionate flash, surely they weren’t doing anything wrong? But now, now he’s accepted they aren’t doing anything wrong. They love one another and this is okay.

It’s okay now for them to take their time, for them to explore one another. To be slow and gentle and loving. Love – the word no longer floods him with shame or guilt. It feels right, it feels perfect. Although some things still give him pause – Stan’s hands on his damaged flesh, for instance. The paint is pretty much dried on his brother’s hands, but some green manages to transfer to his over scars, highlighting them and he wishes he wasn’t so repellent.

He closes his eyes and swallows, tries to not think about it, but it’s hard with Stan whispering, “Look at you…so gorgeous…”

“Stan,” he breathes, “Y-you don’t have to say that. I know I’m not-” his words are cut off by Stan’s mouth and then Stan gasps against his lips, “You are. Fuckin’ lovely…”

“My scars…”

“Are part of you,” he whispers, “They show how much you went through, show how strong you are…you’ll tell me all about each and every one of ‘em one day…but not today, today…”

And it’s like he can’t say anymore as he kisses Ford, as he brushes his hands all over his bared flesh greedily, caressing and clutching, and then he encourages him to roll over, to expose his back. Ford does so hesitantly, his back a sensitive region. Stan’s fingertips grace the crisscross of marks there and Ford trembles, thinking of what lies beneath. The shadowy tendrils that act as a secondary set of limbs – that can change from shadows to sharp weapons in a flash.

The marks cover the wide breadth of his back, his shoulder blades, but they taper off towards the tail end of his backbone. Here, his hips flare and his ass curves. He used to actually be rather proud of this part of his anatomy, thinking it one of his rare good features. It had a nice shape to it, a good volume, but now he worries it’s sagging and unappealing. He worries age has taken its toll only to let out a sharp yelp as Stan unexpectedly digs his teeth into one thick cheek.

Stan’s lips move against his skin, “Love this. Someday, I’m going to eat you out.”

“Stanley!” his brother’s name leaves him in indignant squeak, Ford’s whole face burning at such words, but Stan merely roars with laughter, “Man, Poindexter. You are so missish.”

“I am not!”

“You are too! Any filthy talk and you get all worked up. See?” Stan carefully rolls him back over,
one hand gently grazing over Ford’s bobbing erection before moving upwards, finding one of his nipples to gently tweak, “Bet it’s ‘cause you really like it…”

He looks directly into Ford’s scarlet face, “Even after all this time – you still get all hot and bothered at certain ideas…like me tasting you there…”

“Stanley,” this time his brother’s name leaves him in an aroused whine but Stan doesn’t stop, just eggs him on, “I want to worship all of you. Put my lips and tongue and hands everywhere…want to mark you all over. You’re mine.”

“Lee…” Ford groans, hips jerking uncontrollably as Stan keeps teasing one nipple, then the other. “Love it when you call me ‘Lee’. Been too long since someone called me that. But it only means something when it comes from you, Sixer.” He bends his head, licks at one nipple, draws the taunt tip between his lips, “Say it again.”

“Lee!” Ford hisses, all his fingers threading through Stan’s hair, clutching at his skull, cradling him close as his brother feasts on each nipple in turn before trailing his mouth farther, the silky wet tip of his tongue working over Ford’s quivering abs and then finding his flush cock, lapping at the spongy end before taking all of it deep into his mouth, sucking earnestly.

Ford’s head falls back, ecstasy ringing throughout every vein, ragged noises drawn from his throat. His hands comb over Stan’s shoulders, his thick arms. They brush along his sides, leaving their own orange paint trails as they slide over his thick belly and Stan grunts, pulling away to look up at him with a slight glower, “You don’t have to touch that.”

“What? This?” Ford runs his hands tenderly over Stan’s belly, “But I love it. So warm, so plush… love how healthy you are, how full,” he captures Stan’s face in his hands, urges him to look up as he locks their lips together again, “Want you to fill me up. Want all of you in me.”

The sound that leaves Stan is hard to classify, but he does kiss his brother again, one hand finding Ford’s spit-slick length, pumping it gingerly. Ford’s hips move up into the motion and he covers Stan’s hand with his own, just to feel it, just to touch him. Stan’s hand has so much strength, even as lined with wrinkles as it is and Ford pulls away from their kiss, looks at the crinkles near his twin’s eyes and whispers, “Your advanced age suits you…you look so distinguished…”

“If you can think enough to say words like ‘advanced’ and ‘distinguished’ I ain’t doin’ my job right,” Stan grouses, “You got any lube?” Ford points towards his coat, which is still folded up nearby. Stan mummers ‘good boy’ before digging through it. He produces a bottle and Ford adds, “Condoms too…”

“Don’t need ‘em.”

“Stan…”

“Look, I’m clean and you were just in the hospital and I may or may not have had ‘em check you out all over to know you’re fine so, y’know…” Stan coats one hand distractedly, clearly not wanting to meet Ford’s eyes as he says shyly, “I…want to feel you, Ford. Nothing between us.”

Ford lets the words sink in then finds himself nodding jerkily, “Nothing between us.”

Stan doesn’t answer with words. Instead he reaches down between Ford’s legs, finds his puckered entrance and slowly edges one finger in, then another. Ford moves back against the intrusion, peals of pleasure escaping him. Stan’s eyes dart between Ford’s face and where his fingers are steadily
pushing in and out of his brother’s tight body.

He licks his lips, “Someday…I’mma have you do this to me.”

A sharp cry escapes Ford at that, his fingers clawing at the pillows beneath him. The very idea of doing this to Stanley makes his cock jerk, precome dribbling out to soak his belly, trail down between his thighs. Stan’s breathing is heavy and his fingers have picked up speed as he continues, “Been a long time since that too. It wasn’t good then…but maybe…maybe with you…”

“Stan,” Ford whimpers his name, torn between pleasure and a pang of sadness at his words but Stan just lets out a wry laugh, “Keep messin’ up. Sorry. Not suppose ta talk about that stuff. Not right now. I’m thinkin’ a bit too much myself, I guess. Which is a surprise…can’t believe I can even form a single thought when I got you like this, got my fingers in you…”

He twists said fingers, drives them higher, finds that sweet spot and Ford’s throat aches as his moans reach a higher pitch, as his head thrashes back and forth, “Fuck! Lee, Lee!”

“That’s better.”

“Lee…oh, oh, god…please, please…need you…”

“Need me to what?” Stan jests, “C’mon…what do you want, sweetheart? Tell me how do you need me?”

“Need you…” he pants, “Need you…inside me…”

Stan withdraws his fingers and Ford lets out a keen of loss but then Stan is coating himself, slicking up his own sizable cock before arranging Ford, carefully lifting his legs up and around him, “You want me inside you?”

“Yes!” Ford cries the word out eagerly.

“You want me to make love to you?”

“Yes.” This time the word comes quieter.


“Please…Stanley…I love you. Make love to-ahh! Ah!” Ford doesn’t even get to finish the sentence before Stan shoves his whole, thick length inside of him. But he doesn’t rush. No, he draws out slowly and then carefully eases back in again. His movements are measured, precise, controlled even as he cuddles Ford close, buries his face into his brother’s neck, nuzzling there as he moves in and out.

Ford is the opposite. He has no idea how Stan is so composed. He’s clawing at Stan’s back and his ass, trying to drive Stan more deeply into himself, trying to get him to pump faster because this is sweet torture. He can feel all of him, no thin latex between them this time and the feeling is otherworldly. His aching cock is caught between them, untouched, save for the movements between them, the pure friction, and all of this would be bad enough as it is, but it’s the gnawing need that’s really killing Ford. He needs Stan, has to have him, have him deep inside of him. He wants to shatter them both into a million pieces and then meld them together into one unit.

He spent years in other dimensions, trying to make himself better, changing himself and adding what he thought of as improvements – doing whatever it took to protect himself, make himself a superior being. But everything he did – every cut, every stitch – none of it gave him this. This is what he’s
needed. Who’s needed. Stanley is his improvement. Stanley is his safety. Stanley is the love of his life.

And he needs Stan to feel it as insanely as he does, needs him to be just as drowned in it, and he lets out a moan, “I love you, Stanley…love you so much…lov-oh! Ahnhh! Yes! Yes, p-please, uh!” and it breaks down into mere wails as Stan does as Ford hoped he would, his thrusts taking on a more rigorous tempo.

Stan cups his face in his hands, kisses him, tongue plunging deep before he just brushes their lips together, air a shared commodity between them, “Ford, fuck! Sixer…I…”

But he doesn’t get to say another word, instead shuddering as he breaks; his big body trembling over his brother’s and Ford feels it, feels his insides getting soaked wet with Stan’s spunk and that’s all he needs to come apart himself, his release coating both of them, slick on their bellies and chests. Stan collapses on top of Ford, air whooshing in and out of his lungs but he doesn’t rest long, even with how exhausted he sounds.

No, he raises himself up and his face is so bright, brighter than the sun, as he kisses Ford and smiles and rubs their noses and foreheads together, extremely affectionate and happy and Ford finds that the mood and actions are entirely infectious as he does the same, more happy than ever to be home, to be right where he should be, right where he belongs.

+  

LATER

Ford is working out a last few details on the booth. He eyes the ‘Mr.F’s Fantastical Facts Booth’ banner speculatively. He still can’t believe he let Stan talk him into that stupid thing. Eh, well. It could always change. After all, the Mystery Shack used to be the Murder Hut. He’s setting out some pamphlets and books he wrote when he hears someone clear their throat behind him.

He turns to see Stan standing there.

And he looks…nervous.

Which is suspicious.

Ford crosses his arms, leaning back against the booth, “Yes?”

“Um, well,” Stan scratches at the back of his head and then one arm. He shifts his weight from foot to foot and Ford starts to feel more and more suspicious, especially when Stan seems so reluctant to talk. But then Stan seems to snap out of it, shaking his head and plastering on his ‘Mr. Mystery face’. Ford has taken to calling this expression that, because he’s been around the Shack long enough now to recognize it. It’s the face Stan puts on when he’s trying to be comfortable, but he’s really not.

Ford can (for the most part) see through Stan’s cons now, through this façade he paints for others. It’s a shame to see Stan put it on now – Ford thought they were well past this, but Stan holds it firmly in place as he sticks his hands into his pockets, “So, tomorrow’s the big day.”
“Yes?” Ford questions, wondering where Stan is going with this.

“We debut the booth tomorrow.”

“True.”

“We…we officially introduce Mr. Lee ‘Ford’ Pinesbury to all of Gravity Falls. Mr. F. Mr. F and his booth. Mr. F and his fantastical—”

“Stan, is this going somewhere?” Ford interrupts, bemused by his brother’s antics. Finally Stan puffs up his chest. He walks over to Ford and draws his hands out of his pockets. One goes for Ford’s left hand, raising it up and the other produces a gold ring. “You gotta put this on.”

Ford draws back slightly, “What?”

Stan starts talking fast, rapid fire, clearly trying to cover up his nervousness, “When I came up with this persona he was married, so you should be married, so you should wear this wedding ring so no one’ll question it or, y’know, ask you out or hit on you or whatever ‘cause if you’re married or they think you’re married then no one will try to take you away from—”

“Hey! Wait!” Ford slows him down, manages to draw his hand away and Stan’s still holding the ring, looking bereft as his twin speaks, “You…you want me to say I’m married?”

“Duh, Sixer. Keep up!” Stan snaps but in a way that clearly reveals his anxious vulnerability.

Ford looks at Stan’s hands, “I…I see you’re wearing a ring as well.”

Stan looks at his own hands, a golden ring sparkling up at him, and then he folds his arms, trying to look unaffected, “Just seemed right. I mean, we’re senior citizens. We both woulda been married by now.”

“You were, in fact, at one point married.”

“I toldja – that marriage didn’t matter!”

“Does this one?” Ford tosses out and he starts to feel a little apprehensive himself, “And…is…is this one to…me?”

They very idea seems impossible. It wasn’t even that long ago they settled back into being brothers, into being boyfriends and now Stan wants – what? For them to be husbands too? Ford wants to say that seems a bit much, he thinks about how he should be rational about this…but the idea is so oddly appealing. And it’s not like they’re going to have a big, overly elaborate wedding or something.

All Stan wants is to exchange rings…right?

That very much seems the case as Stan snarls, “Wouldja just put the stupid ring on?!”

But Ford doesn’t want to just do that. He wants to know for sure. He needs to. And he feels sort of light headed as he hears himself say, “You should ask me.”

“What?!” Stan looks startled, but Ford feels his resolve growing stronger. He doesn’t know why exactly he needs to hear the question spoken aloud, but he does and he shyly returns “Ask me nicely. Properly.”

Stan gnaws on his top and bottom lip, eyes squinting and unsquinting. It’s as if he’s trying so hard to think of what exactly to say that he can’t help but have a physical outward reaction in conjunction
with his internal turmoil. Taking pity on him, Ford quietly asks, “Or…or I could ask you-?”

“Hell, no!” This jolts Stan out of it and he looks near livid at the mere suggestion, “These are my rings and this is my idea, so I’ll be doing the asking!” He takes Ford’s left hand again, ring poised to strike once more, “Stanford Pines, will you marry me? Good! Now put this ring on!”

“Wow. Nice. Very romantic. I like how I didn’t even get to say ‘yes’.” Ford mumbles but in a way – while it was extremely blunt – it was romantic. It was very Stanley to say the least. Especially the part where he just tried to casually trick Ford into it.

But now, he has the grace to look a little chagrined as he teases each of Ford’s fingers in turn. He draws in a shaky breath and then he looks up. He locks his brown eyes with Ford’s and says steadily, “Ford… I love you… I don’t want you to ever leave me again. I was your first kiss and I intend to be your last. Will you-?”

Stan doesn’t get to ask. He gets a kiss instead. It’s sweet and sincere and when Ford pulls back he sniffs and ignores how his eyes have gone hazy, “I-I don’t know which finger to put it on.”

Stan slides the ring onto one of Ford’s fingers and then kisses him before frowning, “Wait – you still didn’t say ‘yes’.”

Ford rolls his eyes, “Yes, of course, dummy.”

“I’m not a dummy!”

“Normally I’d agree with you, but there was that time you broke my science fair project and didn’t just tell me about it in advance so I could fix it and-” Ford’s words are cut off by Stan grumbling, “For fuck’s sake! You’re never gonna let that go, are you?”

“No,” Ford admits truthfully, “I’m not. I’m going to hold on to that, he edges close to Stan, takes his hands in his, links their fingers, “But that’s okay. I’m going to hold on to everything. The good and the bad. But most of all? I’m going to hold on to you. Especially you, Stanley Pines. Nothing between us, remember?”

Stan colors and then he kisses Ford, nodding, “You’re right. Nothing between us. Not ever again.”

END

Chapter End Notes

What a long strange road this has been! I started this in AUGUST. I had no idea it would be so big or so long! If you’ve stuck with me and my trash this long, I would like to thank you from the bottom of my heart. If you gave me reviews and critical feedback, I thank you even more so!

Hopefully this ending is satisfying and (as you may have seen) I gave more than enough
hints that I might write little snippets in this universe in the future. If you return to read
those, that would be wonderful and if not, I at least hope you enjoy the entirety of this
story! Thanks again for reading this and I send you all my love! *hugs*

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!