A Thousand Natural Shocks

by WDW

Summary

Thirty years ago, Stanley Pines made a deal. Now, in the wake of Bill's defeat and his brother's disappearance, Ford begins to unravel Stan's secrets.

(now with epilogue! as of feb 2019)

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
PROLOGUE

Tongues of red and gold flame rose from the blazing wreck, briefly illuminating the dark night sky. Despite the intensity of the fire, however, it did not spread; it sputtered and died against the dark tree trunks. It desperately consumed the branches and shards of wood that littered the forest ground, but to no avail. If not for the remaining gasoline in the car acting as fuel, the fire would have died within minutes.

A solitary figure stood at a safe distance from the disaster, staring at the conflagration with visible dismay.

"Fuck," he muttered, dragging one hand through his hair. "Fuck. I can't believe the bastard did that to my car. How the hell did Rico track me all the way here?"

MYSTERIES OF LIFE, I SUPPOSE.

"Yeah… Geez, shoulda known from the start that the guy was bad, but going after a man's car?" The figure sighed. "Guess I'm just lucky that I got outta the El Diablo in time. For a second there, I thought—"

The realization came in steps. "…Oh. Oh, no."

YES.

"Dammit, no, no, no. Not now. It's a mistake, I swear, you've got the wrong guy - "

THERE ARE NO MISTAKES.

"You don't get it! I - I need more time. My brother, he's still on the other side of h-his dumb nerd project. I need to get him back –"

THERE IS NO MORE TIME.

"There has to be," the figure gritted out through clenched teeth. "…I'll make a deal. I don't care what it costs. I'll do anything. Please."

I DO NOT MAKE DEALS.

He sucked in a breath. "I - Whatever. You ain't taking me, ya hear? I'll – I'll fight you. I gotta warn ya, I have a mean left hook – urk!"

The figure clapped a hand over his left shoulder with a gasp of pain, eyes wide. "S-Shit, what the hell was… This is fightin' dirty, I'm telling ya –"

There was a pregnant, thoughtful pause. THIS IS NOT MY DOING.

"Yeah, play another one, would ya? Tryin' to con a conman –"

He gritted his teeth and fell to his knees as another flash of pain lanced through his being. "…I'm not a genius or anythin’ like that, but dead people ain't supposed to, uh, feel pain, right?"

HM.
“…An answer would be nice, y'know.”

GOOD-BYE, STANLEY PINES. WE WILL NOT MEET AGAIN.

"What?" He forced his head up. "Wait, the hell does that –"

His companion had gone. The flames of the wreck had finally died out, exhausted.

The night was dark again, and this was when he noticed the eerie green glow that emitted from the brand on his left shoulder.

"This - ?"

Dozens, hundreds of eyes opened as one, decorating the dark forest expanse around him like sickly green lights. Six of them swiveled and pinpointed him with uncomfortable accuracy.

WE CAN GIVE YOU MORE TIME
CHAPTER ONE

Chapter Notes

Now that this fic has been thoroughly jossed by @notllorstel (nope, Stan is not fae in this fic, though fae!Stan gives me so many ideas - no, no, I need to finish this first. Nor is he really ‘neverhuman’ - or, well, it depends on your perspective) here’s the next chapter! A full one this time, from Ford’s POV. Lots of Stangst!

Speaking of which, most of the fic will be Ford’s POV, but I’ll be doing some interludes every few chapters or so that will be from some… interesting perspectives.

Warnings: Old men failing at talking things through.

CHAPTER 1

Ford wrote furiously in his journal, valiantly trying to ignore the sound of voices from outside his home.

The keyword here, as had become increasingly common for him, was ‘try.’ The dozen or so feet and thick wooden wall did very little to muffle the voices of his grand-niece and nephew, as they loudly bid adieu to the town that they had spent their summer exploring, understanding, and ultimately, saving.

The - attempted - end of the world had indeed come before the end of summer. This time, however, Bill’s plans did not come to fruition. Through quick-thinking, courage, and indeed, not just a small amount of good ol’ fashioned luck, Pines family managed to seal off the dimensional rift and cast Bill Cipher out of this world – for once and for all.

It had… turned out much better than Ford would have ever imagined, or even hoped. No deaths, no injuries, no one driven into crippling insanity (don’t think about fiddleford-) which meant that both Mabel and Dipper would return home much the same as they had left it – physically, at least.

Even from the short weeks that he had been acquainted with the twins, Ford knew that both children had undergone their fair share of personal growth over these few months. Dipper had learned many of the lessons concerning knowledge and power that Ford himself had learned decades earlier, albeit much different (much worse) circumstances. Mabel, on the other hand, had been forced to reconcile some of her more idealistic notions with reality, a nugget of knowledge that Ford wished that he didn’t have to be manipulated by a triangular dream demon in order to gain himself.

Yes, over the past few weeks, he had grown very fond of those two. He had become used to Mabel’s casual acceptance of the strange, Dipper’s insatiable thirst for knowledge – and so, Ford was very sorry to see them go.

Which made it all the more galling that he had to stay inside, curtains drawn, hidden from sight, as the children prepared to return home.

Of course he could understand the reasoning behind the decision. He had made the decision, even – Ford knew very well that the appearance of two Stanford Pines’ would mark nothing but trouble for
everyone involved. But in the end, the reason why he could not even venture out from his own home for fear of discovery…

The slam of a car door jarred him temporarily out of his thoughts. “Have a good trip home, kids!” He heard. “But, remember – if you see the cops in the rear mirror, hit the gas! They can’t book you if they can’t catch ya!”

Ford gritted his teeth. That reason was standing half a dozen feet from the door.

That reason had stolen his identity, besmirched his name, and had taken thirty years of his life from him – three decades that he could have spent advancing his chosen field of quantum physics, years that he could have spent with his family. He could have went to his parents’ funerals. He could have watched his younger sister grow up.

Anything but the hellish decades he had spent scrabbling to survive in the other dimension.

(He’s your family, too, said the little voice in his head, from a spot once occupied by a far more foreign entity. He gave up three decades of his life to bring you back -)

But that was over now. Stanford Pines was back in his home dimension, and… he would make things right. He would get his identity back and clear his name. He would do what he could for Fiddleford – it was the least he could do, given his role in the man’s insanity. He would make sure Stanley –

“See you next summer, Grunkle Stan!” Came Mabel’s loud cheer. Ford froze. “You better hug it out with Grunkle Ford before we come back and visit – because if you two are still grumping at each other next summer, I’m gonna make a giant ‘hug it out’ sweater and make you guys wear it!”

Stanley’s reply was far less audible. For a conman, he had never been a good liar – not to his family. “…Yeah, yeah. Well, all I gotta say is… sweaters aren’t exactly my thing.” A brief pause. “So, guess I’ll have to make sure ya don’t have to make me wear one, huh?”

Mabel screamed in joy. Ford shook his head, irrationally glad that, at least for just a while longer, the twins wouldn’t know the truth. He wouldn’t have to explain to the children why he had to eject their beloved Grunkle Stan from the Mystery Sha– from Ford’s home.

Just as well, because he wasn’t even sure how to explain that to himself.

Weeks ago, when Ford had been fresh out of the portal, still reeling with the realization that after thirty years, he was back, there had been no doubt about this course of action. Stanley had stolen his name, his home, his life. The man might have worked to bring him back to this dimension, but it was because of his own heady guilt that he did so.

Well, that debt was paid. Ford didn’t owe anything more to his twin. Stanley had to find his own path in the world – a path that shouldn’t at all converge with Ford’s.

But since then, Ford’s adamant beliefs had been shaken. It had become clear that the bond between twins was not so easily broken, as demonstrated by both Stanley and himself. As much as Ford wanted to believe that Stanley had done all that he did out of pure selfishness, not even he could be so blind. Stanley had wanted Ford’s approval and acceptance just as much as Ford, very deep down, wanted his.

He was wrong about his twin. Ford just wasn’t sure how he was going to admit it.

But he couldn’t shy away from it forever.
Distantly, he heard the revving noises of a car driving away. A minute later, the door to his home cracked open, and his brother stumbled in, back bowed, eyes suspiciously moist.

“Stanley,” Ford said, and set down his journal. “Mabel and Dipper are gone, then?”

Stan startled at the sound of his voice, but straightened immediately, his frown transforming into a wide grin as he whipped around to face his twin, no sign of his previous weariness evident on his frame. Ford wasn’t so easily fooled, however.

“Yeah, the kids are off to California. Things are gonna get a lot quieter without them, huh?” Stan paused, evidently aware of his slip of tongue. “Uh, I mean –”

“Stanley…” Ford shook his head with a sigh. “About that… We really need to talk.”

His twin paled. “Uh…”

“I… heard you talking to Mabel, outside.”

“…Son of a –” Stan muttered to himself. “Okay, fine. Yeah. Don’t worry, I’m not gonna tell them about the whole, uh, throwing me out thing. That’s one thing you can trust me not to do, by the way,” he added with an underlining of self-deprecation, “I won’t do anything that would hurt those kids.”

“No, ah - That’s,” Ford hesitated. “That’s not what I mean. Stanley, about what I told you all those weeks ago – right after you saved - right after I got out of the portal –”

“Geez, it’s fine, Sixer. I get it, you –“

“That’s not what I –“

Both men stopped at the same time. “I know,” said Ford carefully, hesitantly, “that Gravity Falls has been your home for the past thirty years. I understand that you are reluctant to leave it.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever,” Stan scoffed unconvincingly. “Look, Poindexter, you know me – I’ll be fine anywhere. I did just fine those ten years, remember that?”

Ford had his doubts about that, especially considering the bedraggled, half-starved state in which Stanley had arrived at his home all those years ago. “Stanley, we both know that’s not true,” he sighed.

Stan tensed. “I can look after myself.”

“You were living out of your car, Stanley –“

“I’m doing fine now, aren’t I?”

“After thirty years of living under my name, living in my house, living with my identity, yes!” Ford gritted out.

Why did Stanley have to be so stubborn? He had seen how much his brother loved this town and the people in it, despite his constant grumbling about the stupidity of its citizens. Seeing Stanley performing to his audience in the Mystery Shack… it was the happiest Ford had seen his brother since their father had thrown Stanley out of the house.

“So this is how it is, huh?” His brother muttered darkly, and Ford realized suddenly that he might have said the wrong thing. “Look, Poindexter. Your name, the Mystery Shack, all your nerdy
books and all that paperwork – they’re all yours, alright? I don’t want them – I don’t need to be you to be successful. Hell, I don’t – don’t need you at all,” he added, albeit somewhat unconvincingly.

Ford stood up and stepped forward hesitantly, one arm outreached. “Stanley –“

His brother stepped back. “Hey, I’ll be outta your hair soon enough.” Stan sighed. “Look, if you want, I can rent out a room for tonight, alright? I know a place in town –“

“For God’s sake –“ Ford spluttered, shaking his head. “No, you knucklehead, I’m not telling you to leave!”

The silence that prevailed after that exclamation was almost embarrassing.

“You, uh, what?” Stan blinked, clearly shocked, and cleaned out his ear with his little finger. “Gimme a sec, Sixer, I think my hearing aids -”

“There’s nothing wrong with your hearing aids, Stanley.” Ford sighed, unsure of just how to continue. It seemed like a lifetime ago that he had been able to talk easily with his twin – nowadays, it felt as if every conversation had become a minefield, littered with the hidden grievances of four decades of separation.

“Look, Stanley… It’s obvious that you have made your own place, here in Gravity Falls. I’m not going to force you out of it.” He attempted a weak smile. “Now, I’m not going to say that I’m particularly pleased that you turned my home into a roadside attraction… but I’m sure we can work something out. Most of my work is contained underground, after all, and I suppose…”

His brother stared at him, eyes wide behind his glasses, inexplicably pale. Ford hesitated slightly, confused and slight daunted by the lack of response – but forged on with determination.

“Though, I do want my name and identity back. But I’m sure we can figure out a way to explain your, ah, ‘fiery death.’ I’m not sure how exactly you faked your death, but without records of an identifiable body, it shouldn’t be a problem to, ah, make our own alterations –“

Stan made an odd wheezing noise at that.

Ford hesitated, unsure how to react to the interruption. “Stanley?”

“…You really thought this all out, huh? And here I thought – Damn it, Sixer.” Stan shook his head, an odd, pained smile on his face. “You really haven’t changed a bit from when we were kids, have you?”

“Stanley –“

“C’mon, it’s been a long day,” Stan said quickly. “Let’s not deal with this now. We’ll have plenty of time to, uh, figure this out tomorrow… Right? Sixer?”

Ford hesitated. “Well, I suppose –“

An artificially wide grin pasted itself on Stan’s face, fooling absolutely no one. “Great! Uh, I’ll just –“

Without a single word further, he turned his back and practically fled towards the direction of his room. Ford could do nothing more than stare, half a conversation’s worth of rehearsed reconciliation tasting like ashes on his tongue.
This… had not been part of any of the dozens, hundreds of scenarios that Ford had ran through his head since he had made that final decision, had forced himself to confront the reality that he did not, in fact, want his twin to leave – not again. Perhaps he had been overly optimistic, but he had not expected Stanley to react so… strangely to Ford’s offer.

Surely, Stanley would be pleased at the prospect of staying in Gravity Falls? The twins might be gone, but Ford was not blind enough to see that his twin’s family extended to far more than blood relations.

Ford let out a sigh, and turned away from the spot where Stanley had last been. He should have learned by now that any conversation between him and his brother… was not going to end well. With the immediate threat of Bill gone, he had hoped – never mind that.

And yet.

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They closed the door with their shaking hands.

Time was up.
Sorry for the long wait, everyone! College apps have taken over my life, but the good news, I spent a while writing out a basic outline for most of the fic.

This is departing wildly from @notlorstel's Neverhuman AU, but I'll be happy to answer any questions y'all have about the fic and/or give hints about what's coming. A lot of this was inspired by certain parts/theories I've seen around.

((Also... if this seems to be heading in a worrying direction, I did take a lot of inspiration for neverhuman!Stanley from @jimsdeadbones's Rift!Stanley AU. Maybe that's reassuring, maybe it's not.))

Chapter Notes

CHAPTER 2

Admittedly, Stanford Pines wasn't the best sleeper, even before the whole fiasco with Bill. His insomnia had served him fine in college, where it was practically the norm. On the especially bad nights when pure excitement and passion would keep Ford up all night long, Fiddleford would brew him a carafe of dark coffee in the morning, with no cream and perhaps just a little too much sugar to be healthy – just the way he liked it.

His eyes practically boring holes in the ceiling above him, Ford suddenly found himself nostalgic for the past.

When had everything changed?

When he found Stan's snack bag next to his malfunctioning project, and realized with dawning horror just how far his twin would go to keep them together? When their father had thrown Stan out of the house, and Ford had been too inflamed with rage and indignation that he couldn't even look his twin in the face? When Fiddleford had stormed out of the lab, wild-eyed, shouting damnation and destruction?

In fact, he suspected, but would never admit, that his almost life-long insomnia might have stemmed from his never getting used to the absence of loud snoring from the bunk bed just above him.

In the weeks after his return from the portal, that sound was a lifeline of normality for him, even though it had been forty years since he had last heard it so regularly. But now -

Ford sat straight up, a cold pit opening where his stomach should be.

For the first time since he returned from the portal, he couldn't hear Stanley's loud snores, usually easily permeable through the wooden walls.

Which meant –

It takes him mere seconds to put together the pieces, but the realization still floors him when it hits.

He should have known. Stanley, the stubborn idiot - no wonder his brother had been so adamantly on
waiting another day.

But, why would Stanley want to –

Ford shook off that line of inquiry. He did not understand his twin; that was something he had to accept. After seeing Mabel and Dipper's relationship, he had to wonder if he ever did.

The door to Stan's bedroom was unlocked and easily opened, but it was as Ford had feared.

His brother was gone, had somehow left while Ford was distracted by the skeletons in his closet – gone, without even attempting to talk anything out.

Without missing a beat, Ford turned on his feet and ran for the front door, suddenly very thankful for his habit of sleeping in his day clothes.

The night was cold, dark, and quiet. The disappearance of Stanley's car from the driveway was damning.

Judging by the fresh tire marks on the loose gravel of the driveway, Stan hadn't been gone for long. Nevertheless, short of running on foot and picking a random direction, there was nothing he could do. Even if he could gain access to a vehicle at this time in the night, he had absolutely no idea where his brother was headed.

Ford swore colorfully, dragging a hand through his hair, then again with increased volume.

With a sense of defeat, he trudged back into the house, cursing any and all gods out there in the multiverse for Stanley's ridiculous stubbornness. No doubt, his brother had taken some kind of offense to something he had said, and ran from his problems instead of staying to work them out.

Typical. Just typical.

It was only after Ford slumped down into a nearby chair, that he noticed the single piece of paper on the kitchen table. His brother had left some kind of note. He eyed it balefully, as if ignoring it would make it disappear along with the past fifteen minutes.

A moment later, he sighed and reached for it anyways. He was 58 years old – he couldn't afford to be so immature about his problems, not anymore.

Perhaps, Stanley had the prescience to at least leave some kind of contact information. True, he might ignore Ford's calls, if he truly insisted on acting a quarter of his age. But once the kids returned to California, Ford could call and mention that their Grunkle Stan was taking an extended vacation to avoid working their issues out.

Knowing his grand-niece, it would take less than a day for Stanley to be standing sullenly on the doorstep, being shouted at by a twelve year old girl armed with a military grappling gun.

Ford smiled fondly at the thought. Yes, if Mabel had any idea that Stanley had gone, there would be – excuse his French – hell to pay.

Then he read the note, and the smile disappeared from his face.

It was written in Stanley's distinctive, blocky handwriting – impeccably neat and easy to read, which had, in their childhood, contrasted greatly with Ford's own unnecessarily stylized cursive. The strokes were shaky, however, and Ford found himself uncomfortably reminded of just how old he and his brother had gotten. But the contents itself…
…made no sense. Ford squinted, and adjusted his glasses.

Ford,

Thanks for the offer. Between the two of us… you always had the best ideas. But, and then, separated by several scribbled words out, it's not gonna work for this. Just, a blotch of ink, trust me, Poindexter.

There was no elaboration. Ford raised an eyebrow.

The twin thing we had about not going through each other's stuff? Consider this permission to do whatever you want with the stuff in the Shack your house. Phonebook's in the second drawer to the left – bunch of numbers in there, if you need help with getting your identity back.

Shermy's in there too. You, a smudge of ink, should talk to her.

There was a small puddle of ink at the end of the last letter, as if Stanley had been momentarily distracted. Then, thin and streaky, as if scrawled down before he could change his mind, Twelfth floorboard from the door, my room. Couldn't risk Dipper and Mabel – everything else was scribbled out.

Don't tell them. They don't have to know about – another series of scribbled out words. Don't do anything stupid, Poindexter.

Another scribbled out word, then simply, Sorry.

Ford put the piece of paper down slowly, a cold sensation going down his back. No contact information. No hints at where Stanley had gone, or why. Ford had experience with the cryptic, but this was ridiculous.

And… perhaps, if he had been less experienced with the supernatural, he would be able to convince himself that there was nothing strange about the note.

But there was something… indescribably sinister about the whole thing, and Ford couldn't stop the electrifying jolt of panic that drove all lethargy from his limbs. He wouldn't be getting any sleep tonight, it seemed.

What had his brother gotten himself into…?

The car rolled to a stop. The parking brake was pulled, almost as an afterthought. He opened the door, and stepped out with a groan.

This was hardly a conventional parking spot, and they had mowed down thirty years of new growth in order to get to this exact spot in the forest. But he had needed a place where people wouldn't go – the last thing they needed was for an abandoned vehicle to be reported, to either Ford or the kids. They weren't sure which would be worse.

He drove a hand through their hair with a sigh. "Hell," they said to himself, "…We really screwed it up, huh?"

He had been telling the truth – they had never been the twin with the good ideas. This was probably on the par with the Stan-vac with how ill-thought it was, but… what other choice did he have?

If the kids found out… Stanley wasn't sure what he would have done. Ford… as much as they didn't
want him to know, there was no way his brother could keep his nose out of the latest mystery.

And when he did find out the truth…

*How much longer can you keep up this act, Stanley? You're good – but not that good. I've been in Stanford's mind – I know him better than his own twin!*

*Though… that doesn't mean anything to you - does it, Six-Sights?*

They swallowed. Cipher might have spouted more lies than truth. But he had no reason to lie when the truth worked towards his benefit.

The demon had been right, all those years ago. He couldn't have kept it a secret forever – not if they had stayed. Hell, they suspected that the only reason Cipher hadn't outed them was because the alternative would have been much more fun for him.

Cipher was gone, banished from this realm along with his allies from beyond the rift. But Stan's greatest enemy had always been himself.

Ford would react the same, no matter what they told him. Better he found out on his own.

But this way… Dipper and Mabel wouldn't have to know – and that was what mattered the most.

He placed his fez on the hood of the car with trembling hands.

The forest lit up briefly with pale green light. When it died down, they were gone.
CHAPTER THREE

Chapter Notes

Update was a while in the waiting, I know - if it's any solace, this chapter is quite a bit longer than the past I've posted. Sorry about all that. I have a relatively comprehensive plan of the entire fic so far, I just have to find time to sit down and write it out.

Introduced in this chapter is Shermy Pines - a bit necessary, since I didn't want this entire fic to be Ford and his internal monologues. Seeing how their character barely exists in canon, any iteration of them is pretty much an original character. But here, I'll be going with Sarielle's Shermy, who's Dipper and Mabel's grandmother, and who kicks all kinds of ass, honestly. No background knowledge is necessary (but y'all should check their fics on AO3, because they are amazing) but just giving credit where it's due.

CHAPTER 3

The cold fear coiled in his gut promised a sleepless night.

Never one to waste time, Stanford Pines cracked open his brother's phonebook and began flipping through the yellowed pages, in a vain attempt to keep his mind off of certain other topics.

There was no point in wondering where, when, and above all, why Stanley had gone. As things were, there was nothing Ford could do to change his present solution. First, he needed to get his identity back - and more specifically, clear his name. Incarceration was not his main concern - he had spent a significant portion of the past thirty years in some kind of alien prison. But he would damned if he was to be arrested on charges of **llamacide**.

His current task did little to distract him from his wandering thoughts, however. It was clear that Stanley had accumulated a large number of contacts over the past three decades, but the names and numbers meant nothing to Ford. There were cryptic notes scrawled near certain contacts, but they elicited nothing more than mild bemusement. Pug smuggler?

It took mere minutes for the names to start to blur together, and this came from a man used to deciphering millennia-old demon summoning incantations, written in languages lost to mankind. Park. Palmer. Pan. Pendragon raised an eyebrow. Price. Pines. Pitt. Pinckney -

Pines. Ford blinked, and flipped back a page. Ah, yes. **Shermaine Pines (Shermy)**, written in neat letters, surrounded and almost entirely covered by scrawled notes. Following it was a whole collection of other Pines, most of them completely unfamiliar. **Dipper and Mabel's parents**, was written next to one number, and Ford subconsciously averted his gaze.

Yes, that was right. Stanley had made mention of Shermy, but with the distraction that came with the rest of the note, contacting her had slipped his mind entirely.

Ford remembered her, of course, even though it had been much more than three decades since the last time he saw his younger sister. She had been a five year old child then, and wasn't it strange to
think that his baby sister was now a grown woman - a grandmother, even? If not for the familiarity of Mabel's wide grins and Dipper's defiant stubbornness, he would have found that impossible to believe.

Her name drew surprisingly vivid memories - Ford had thought the past thirty years had robbed him of most casual recollection of his previous life.

But they were meaningless - the person that Shermy was now, was in probability… a different person entirely. His baby sister had grown up into a stranger in the decades he had spent trapped between dimensions. Those were years he could never get back.

Yes, Stanley had brought him back through the portal. But what did he bring him back to?

Before all of this, Stanford Pines had been destined for a bright future. His research was promising - he could have made groundbreaking discoveries and elevated mankind to unprecedented heights. His whole life had been spread out in front of him, and what a life it was! With Fiddleford by his side and Gravity Falls positively teeming with mysteries to explored -

Could haves, would haves. All that possibility, all that potential - they were all lost now.

At best, he was now a laughingstock among his former peers. Fiddleford was recovering, but he had spent decades as a lunatic living on the very edges of society and lost even more than Stanford had. Ma and Pa had passed years ago, and Ford had never gotten the chance to say good-bye.

In this world, Stanford Pines was without friends, future, and with the exception of two - three people - family.

Yes, it was true that Ford had made his own… unfortunate decisions. He should have listened to Fiddleford's warnings. He should have never trusted Bill - that had been made very, very clear. But he had made up for that particular mistake… sufficiently, he felt.

But it hadn't been Bill who had taken three decades of his life from him, and expected thanks in return.

In the end, Ford had not wanted Stanley to leave. But that did not mean that he had truly forgiven his twin.

He wasn't sure he ever could.

And now, Stanley wanted him to talk to Shermy, the baby sister that time and separation (and, however indirectly, Stanley himself) had turned into a complete stranger.

Ford's first instinct was to refuse. All he had to gain from the phone call was heartbreak and the saccharine sentimentality that was his anathema - and that was if his sister even believed his story.

Really, why would she? Thirty years of disappearance, identity theft, faked deaths - it sounded like a plot straight out of that ridiculous duck show his brother was obsessed with.

But reality hit like a freight train. Shermy was quite possibly the only person alive who had known both Stanley and Stanford Pines - the only person who knew the differences between them. It was inevitable that she would stumble across this deception, and there was no telling the consequences when that happened - for everyone involved.

He dialed the number, for that reason only.
This was the logical decision, the best for everyone involved. Really - Ford certainly didn't expect to find some kind of familiarity, some kind of normality, in talking to someone who - who might as well be a complete stranger. There was no reason to believe that Shermy had not changed completely.

*(So why did he still -)*

His hand clenched on the phone. It took several minutes for the other line to connect. During that time, Ford had already regretted his decision half a dozen times.

The voice that broke the static was female, flat with disbelief, and completely unfamiliar. "Alright, who the hell is this?"

Ford paused, momentarily disorientated. This… He squinted at his brother's handwriting - perhaps he had misread one of the smudged numbers. "I, ah, apologize. I think I… might have the wrong number -"

"…Wait, Ford?" There was a brief, significant pause. "Is that you?"

He floundered for a few seconds. Shermy? But Shermy did not sound like the grandmother she was supposed to be - but then again, she *would* be relatively young for a grandmother, wouldn't she? But… how was it possible that she remembered him? She had been so young when Ford had gone into the portal -

Ah.

It became suddenly, uncomfortably clear - she thought he was Stanley. His brother really had assumed his identity, in every possible way. Ford wasn't sure how to feel about that. "I - Is this Shermai - Shermy? Shermy Pines?"

"…Ford, what the hell?" There was a shuffling noise. "Look, the only reason I'm not reaming you out for drunk dialing me at 3 AM in the damn morning is because -" A pause. "Oh, crap."

He blinked. "Excuse me?"

"Is - Is it today? It is, isn't it. You wouldn't be drunk off your ass if it wasn't -"

It had been a while since Ford had felt so lost in a conversation. "What is today?"

An aggravated exhale of breath. "You *know* what, Ford. I've been telling you for years that you can, y'know, *talk* to me instead of stewing in your own misery. At least you're not doing this with the kids still in the house -"

"I am not intoxicated," he protested.

"You're a shit liar, Ford," she said flatly. "Look, I can't pretend that I can completely understand how it felt for you to lose Stanley, but he was my brother too. Besides… I thought we've moved past 'denial' by this point. We both know *perfectly* well why you're doing this."

"To lose Stanley -?" The dots connect. Right, Stanley would have had to mourn for himself in order to keep up his deception. It seemed that he had been a tad… fervent in holding up his pretense.

"Are you talking about the, ah -" Ford had to think momentarily to remember what Stanley had said his story had been. "The car crash?"

There was a long silence, and Ford worried suddenly that he had misspoke. When Shermy spoke
again, her voice was deathly serious. "Stanford, are you alright? ...Hit your head on anything?"

"I am perfectly fine," he said, just a tad curtly. Rather understandable, considering he hadn't had a hold on this conversation since it had begun.

"Sure. Alright, whatever you say. You do remember the voicemail you left me a few days ago, right? I'm pretty sure that was the definition of, 'not fine.'"

Stanley. Stanley had left Shermy a voicemail, a few days ago - which, outside of Bill's time stasis, meant the day or two leading up to the Weirdmageddon. It was... convenient timing, which Ford could mark up to coincidence if not for a lifetime of experience.

He gripped the receiver tighter. This voicemail could be the key to finding his brother. "What did he - I say?"

"Ford?"

"What was in the voicemail?" Ford asked again.

"...This is not helping your claims of sobriety, Ford."

"Shermy, this is important. Just... answer my questions. I understand that they may seem... ridiculous, but I can explain afterwards." Ford let out a sigh. "Please."

His sister was silent for a moment, clearly shocked. But hesitantly, she said, "You apologized for taking away my brother."

Ford sank into his chair. "What?"

When Shermy spoke again, her voice was low. "Look, Ford. I've told you again and again, but ... damn it, for someone so smart, you have a ridiculously thick skull. What happened to Stanley wasn't your fault, alright? I never blamed you. Neither did Ma and Pa - hell, I'm pretty sure they blamed themselves."

He didn't reply, too consumed by his whirling thoughts. What was Stanley apologizing for? The most obvious possibility was that his brother felt guilt for pushing him into the portal - and a small part of him said vindictively, good. But when followed to the logical conclusion, it didn't make sense -

"I used to think they were right, y'know. Pa was the one who kicked him out. Do you know the survival rates of teenagers on the streets? It's a miracle that Stanley... even got as far as he did," Shermy said bitterly. "I never even got to meet him. Not until the funeral. Do you have any idea how fucked up that is?"

- because at the time of the voicemail, Ford had already returned from the other side of the portal. In fact, Ford had already been back for weeks at that point. The timing simply did not line up.

Unless Stanley knew what was coming.

The realization shocked Ford right out of his thoughts, and he found that he could not tune out Shermy's words any longer.

He... had never considered, really, the fact that Stanley had never met his younger sister - Shermy had been a baby when... well.
"Sherm, I -"

"But… Ma and Pa lived with that guilt for the rest of their life," she continued, cutting him off. "You weren't home most of the time, but… Ma cried a lot. She shouted at Pa. She blamed him for what happened to Stanley, and… well, it's hard to tell with Pa, but I think he blamed himself too."

Shermy let out a sigh. "You have to learn to forgive, Ford. Else, you'll be carrying this burden with you for your whole life. Sometimes, that's the only way you can fix things. Stanley's not coming back, Ford."

The irony of the moment hit him all at once, and he had to stifle a bark of laughter. For what he had to do next, he needed Shermy to trust him - and if nothing else, Ford had learned that maniacal laughter was not a sign of a well-adjusted mind.

"…About that. Shermy, remember when I said I would explain these questions?"

"Yeah, Ford?"

Ford paused, steeling himself. "Stanley's alive, Sherm."

The other side went silent, but there was no clicking sound to indicate that his sister had hung up. Ford pressed on. "It's… a very long and complicated story. But Stanley faked his death, thirty years ago. Since then, he -"

"How?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Ford, how did he fake his death?"

He racked his brains trying to remember his brother's explanation to Dipper and Mabel. "He cut the brakes on his own car, I believe. There was a flaming car crash - much of the identifying evidence was destroyed in that, so Stanley was able to be legally declared dead without a body."

"There was a body in the car, Ford."

Ford blinked. "There was a -"

"Look, Ford. It's not that easy to have someone declared dead - not without their remains."

The phone receiver hung loosely in Ford's hand. He stared into the distance as he tried to comprehend Shermy's revelation. "Are you sure?" Ford asked weakly.

"…Yeah. Ma and Pa went to identify it. There… was a lot of damage, I think. The funeral was closed-casket. Dammit, Ford. You were there - how do you not remember this?"

A great deal of physical damage. Closed-casket funeral. And Ford knew, for certain, that his brother was alive. Meaning…

…How identifiable was a severely burned body? Especially for a grief-stricken couple who hadn't seen their son in a decade.

The only conclusion that Ford could make, turned his stomach. But really, it explained everything - why Stanley felt the need to run, what he hadn't wanted Ford to tell Dipper and Mabel. The body used to fake Stanley's death was not his, obviously.
But whose body did he use - and, what had Stanley done to get it?

"Shermy," he said slowly. "There's something I need you to look into for me."

Gravity Falls, August, 1982

"You want -" A pause. "...Actually, I dunno what that means."

They explained. He was quiet for a long time.

"Alright," he said finally. "I get it now. Guess I should of expected. Not like I have much else to give."

They waited. They had time. He didn't.

"So," he said, like they knew he would. "Say I, uh. If I agree. What happens then?"

Many things. Nothing. A thousand, thousand revolutions of a lone planet around a lone star in a lone galaxy. It was all the same to them.

"...To me, I mean."

They -

They.

"You... don't know, huh?"

They.

"Damn it. Damn it. How the hell do ya expect me to agree to something with conditions like -"

They needed him.

"How - How do I know you won't screw me over? You could leave Ford on the other side, after. Not like I can do anything to stop you."


Everyone, this armageddon wouldn't be possible without help from our friend here. Give him a six-fingered hand!

His brother.

He was wrong. He could. When.

They said, you would do anything for more time.

They said, anything.

He hesitated.

He nodded.
CHAPTER FOUR

Chapter Notes

So, uh, this is a real monster of a chapter. I couldn't find a good place to stop, I guess. Some truths become apparent. Hope you all enjoy!

*goes back to sobbing about GF ending in one episode*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER 4

The landline receiver fit into its base with a final-sounding click. Ford sat for a moment, staring into the distance with unfocused eyes. Then, with a guttural noise of frustration, he swept everything off the table with one forceful movement of his arm.

Hundreds of sheets of paper flew through the air and slid all over the floor. Ford breathed heavily for a few moments, quietly staring at the mess he made. Then, absurdly thankful for the lack of witnesses, he bent over and started to pick them up.

There was no telling if it was important paperwork, or more contacts. Or, they might even contain clues about…

He sighed. The rest of his call to Shermy had gone, well.

The single word that came to mind did not exist in this dimension, the last he had checked. But the closest translation… It had not gone smoothly. It had not gone smoothly at all.

As Ford had found out a few minutes after his request for help, Shermy was an investigative journalist. It was a clear boon, considering that he was after information, and lots of it - until he realized that Shermy's penchant for complicated, borderline uncomfortable questions had only intensified with age and experience.

Telling her the entire truth was out of the question - at least, for now. He had enough trouble with clearing the encyclopedia of crimes his brother had committed under his name. The thought of explaining thirty years of inter-dimensional travel, stolen identities, and supernatural encounters was… daunting, to say the very least.

Stanley could take care of that - once Ford found him.

But she had been… very insistent in her demand for answers. Mabel's letter to her parents about her newest grunkle had not helped. It had gotten to the point that Shermy had threatened to drive up to Oregon herself, and it was only through Ford's quick thinking and - and she had been very clear on this - her long history of trust with 'Ford' that she had relented.

She had promised to look into disappearances and generally strange ongoings in the general time and geographic location of Stanley's car crash… as well as the circumstances of Stanley's 'death' itself. No promises, Shermy had told him seriously - it had been a very long time ago, after all.

Ford had agreed readily to everything his sister demanded - yes, he would tell her why he needed the
information, yes, he would explain what exactly was going on with Stanley - with the knowledge that once he got him back, any attempt at an explanation would be made much easier.

But she had made one request of him that made him hesitate.

"Look, Ford," Shermy had said. "I don't know what's happening on your end, but. If you do find Stanley…"

"Yes?"

"Ask him why. If he's been alive this whole time, why the hell did he never come back? Ma and Pa died thinking he was gone, and I never even got to -" She cut off. "…Just ask him, alright?"

Ford opened his mouth, then closed it with a click.

"Ford?"

"I will," he said thickly. That was a question that he could answer… but Ford knew without a doubt that his reply would only prompt additional, more difficult questions. 'Stanley' hadn't come back so 'Stanford' could - and it had never really hit that Ford wasn't the only who had lost his identity, thirty years ago.

Not until now.

He cleared his throat. "Shermy, you believe me? About Stanley being alive?"

Her reply was a bitter laugh. "…I don't know what to believe right now, Ford. But you had my back when I needed it most. I'm not enough of an asshole to not have yours."

Then Shermy had hung up, leaving Ford to a dial tone and the clamor of his own thoughts. Slowly, deliberately, he put his head in his hands.

Was his brother a murderer?

Stanley was a con-man and a liar, Ford knew. Having stumbled upon Stan's list of charges (under Ford's name, no less) while channel flipping several weeks earlier, he was also very aware of the sheer amount of his brother's crimes. There was no telling the kind of crowds Stanley had been caught up with during that decade.

So really, Ford shouldn't be surprised about this new development. It fit everything he knew about his brother. And hadn't Stanley himself admitted that he would do anything for his family?

But he couldn't believe it.

Stanford Pines had always been a man of reason. Even his obsession with anomalies had been well substantiated by hundreds of incident reports. He made decisions after careful weighing of his options. What was logical, was what was right. The last time he had lapsed in his judgement… had nearly brought about the end of the world.

But here and now, he could not bring himself to acknowledge the logical possibility.

Because this was Stanley. His brother, who lied and cheated and almost damned the world for his family - but also, his brother, who he had honestly envied for much of his childhood. Ford might have had the raw intelligence, but it was Stanley who had, as their mother referred to it, the 'personality'. Stanley had his natural charm, something that Ford sorely lacked.
In truth, it was far more than that.

As children, Stanley had been everything he ever wanted to be. He had no trouble talking to people, with a boundless confidence in himself that Ford lacked completely. And, most of all - he was normal, with his five-fingered hands and a wide smile for everyone. Everyone, except his blinding fury at Ford's bullies - and even now, that was something Ford still couldn't completely comprehend.

(But after that flash of deja vu seeing Dipper risk his life and the world not just to save his sister, but him… perhaps, now he understood a bit more.)

When their father had thrown Stan out… it had almost been a moment of vindication. His brother wouldn't always be okay, his 'personality' wouldn't always carry him through - and then, minutes later, when the moment had passed and the reality hit that his brother was gone… he had told (lied) to himself that his brother had deserved it, and what's more - Ford didn't need him anyways.

(and… Stan would be fine. He always was.)

But even without Stanley by his side, adulthood had been especially humbling. He couldn't trust, he couldn't commit, he couldn't - and everyone had left, in some way or another. Watching Fiddleford disappear into the darkness of their laboratory, he had shouted and cursed - and knew, within his heart, that his brother would not have made the mistakes he had. Stanley, who trusted, who committed, who loved -

Stanley, who, despite his crimes, his lies… was a better person than Ford could ever hope to be.

His brother was a con-man and a liar, but he was not a murderer.

(he couldn't be)

Ford leaned back.

Every part of Gravity Falls was somehow influenced by the supernatural, and Ford had no doubt that Stanley's faked death was aided by forces unlimited by rules of reason. What he needed was evidence. He didn't know what kind of creature was involved, but.

Twelfth floorboard from the door, my room. Couldn't risk Dipper and Mabel –

Ford sat up, eyes wide. Stan's note. Of course.

True, there were a number of things that his brother could be referring to. Before - all of this, he had automatically assumed that Stanley simply kept his earnings hidden under the floorboards of his home - he couldn't see his brother ever making deposits at the bank.

(Except he evidently had, judging by Ford's paid-off mortgage and student debts.)

But, confronted with the new information of the past hour, the line had taken a far more sinister meaning. Whatever was hidden under those floorboards could contain clues as to how his brother had managed to fake his accident.

Stanley's room smelled of smoke, unnecessarily strong cologne, and strangely enough, just the smallest whiff of fabric softener. Even knowing the man was probably hundreds of miles away at this point, Ford felt uncomfortable just… walking inside.
It had been many, many years since they had shared a room, but it seemed that the vast majority of his brother's bad habits was intact. Various things were crammed into the corners, from vacuums to helmets. The bed was unmade. Ford stepped carefully over the beer cans scattered all over the carpet, and -

Carpet?

He knelt to the ground, inspecting it with squinted eyes. Yes, this was very clearly carpet - old carpet at that, stained with unknown substances and smelling vaguely of alcohol. But Stanley had very clearly mentioned floorboards…

Ford sighed, and pulled out a knife from his pocket, a keepsake from his thirty years traveling through dimensions. Stan wouldn't complain about property damage, surely, not when the rest of his room looked like this.

He cut a slit into the carpet with some difficulty, and pried the two sides apart with his hands. Floorboards, rotted with age. Ripping them up before laying the carpet must have cost extra, knowing his brother.

Or, with what he knew now… they probably provided an additional layer of security to whatever Stanley was hiding.

Because there was no doubt now - this was not a hiding place for a stash of money, not when it was almost impossible to unearth, even with the knowledge of its location.

This was for hiding something permanently.

Further observations determined the width of each floorboard, and some quick mental calculations brought Ford to a location several feet from where he had started. The actual retrieval process was far more difficult, as Ford cursed and fumbled his way through splinters and rug burns to pry up the floorboards.

But then, he reached below and closed his fingers on something that was evidently not dirt, and the triumph that he felt then made it all worth it.

It was a book, with blue covers and considerable heft. Ford blinked. No, a journal - not one of his, as it was evidently a product of mass production, and Stanford had hand-bound all three of his.

There was only one person it could belong to.

Perhaps, he had more in common with his brother than either of them had believed.

He cracked it open carefully. It had been more damaged by the passage of time than his own journals - understandable, because when Stanford Pines made something, he made it well. But the majority of the words were legible, and his brother's handwriting was distinctive on the pages.

Ford sat down, adjusted his glasses, and prepared to read. A cockroach crawled over his splayed hand.

…Maybe it was a better idea to examine Stanley's journal in the kitchen.

Only about a third of the pages were filled.

Stanley had taken a very different approach to the creation of his journal. While Ford had meant for
his journals as references above all, Stan's entries were more reminiscent of a diary, focusing more on his personal experiences and thoughts. Each entry was written chronologically, with the day's date scrawled on the top of each blurb. Just from a skimming of the contents, his brother had focused more on text - the few pictures were rudimentary at best, but the written descriptions were vivid… and oddly poetic in their bluntness. Then, there were some pages of equations that Ford remember vaguely from the later years of his doctorate studies.

The latter raised an eyebrow, but for now… he ignored all of that, and immediately flipped to find the day of his brother's faked death - only to find that the last entry was written several days before.

Ford swallowed his disappointment. Of course it wouldn't be that easy.

With a sigh, he returned to the very first entry, and began to read.

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*Gravity Falls, January, 1982*

Stanley could still hear his brother's screams, even though it had been over an hour since... it happened.

Over an hour, spent grappling with machinery he had no idea how to use, pressing any buttons he could, cursing whatever deity thought it was funny to screw over Stanley Pines just one more time.

If only Ford put labels on all his... science stuff. Then maybe he could have the slightest idea how to even start bringing his brother back.

(Because Ford *was* alive, and it didn't matter how long, it didn't matter what he had to do, Ford was alive and Stan was going to bring him back -)

He had flipped through the book Ford had thrown at him. Unfortunately, the words might as well be gibberish. Even ignoring the strangely detailed pictures of... *things* that made Stan wonder if his brother had ever gotten into hallucinogens in college, Ford's equations and calculations reached far, far beyond the level of any math Stan had ever learned during his admittedly meager amount of schooling.

And back then, he had thought throwing the alphabet into the mix had been crazy enough.

By now, Stan had about come to terms that he was stuck. He needed to bring Ford back, but he had no idea where to even start. Was his brother's invention just broken, or had it always been a single-use device? And even if it was broken, how was he supposed to know what to fix?

He had to confront the truth - Stan wouldn't be getting his brother back anytime soon. But eventually, he would. *He had to*. Right now, however...

The rush of adrenaline that had fueled him for most of the past hour had completely faded, and paralyzing pain from his injury had replaced it. It hurt to move from his bent position, and an accidental scraping of the burn against Ford's couch was so painful he had yelled out loud.

Eventually, he managed to stagger upright, a hand instinctively reaching towards to his back.

Cold water, that was what he needed. Cold water and lots of painkillers.

As it turned out, Ford's medicine cabinet was well-stocked. Perhaps, unusually so. Everything was legal, yes - but what had Ford been doing that required all of these painkillers? And… bandages?
Stan squinted, then shook his head. His brother had clearly gotten involved in some crazy things during the last decade - though maybe *he* wasn't the one to talk.

He took a few, and swallowed them down completely dry. Sure, it probably wasn't a great idea to pop strange pills in unknown amounts. But the pain was nearly blinding now, and this, at least, was something Stan had a lot of experience in. He hadn't been able to afford neatly printed dosage amounts and prescriptions for nearly a decade.

Nearly half an hour later, he sank down on the toilet seat, new gauze haphazardly applied to his burn, done with only the aid of the mirror. His legs gave out halfway and he hissed in pain as he smacked into the code porcelain. Good thing he had decided to sit down when he did.

Stan was tired. He had been exhausted for the majority of the last decade, but now, it felt as if every ounce of fatigue he had endured and ignored had come crashing down on him. It had been a long drive up to Oregon, with little sleep and even less food, as his throbbing eyes and the gnawing pit in his stomach reminded him.

There was nothing more he wanted to do but sleep.

But he couldn't. Not now. Not until he got Ford back. God knows what was on the other side of that portal, and judging by Ford's reaction... it was nothing good.

He had to go back down there. Maybe Stan had overlooked something, or his brother had left a note somewhere, or... Something.

There had to be something. Anything.

The journey back down to his brother's underground laboratory ended up taking a whole lot of time and leaning on walls. Stan staggered out of the elevator, flipping through Ford's journal until he found the page he had seen earlier.

It looked like a blueprint - well, part of a blueprint, anyways. But there was one of the sides of the triangle, that part of the circle... now, if only Ford wrote the stuff on there in a language Stan could actually *read*.

He squinted back at the machine again, and that's when he saw it.

Directly in front of the entrance to the portal, hovering several feet from the ground, was a swirling mass of substance that Stan had no idea how to describe. Gravity clearly had no hold on it, but the way it moved... looked as if it was crackling with energy.

It seemed to have a *lack* of color, if anything, and staring too long into it sent chills down his spine.

Stan lifted one of the shorter metal pipe near his foot, and used it to poke the thing. Y'know, just to get an idea of what the heck it was.

…Well, whatever it was, it writhed at the contact - almost angrily, if he had to put a label to it. Stan examined the tip of the pipe dubiously. A whole chunk of the metal, the part that had actually made contact with the substance, was completely gone. Not melted or cut off, just... missing, as if it had never been there in the first place.

Stan blinked. Well, good thing he didn't use his hand. What the hell was he supposed to do with this thing?

...Whelp, he got nothing.
"Uh," he said finally, squinting up at the... some kind of rift, or something. He did not want to deal with this right now. "...Don't suppose ya could just... go away?"

He didn't expect any sort of reply, and he didn't get one. Staring too hard at the thing made Stanley vaguely uncomfortable for some reason, and he looked away. Now, he had no idea what the thing was, but after seeing what it did to solid metal... Stan knew for sure he didn't want it anywhere around him.

Dammit. He could get Ford to deal with it. Once he made it back safely.

But... This was one of weird things that his brother was obsessed with, wasn't it? Stanley glanced back down at his brother's journal, then shook his head to himself.

Nah, he couldn't write anything in here. Even if Ford appreciated him keeping record, he would go bananas first about Stanley messing with his private property. Or something.

He turned away from the portal and began his long journey upstairs.

Stanley had a long night ahead of him.

---

_Gravity Falls, August, 2012_

Ford's face had turned ashen. He wiped at the words, as if trying to dispel an illusion. It couldn't be possible, could it? This was the first time the portal had been activated - well, excluding the accident with Fiddleford. But really, both times, the portal had been open for less than a minute. Not nearly enough time for a -

- for an interdimensional rift to be formed.

He chuckled weakly to himself. Stanley must have seen something else. If a rift between dimensions had been opened, it would have meant the end of the universe. Ford would never had had a home dimension to return to.

Then the moment of humor passed, and Ford shook his head. No, there was nothing else it could be. The proximity to the portal, the physical appearance, the fact that what was inside... could not be comprehended by human eyes... It didn't make sense, but he could not hide from the truth.

When Ford had gone through the portal, a hole had been torn in the universe.

The question was, how was the world still existing? Even Ford's specially engineered prison had been unable to hold the rift in the end - at least, without the alien adhesive that Stanley could not have had access to. In fact, his brother clearly had no idea what was in his basement - or what it meant for the universe.

It was the perfect opportunity for Bill Cipher. All it took was a meeting in the dreamscape, and Ford knew perfectly well how easily the dream demon could prey on a person's insecurities. Not to mention... with Stanley as oblivious as he was to the supernatural, Cipher could have simply waited for the rift to naturally expand.

But none of that had happened. What had happened?

Ford steadied his shaking hands, flipped the page, and -

- blinked.
Ford closed the journal, letting out a breath. Of course. It made perfect sense. Now, the last few minutes of panic seemed ridiculous. Yes, the portal had not been open long enough for a permanent interdimensional rift to form. Just another side-effect, a mildly more severe version of the gravity fluctuations. It had closed itself within the day. It must have been a lost cause for Cipher.

A dead end, but he was indescribably relieved that it didn't develop any further. Dimensional walls tended to hold strong, and it took a great deal of power to break through them. Even if anything had come through during the rift's brief period of existence, it would have been pulled back through when it shut. The universe preferred a state of homeostasis above all else, and without an anchor of some sort...

He shook his head. Bill Cipher and the other creatures from the other side of the rift... there was no point in dwelling. The walls between dimensions had been reinforced with the metaphysical equivalent of steel, a thousand times over. Nothing could get across now.

Besides, he was facing a problem far closer to home. If there was one thing that the Weirdmageddon had taught him... it was that family was more important than the supernatural.

---

**Gravity Falls, January, 1982**

Hours after the lights shut off, the rift contracted wildly. Pulsed. It frayed at the edges, shrinking slightly, and -

They were called. They came.

- snapped shut, sparks of remnant energy crackling out of existence.

Confusion.

"Well, well, *well*. Look who's made it, just in time! Cutting it a bit close there, I admit - I was getting worried you wouldn't be joining the fun!"

Confusion.

"Oh, I know that *look*. An eternity spent as an inconceivable horror existing outside of the laws of the natural universe - sentence must come pretty new to you, huh? How does it feel, existing in less than six-hundred eighteen dimensions? Tingly? Let me tell ya, it's a real pain - can't even stretch my fifty-seven eye-wings in the seventh dimension without driving a few dozen humans into crippling insanity! Hey, how you feeling, Six-Sights?"

Confusion.

"Eh, I can see I'm not getting anywhere. Old dogs and new tricks, and all that. Consciousness is overrated, anyways. Good thing all I need from you... are OLD TRICKS."

Confusion.

"Well, I got bad news for you. That sigil of yours can't tether you to this plane for long. We're gonna need something a lot stronger if we want you to kickstart the fun. Something like a human soul! Good news..."
"...I know a sucker who's just desperate enough to give you a hand."

Chapter End Notes

FUN FUN FUN FUN
Gravity Falls, February, 1982

Stan groped frantically, eyes useless in the pitch black of the darkness. There was some kind of cool, tangible quality to it, and he thought suddenly of lightless ocean depths.

But this did not feel like an absence of light. This darkness had a liquid existence of its own.

Eventually, he tired. For a moment, gasping for breath that somehow existed, Stan simply hung there in the darkness, the chill of inexplicable fear deep in the pit of his belly. There, he registered an odd, indescribable sensation, like a shortness of breath, like a force of pressure on his back.

Someone was watching him.

He hadn't survived this long by being a complete knucklehead. Mustering up his courage, he shouted into the void, voice hoarse but strong.

"Who's out there?"

There was no reply.

Stan ignored the tingling sensation at the back of his shoulder, ignored how quickly it accelerated from a minor discomfort to burning pain, and repeated himself, teeth gritted. "I said, who's out there?"

And then, he saw it. Or rather, he saw Them.

STANLEY PINES.

He didn't as much hear the words as he felt them. The air was gone from his lungs when he gasped for air - and, it seemed to him, from everywhere else as well.

"What - " Stan cut off suddenly. He raised his head and looked into six impassive eyes. Green. A pale, poisonous green. "What the hell are - "

A sudden burst of pain - dull and distinctly located in the region of his left hand.

Stan opened his eyes to the worn wooden logs that made up the ceiling of his brother's home. He blinked once in momentary confusion, and then glanced over to confirm his suspicions.

He had banged his hand on the coffee table. It wasn't particularly painful and evidently temporary, but it had been enough to jolt him awake. That, at least, he was thankful for.

What the hell was that?

Stan pushed himself up from the couch and attempted to rub the sleep from his sore eyes, to no avail. He might have rested physically, but mentally… that was another matter entirely.

This was real. This was real - the threadbare couch, the plain wooden walls, the high ceiling.
Not the voice. Not the eyes.

Bad dreams, huh? Stan had had his share of those. But none like this. There were always some kind of outlandish event in nightmares, no matter how bad, that he could grab onto to convince himself of the surreality of the events.

But though this nightmare was both strange and bewildering, Stan could not quite convince himself that it was just a dream. It felt real, both inside and out. It made him feel real fear, at the very least. Hell, it made him paranoid.

Stan remembered how Ford looked back then - how his brother had looked back then, eyes wild and pupils dilated, picking at the skin around his nails, shivering and generally looking an inch from a mental asylum. He had been scared, fearful of everything around him.

Was this how Ford ended up… like that? A few bad dreams, that feeling of deep helplessness - and his brother had went off the deep end - had pointed a crossbow at his own twin, and demanded to know if Stan was going to steal his eyes.

Then, with a burst of sudden anger, he thought - well, Stan Pines is made of tougher stuff than that.

Whatever had frightened his brother out of his wits, that thing with the eyes and the green, was in for a surprise if it expected an easy target in him. If it thought it could scare Stan away from Gravity Falls, away from saving his own brother - then it had a whole other thing coming.

(No, They had a whole other thing coming, Stan corrected himself automatically. Then he blinked. How did he know that?)

The foul taste of his own morning breath made it hard to stay thinking.

Stan got to his feet with a grunt, and began his long trek to the bathroom. The sudden movement made him suddenly aware of the various pains all over his body - the ache in his lower back from the hard couch, the throbbing pain slowly disappearing from his left hand, a resurgence in the burning sensation in his burn wound.

A proper bed would do him good, he supposed. Anything better than Ford's threadbare couch and a thin blanket.

But the thought of taking over Ford's bedroom in any way made him uncomfortable. It had been a decade since he had last slept in the same room as his brother, but it felt even longer.

A lifetime, maybe.

Stan hated being in his brother's room, and had ventured in only when circumstances forced him to. He couldn't quite explain it. There were reasons, of course: there were too many of Ford's nerdy books in there, his brother would throw a fit if Stan invaded his private space without permission, it reminded Stan too much of him. But none of them was right, not exactly.

It just felt like a betrayal of sorts. As if, by taking over another part of his brother's life, Stan was admitting a kind of defeat. That he was admitting that he would not be able to save his brother in a matter of days, or weeks, or months. It would take years. Maybe a lifetime, seeing how incomprehensible his brother's notes had been.

But… that was fine. At least Stan was in a better place than he was a month ago. Here he was - with a job, a goal, and if he managed to get the damn portal working again, his family - for the first and only time in his adult life. No matter how unconventional or inconsistent.
The door opened with a creak, and Stan splashed a few handfuls of cool water on his tired face, hoping it would soothe or hide at least some of the signs of his very long night. He brushed his teeth until his gums bled. A half-assed shave job later, he looked at least somewhat presentable. The liveliest he could look, under the circumstances.

At least he had running water. That wasn't something he could always say.

An uncomfortable twinge from the burn on his back reminded Stan of the last step in his new morning routine. Wincing and squinting at the mirror, he unpacked the gauze from his injury.

When did burns heal blue?

Stan certainly hadn't gone to any special measures to treat his wound. In fact, he had dealt with it much like how he usually did with personal injuries in the past - that is, clean it the best he could, stick a bandage on it or stitch it up, then ignore it. In retrospect, that might… not have been the best idea.

Stan made a noise of disgust. Why the hell was he wastin' his time on this stuff? He had survived, hadn't he?

He took one last look at his burn. What was the point of packing on more gauze anyways? The stuff cost money, and it wasn't as if it helped. Burn was gonna sting every few hours, no matter how many layers he stuck on.

He grinned at the mirror, exposing as many pearly whites as he could. A salesman's smile - or a conman's. Not that there was much difference, when it came to Stanley Pines.

Stan frowned suddenly. Nah. There was something… different needed. Something more. Sure, he had switched out the ol' question mark costume for a more distinguished looking black suit. Added a bowtie, an 8-ball cane, but -

He heard a sharp knock on the door. Stan froze for just a second. Maybe if he just ignored it, it would go away?

Whoever it was knocked again, just as frantic and clear as the first. "Stanford!" He heard distantly. It was a man's voice, not especially deep, and with just a hint of a Southern twang. "Stanford Pines!"

Oh, hell. It would be a few hours until the newly renamed Mystery Shack opened to the public, and Stan hadn't exactly done any advertising - the odds that this was some early bird visitor was astronomically low. And whoever this stranger was, he knew his name - his brother's name, at the very least. This wasn't someone he had met in town.

This was someone who knew his brother, and by the sound of it, it was more than a passing acquaintance. Meaning, this was someone who was going to know that Stan was not who he was pretending to be.

He might be screwed, but never let it be said that Stanley Pines didn't go down fighting. Stan cleared his throat, and tried to think hard about how his brother had acted in the hour or so he had talked to him.

Hole ripped in the fabric between dimensions. Advanced mathematical calculations to estimate the probability of impact. Stan repeated the words to himself under his breath, trying to get the voice just right.

"I'll be over in just a minute!" He shouted clearly, trying to keep the worry and fear out of his voice.
Stan fumbled on a pair of his brother's glasses and shrugged off the black 'Mr. Mystery' suit, pulling on one of Ford's dirty old coats over his white dress shirt. With a handful of water, he rearranged his own hair in as good of an imitation of his brother's as he could. He threw an old towel or two over some of his newer 'attractions', and let out a deep breath.

He cracked open the door, and slumped slightly in relief.

Guess he won't be needing the bat.

He didn't know the stranger, of course, but - the guy just didn't look like a threat. With his rail-thin frame, he looked like he could blow away with a heavy gust of wind. His nose was... unfortunate, and coming from a Pines, that was sayin' something. His wire frame glasses and familiar, nervous expression, however, single-handedly answered Stan's leading question about the man.

There was no doubt - this was a world class, rank A nerd of the highest degree. Maybe even one on par with the real Stanford Pines himself.

The two men exchanged a mutual look of silence.

"Stanford," the other man said finally, voice quiet. "It's - been quite a while."

The past ten years had taught Stan the art of reading a situation. So, friends - good ones, which was... kind of surprising, given how well Stan knew his brother. Might be that the surprise might just his own brand of jealous hurt.

Or - hell. Stan squinted. He had seen that particular look before, that specific brand of awkward discomfort - and wasn't this awkward. By the looks of it, these two nerds had been a bit more than friends. Who woulda thought that Ford of all people...

But there had been a fallout at some point, somehow. Stan sure wished he knew why. Except, this wasn't exactly a conversation he wanted to have out here on the doorstep.

"Yes," he said, glancing briefly to the side like his brother always did when he was nervous. "Yes, it - it has." Damn, Stan still had no idea what the guy's name was. "Would you like to - come in? We should talk inside - " Crap, crap, think of a reason... Ford had been pretty damn paranoid then, wasn't he? "Someone could be listening in."

"Someone listening in?" The other man blinked incredulously.

"Uh -"

"Stanford, we both know that your home is quite the opposite of a bastion of privacy," he snapped, with a surprising amount of anger. Stan blinked, taken aback. But it seemed that he wasn't the only one - Stanford's friend seemed briefly shocked at his own outburst, before he regrouped. "I - I know ya trust him over me, Stanford. But for once, trust me on this when I say that - that thing is not what he seems!"

Stan's expression tightened. The conversation had turned an abrupt turn into unknown territory, and he had no idea whatsoever how to proceed. 'Him'? Bastion of privacy? There was a long, familiar-sounding story here, he had no doubt. Stan had been dropped right in the middle of a lover's spat taken to the nth degree.

Just typical Ford.

Well, Stan had survived the past decade with the mantra of, 'fake it 'til you make it.' It seemed that
this situation was no different.

"I'm not," Stan said hesitantly. "In contact with him, I mean." It - wasn't exactly a lie - Stanford certainly didn't look like he had talked to anyone in a long while.

The stranger looked surprised, then strangely hopeful. There was relief in his voice when he spoke. "Then, the portal - ?"

Stan's face froze. The portal? This guy knew about the portal? The one that Stanford had been so adamant about keeping a secret, the one that -

One that could not have been the work of a single man, no matter how much of a genius he was. And the equipment he had found downstairs had belonged to more than just one guy. The five-fingered gloves - Stan took a harder look at the man in front of him. Definitely a nerd.

Someone Ford would get along with. Maybe, someone Ford could work with as well.

Stan's mouth felt desert dry. Standing in front of him was the key to getting his brother back - someone who had worked on the same project, who knew how to fix it. All he had to do now was convince him to help.

"Stanford, now that you believe what I told you about him... surely you would agree to shut down that portal?" The man asked again.

Stan let out a sigh. There was a whole story here that he knew nothing about, and he would be lying his ass off if he claimed that he wasn't curious about it. "Let's - talk about it inside."

The other man looked doubtful. "Please," Stan said through gritted teeth. The last word had been hard to say - in fact, his burn flared in pain just thinking about it. But it seemed that it was the last thing the other man needed, because he nodded jerkily and walked through the open door.

Stan shut the door, and quickly stepped in front of it. He raised a hand, and swallowed. "Sorry 'bout this, but I can't shut down the portal - "

The stranger's face turned bloodless pale, but his expression had become resolved. "...If there's no other option," he started with a sense of finality.

" - because I'm not Stanford Pines."

" - then, I'm sorry, Stanford - " The other man blinked, one of his hands reaching under his coat. "You - What?"

"I told ya," Stan said again, his own accent slipping seamlessly back into his voice, "I'm not Ford." As explanation, he raised a single five-fingered hand. If this guy was as close with Ford as Stan thought he was, this was much of a confession.

But the man blanched. "Bill," he whispered, eyes huge and white behind his glasses. He pulled out his hand from under his coat, and he was holding something in it - the wrong shape and size to be a gun, but Stan wasn't about to bet his life on it. "Bill. You promised - I stayed, I finished the portal, you said you wouldn't hurt him - "

Stan tackled him in a moment of adrenaline-fueled stupidity. It was never a good idea to jump a man with a weapon, but in his defense, this stranger was definitely not very experienced with using it. He wrestled the gun - thing out of the other man's hand and sent it clattering across the floor. The man gave a yelp, but Stan didn't budge.
Instead, he pressed him against the wall even as the man struggled frantically. "I don't know who this Bill guy is," Stan said through gritted teeth, "but I ain't him. I'm Stan - Stanley Pines. Stanford's brother, his -"

At that, his captive went limp in his grasp. "You're his twin," he said dully. He was staring at Stan now, mouth open slightly. "The one who was - thrown out from home at the age of sixteen."

"He, uh." Stan swallowed and let go of him. It didn't seem like the man was going to try anything at this point. "He told ya about that?"

"He did. Very unwillingly, I might add. But I wore him down," the stranger said, straightening up and brushing off his jacket. He was taller than Stan had initially estimated, several inches hidden by his terrible posture. "But that's not the topic at hand. Why exactly are you impersonating Stanford in his own home? With that said," his voice gained an edge, and he almost sounded dangerous. "Where exactly is your brother?"

"Those two things kinda… go together," Stan said quickly. "Ford called me over, couple 'f week ago. He showed me this machine in his basement - some kind of portal between dimensions, or somethin' like that. It… activated, on accident. Ford got sucked in. I've… been pretendin' to be him every since"

The other man was quiet after the explanation, his face like stone.

It was an uncomfortable silence. "Um," Stan said slowly, "who are you exa -"

"I knew it would kill him," the stranger said finally, cutting through Stan's aborted query like a hot knife through butter. His voice was unreadable. "I told him that he was meddling with forces bigger than he knew. But he wouldn't listen. And now… he's dead."

"My brother is not dead," Stan growled. "He's - not. That's why I'm here doin' my best impersonation of him, alright? I just have to fix the damn thing and - and I'll bring him back. He gave me one of his journals before he got sent through. I've been tryin' to figure out how to fix it - he's got blueprints or somethin' written down in here, but it's incomplete and I can't read half the stuff in here anyways."

"It's not that easy. Stanford wrote everything down in code. Besides, just the construction of the portal requires advanced knowledge in theoretical physics, doctorate level mechanical and electrical engineering -"

"Which you've got, right?" Stan asked. "You helped him build this thing, didn't you?"

"I - " It seemed to take the man some effort to power through. "You helped him build this thing, didn't you?"

"Then you can help me fix the portal an' bring my brother back."

"F-fix the portal…" he swallowed. "It's not that simple, Stanley. There's something on the other side of that portal, and if it comes through… It could mean the end of - well, everything. This is far more than a matter of life and death, this is a matter of the world. Stanford is dead, Stanley. I saw the other side. He could not have survived it."

Stan shook his head. "Just - stop, would ya? Stop sayin' that. My brother's alive, alright? I would know if he wasn't." At least, he thought he would. He couldn't really describe it, and it certainly couldn't hold up to any kind of logic, but there was a part of Stanley that knew beyond a doubt that his twin was still living.
Or maybe it was just hope in clever disguise.

Thankfully, the other man didn't even attempt a debate. "Fine. Even assuming that he is alive, you might very well be damming this world for the sake of a single living person. You will be unleashing forces beyond your control. Do you think Stanford would appreciate you doing this?"

He… wouldn't. That, Stan had no doubt. Stanford had always been the one with the big picture in mind. As always, hindsight was 20/20 - he should have known that his brother would have never settled for their childhood dream of sailing and treasure hunting. If what this guy was saying was the truth, then Ford would ream him out for endangering the world for the sake of a single man. But the thing was -

"I'm not expectin' him to," Stan admitted after a long hesitation. Sure, that was the dream - that his brother would return from the portal with… some kind of thanks, some bit of gratitude. He was too jaded now to think about the Stan o' War as an actual possibility - but maybe, Ford would let him stick around for just a little while. They could make up. Be something like brothers again.

But Stan was also a realist - least, he tried to be. Ford had been crazier than a sack full o' cats when he had - had pushed his brother into the portal - and he doubted that had improved the man's mental state at all.

"Look, uh - " He gave up. "What is your name anyways?"

The man scooted his glasses up his nose a bit. "Fiddleford. Fiddleford Hadron McGucket, really, I'm an old college friend of Stanford's."

"Fiddleford Hadron McGu - " Stan shook his head. There were some names too strange not to be real. And… old college friend? Was that what they were calling it these days? "I'm not gonna ask. But, uh, Fidds." The man blinked. "I know you and my brother were - pals. So ya know how he is. I'm not doin' this for him to thank me, y'know? I mean, not that I wouldn't appreciate that, but - that's not the kinda person Stanford is. I'm doin' this so I can have my brother back, 'cause I don't know what I'll do knowin' he's gone forever."

Fiddleford flinched at that, and Stan knew he had found his opening.

"I - I'm sorry, Stanley, but - Stanford's - "

"But you - You get that too, right?" He pressed on. "I'm - I gotta admit, I haven't seen my brother in ten years. If ya knew him since college, then… You've known him for a long while. Hell, you might know him better than I do." And didn't that hurt to admit. "I used t'say that my brother was the dumbest genius in the world. Guess that's still true now. But, sure he's - too darn oblivious sometimes, he has some screwed up priorities, but - "

Stan shrugged helplessly, and went for all or nothing. "That's Sixer for ya. But I - we still can't help but love him, yeah?"

Fiddleford was quiet. For one shining moment, Stan thought that maybe, he had gotten through to him -

"I - have to go, Stanley," Fiddleford said abruptly, an unreadable look in his eye.

Stan bit down an expletive. Shit, shit, shit, this couldn't end like this. "I - Look, I'm - not the kinda person who begs, but - " He let out a sigh. "I can't bring Ford back on my own. You're the only one who can fix that damn machine. Look, once we get 'im out, we can smash the thing into rubble, alright? Between the two of us workin' together, we can probably get him to get his head out of his
ass. We just need t'bring him back before -"

"I'll think about it," the other man interrupted, with an air of concrete finality.

Stan's heart sank. Seems like this all he was going to get from the man. Short of forcing him to work on the portal unwillingly, a recipe for disaster considering how little Stan knew about the machine, this was a dead end.

"…Alright. Fine," he said, even though if there was one thing the past ten years had taught him, it was that 'maybe' meant 'no.' "Just. Really think about it, alright? P-please."

Fiddleford's not-gun was lying by his feet, and Stan picked it up in one fluid motion. Fiddleford's eyes went wide, but Stan could tell with a glance that this was no real gun. No place for bullets, just - some kind of glass, like a light bulb. Completely useless. But hell, if this made the man feel safe, all the power to him.

"Here," Stan said gruffly, handing the device to the other man, handle first. Sign of trust, right?

Fiddleford accepted it gingerly. He held it with a finger on the trigger and gave Stan a considering look. Even knowing that the thing couldn't do any real damage, Stan was momentarily, inexplicably afraid that he was going to shoot it.

"Stanley," Fiddleford said suddenly, "you don't need to get involved. The wise thing to do is to - forget about all this and go back to your old life. You can do that if you wanted."

There was no debate at all. Stan shook his head. "I can't. I really can't. Not when it's Ford."

The moment passed. Fiddleford nodded stiffly, and without further adieu, practically jolted out the door.

Stan watched him leave, and dragged a hand through his hair in frustration. Damn. Five bucks said that he was never gonna see that fella again.

Not that he blamed him. If it was some other unlucky sap who had gotten himself swept up in this mess, Stan would have already been a few states away. Really, interdimensional portals? Those tiny men Stan had found hiding in the closet the other day? And judging by the parts of Sixer's journal that hadn't been about the portal, the weirdness of the town wasn't exclusive to just that.

But it was his twin at stake here, and Stan wasn't about to give him up to the mysteries of this town. Creepy green eyes or not.

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*Gravity Falls, August, 2012*

"Mr. Pines?"

Stanford looked up and to the side. The car window rolled down to reveal a wide buck-toothed grin and a somewhat familiar, gopher-like face. He squinted - no, he did know this man, even if his name was, ah, escaping him at the moment. Soup? No, that couldn't be right, this dimension's naming conventions were different than dimension 17's.

A brief look around him made him realize one important fact - he had absolutely no idea where he was. Stanford had realized earlier this morning that the only things remotely edible left in the Shack had been a day-old glass of milk and a stale half loaf of bed, and made the decision to venture into town to restock the larders, so to speak. Unfortunately, Stanley had taken the car on his conceived
venture, and Ford had been forced to walk. Just as well - it had been three decades since he had driven an Earth automobile. Nebulian warpcrafts on the other hand... But he must had made a wrong turn somewhere, distracted as he was by the contents of Stanley's journal.

Eye contact made the man's eyes widen in realization and his grin diminish, just a little. "Oh, you're the other Mr. Pines! What are you doin' all the way out here?"

"I was on my way into town," Ford admitted. "...You're the handyman who works for my brother, correct? I'm sorry, I don't know your name - "

The man chuckled. "It's Soos, Other Mr. Pines! An' that's me - I got a lotta experience unclogging toilets too, but -" He blinked. "Wa-ait, Other Mr. Pines... town's in th' other direction!" He pointed this thumb backwards, to where Ford had come.

"Ah." ...Had it really been that long since Stanford had left the Shack? Yes, he had been in town during the Weirdmageddon, but that hadn't been the best time to observe the scenery.

"It's just a few minutes away, really. Hey!" Soos blinked. "I can drive ya there!"

"...Are you sure?"

Soos nodded vigorously. "Sure thing, other Mr. Pines!"

Well, if he insisted. And if Stanley had trusted him with Dipper and Mabel, then there was no doubt about the man's intentions. "It's Stanford, actually," he said lightly as he eased himself into the front passenger seat. "Or Ford, whichever you would prefer."

"Gotcha, other Mr. Pines!" With that Soos made a - rather wild U-turn, sending gravel flying in all directions. Ford grabbed onto the assist handle on the side of the car in an attempt to limit the g-forces suddenly inflicted on his person, wondering briefly if everyone in this time drove as dangerously as his brother.

They sped over the rocky road, Soos seemingly unbothered by the amount of bumps and skids. Ford, on the other hand, was just a bit - queasy. In an attempt to distract himself from the imminent danger to his life, he reached for the book tucked in his coat pocket - and froze.

He glanced over at Soos with new eyes. The man was - rather close to Stanley, wasn't he? He certainly held a lot of respect for the older man. "...Soos, was it? This - might be a rather odd question, but... have you seen my brother around recently?"

Soos furrowed his forehead in thought. "Last time I saw Mr. Pines, he was at the small dudes' farewell party."

Another dead-end, then. Ford slumped back. "I see. Never mind, then."

"Why d'ya ask, other Mr. Pines?"

"It's Stanford. And - well, it's nothing really. I'm just trying to track down my brother."

Soos let out an audible gasp, his fingers suddenly tightening on the steering wheel. "T-track down - w-what happened t' Mr. Pines?"

"Nothing!" Ford said quickly, because the vehicle was making several uncomfortable swerves. "He's perfectly fine, I'm sure. He just left town last night, though he did leave a note. I'm simply hoping to speak to him about some, ah, recent developments, and thought I'd ask around about his possible
whereabouts. That is all."

The other man relaxed - and so did Stanford, now that he wasn't in any danger of crashing into a tree. "Huh, that's pretty weird 'f Mr. Pines t' do that. But he's been actin' pretty weird since he and the little dudes beat that triangle dude."

"Weird?"

"Well, everyone kept askin' Mr. Pines when the Mystery Shack was gonna reopen, 'cause the end of the world was over an' all. But he kept changin' the subject." Soos frowned. "Boy, I hope nothin's gonna happen to th' Shack."

"Oh." Ford... had some ideas about Stanley's weird behavior, but this was certainly not the right circumstances to bring them up. "Did he, ah, mention anything else? Any future plans, perhaps?"

"Nah, nothin' like that."

There was a long and rather awkward silence, but the buildings of Gravity Falls slowly came into view over the horizon. The silence continued as Soos pulled up in front of the Greasy Diner, but when Ford nodded his head in thanks and moved to exit the car, Soos spoke up.

"Hey, other Mr. Pines..." He fidgeted a little. "Do - D'ya mind if I come an' help? If Mr. Pines' gone missin'..."

Ford eyed him warily. Yes, he was at a dead end when it came to his investigation into Stanley's whereabouts - not even the man's journal had shown any signs of helping. Nor did he actually know any citizens of Gravity Falls, especially not which ones would have any idea where his brother might have went. But on the other hand, he had no particular desire to drag anyone else into this.

"Well - " He tried, and faltered. There was something about the intensity of the man's pleading look that made it impossible to say no. And - well, surely it wouldn't do any harm?

"Man, I bet Lazy Susan knows somethin'! Or -"

"No, I don't mind," Ford said quickly, hoping he hadn't made the wrong decision. He dragged a hand through his hair. 'Lazy Susan'? It seemed that the weirdness of the town had spread to more than just its supernatural denizens.

Soos' eyes went wide. "I - I won't let you down, other Mr. Pines!"

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*Gravity Falls, February, 1982*

There it was again. That feeling of being watched, by a gaze that was a bit too intense to be normal. Stan exhaled.

"Look," he said, ignoring the innate instincts that were screaming at him to stop, to cower, to not engage, "if ya got somethin' to say, say it. I know I'm lookin' forward to my first decent night of sleep in a damn week."

There was a jolt of something like surprise -

- and then Stan was opening his eyes, feeling like he had slept more than the - he glanced at the ticking clock - four hours he had squeezed in the last night. Turns out, it was some hard work managing the Mystery Shack. Whole lot more visitors than he had been getting at the Murder Hut,
though in retrospect, that was probably not the best name he could have chosen for the place. He might need to get an employee. Or two.

Was he getting used to this?

There was a knock on the door - again, he realized, because the first round of knocking had been what woke him up.

"Coming!" He yelled gruffly, groaning as he eased himself off the couch. The banging on the door stopped immediately, and Stan decided that he wasn't about to go to the effort to dig out some presentable clothing. If whoever it was could knock on his door at 6 AM on a Sunday, then they can handle the sight of Stan in his undershirt and boxers.

Stan cracked open the door. "Alright, I've had enough with - "

He froze.

"Stanley!" Fiddleford greeted, setting down what looked like a heavy toolbox and pulling out a stack of paper covered with what looked like scribbles to Stan's terrible eyesight. "I spent last night coming up with some theories as to what could have led to the portal's malfunction. The first and the most likely to me, the device could not handle the permanent transportation of a larger life form and - "

"Ya came back," Stan said weakly.

"Well - yes," the other man said, a bit hesitantly. "I... well, I thought about what you said. And I suppose - " He broke off again. "I'll help you bring Stanford back- or what's left of him. But that portal - regardless of what Stanford may say, it must be destroyed. And because - well, there's really no tellin' what condition the portal really is in at this point, and for all I know without personal investigation, it could very well be still runnin' and - "

"Hey," Stan said with an easy grin, "you don't hafta justify yourself t'me, alright? I'm the sap who convinced you into this, 'member?"

"Right," Fiddleford said weakly. "Right." He let out a big breath. "...Long and short of it, I figured it's not too late. There's still the chance that - he could be saved. That he could be - convinced."

There was an edge of - something there, but Stan had never been one to look a gift horse in the mouth. The man was willing to help, and that was good enough for him. He was a simple man, really - as long as he got his brother back, he didn't particularly care what happened afterwards.

In retrospect, maybe he should have.

Chapter End Notes

...Wow, it's been, uh, a long time. Two months, almost. I'm not sure what excuses I can give. At least I got all those pesky college applications done? The rest of the year, it's all fanfic binging. Kinda good news is, this chapter is even longer than the last one. Could have been even longer, but I figured it was a bad idea to give my procrastination another opening to strike. So here it is - introduction of a few new plot elements.
It's a bit hard for me to balance events in the past and future, but hopefully, all goes well. I don't exactly have a good track record with plot-driven fics, but I do have this all planned out to some degree, so. Hopefully I can get this fic done before the finale REALLY josses everything *sobs*

Confession: I'm pretty darn bad with timelines, so assume any inconsistencies come from this being an AU. Assumptions to make here: Fidds was mentally stable enough at the time of Stanley's arrival to pass off alright, Ford didn't know the full details of the Society of the Blind Eye, and Fidds is not far gone enough to throw away a chance to reconcile with his (boy) friend.
As it turned out, 'Lazy Susan' was an older woman with a vaguely familiar face and a single lazy eye, which Stanford supposed explained the name. She greeted the two of them with a wide, genuine smile.

"Why, if it ain't Soos an' Mr. Mystery!" She set down a pot of lukewarm coffee, a shimmering veneer of grease covering its surface. "What can I get for our town heroes?" The woman gave Stanford a wink - or rather, because of her eye, a very meaningful blink.

"Actually," He interrupted with a strained smile, barely resisting the urge to correct her misunderstanding. The situation wasn't exactly one he wanted to get into now. "The two of us aren't here for breakfast. We're here for infor -"

"Mr. Pines and I will get what we usually get," Soos cut in, ignoring Ford's frantic hand motions. He beamed. "Ooh, and make the pancakes so they look like flyin' saucers!"

"No thank you," Stanford said, just as quickly. "I'm not here to eat, and really, we have some pressing -"

His stomach growled, and two pair of eyes turned to stare. He flushed crimson. Right, the last meal he had was the farewell breakfast with Dipper and Mabel. He hadn't eaten for almost - a day? Over the years, he had become used to the feeling of an empty stomach, but on the other side of the portal, he hadn't had to worry about other people taking an unnecessary interest in his diet – or lack of one.

The waitress gave him a knowing look. "Oh, hun. I'll get those orders in first thing. But sorry t' say, we're all outta eggs - our whole stock grew wings and flew off durin' that weirdness last week! But tell ya what," she added, leaning in with a conspiratory whisper. "I'll getcha a double order of everythin' else."

Stanford leaned back slightly, away from her smiling face. "...Really, I must refuse -"

"All on the house, 'f course!" She added quickly. "Compliments of the chef." A single hand waved at them from over the grill.

That... was not Stanford's concern, and he opened his mouth to say just as much. But – almost involuntarily, his eyes darted to a passing platter of food carried by a rather harried looking older woman. It looked – quite good, actually, and... he hadn't had French toast for decades.

Not to mention, his investigative partner had begun to shoot him pleading glances from across the table, puppy-dog looks that should look ridiculous on a grown man. Problem was, it was working.

He gave in. "Ah, yes, that would be – perfect, actually."

It felt a bit dishonest to get a free meal under his brother's name, but Stanford hadn't had the chance to stop by the town bank to withdraw some cash currency. And really... this was his name, and Stanley had certainly taken more from him than a filling breakfast.

The woman scribbled down something on her notepad and rushed off into the busy kitchen. "Well, Soos," Stanford said with a breath of relief, glancing down at his watch, "as long as we keep a low
"Mr. Pines?" A slightly nasal voice came from behind him, and he whipped around to see a rather small man, an ill-fitting press fedora teetering on his head. "It is you! Why, people haven't seen you for days -"

Stanford scooted back a little on his seat in an automatic attempt to get some distance away from the man. "Who are you, exactly?"

"It's me, Toby Determined, editor of the Gravity Falls Gossiper!" At least, the man didn't seem offended about being 'forgotten'. From the look of things, he actually seemed used to Ford's dismissal. "I'm working on a feature, actually, and I was hopin' I could ask you a few questions -"

"I'm afraid you've got the wrong man -"

"Well, you're Stanford Pines, aren't you?" Determined exclaimed, a little bit too loudly, and the diner went quiet.

"I am," Ford admitted quietly, but it came out uncomfortably loud in the sudden silence. "But -"

That seemed to have been the wrong thing to admit. Determined drew even closer, a glint in his half-lidded eyes. "Well, heck, I already got a few feature titles thought up for ya! How's this, 'Local Hero Leads Rebellion Against Triangular Overlord' -"

'Leads rebellion'? He blinked, and a second later, before Stanford could mentally connect those particular dots, Determined was shoved aside by a wild-eyed man who drew a bit too close to be comfortable. Yeesh, what was with the lack of personal space in this town?

"Stan Pines, I just wanna thank ya for lookin' after my daughter during that whole mess -" The man started, but Stanford had already heard enough. He turned away from him immediately, teeth gritted, only to be met by another hopeful face, and another, and another -

"Mr. Mystery -"

"What are your thoughts on -"

" - idea when the Mystery Shack -"

" - our hero, Mr. Pines, and I do hope -"

"Soos," Stanford tried, unnerved by the gathering crowd of people in front of their small booth, "a little – help -"

The handyman nodded resolutely. "I got you, other Mr. Pines! Hey everybody!" He shouted loudly, momentarily diverting all attention to him. "...Uh, who wants t' see me lick my elbow?" Soos made a valiant attempt, and missed.

A dozen pair of eyes fixated back on Stanford, who swallowed almost audibly. He could make a hasty retreat, he supposed, but it would involve missing out on a quality breakfast and leaving the diner as empty-handed as he had entered. Perhaps, he could return later, when less of Stanley's – fan's were present -

"Shame on all of ya, botherin' a man before he's even had breakfast!" Came a familiar high, nasal voice that, under the circumstances, sounded like the sound of an angel. Lazy Susan cleared a path through the crowd, physically swatting at the people around her with a rather grimy looking broom.
"Get, get!"

Slowly, the mob dissipated. Some were shoo'ed back to their own tables, where they neglected their cooling meals to stare and whisper at the increasingly uncomfortable Stanford. Others, like Toby Determined, were ushered out of the diner with sour looks on their faces.

Satisfied, Lazy Susan gave the two a wink and disappeared momentarily into the kitchen. She returned with two large plates, almost completely obscured by the incredible amount of food they held. Sausages glistened in the daylight, hashbrowns sizzled on the plate, and Stanford was suddenly struck by how distinct his home dimension's cuisine was from – every other, really. and there was something reassuring about knowing that this meal would not try to eat him back.

The moment his plate was set in front of him, he dove in, savoring tastes that he had thought he would never taste again, trying half-heartedly not to eat like – some ravenous beast, but not particularly concerned nonetheless. It had just been - too long since he had had a decent meal, one that he didn't have to check for substances poisonous to carbon-based lifeforms, or scarf down while keeping an eye out for the very real monsters in the dark. Or pick out bits of Stan's body hair from.

After what felt like minutes, his plate was empty, scraped clean of – practically everything. Stanford put down his fork carefully, and looked up into the identical stunned stares of Soos and Lazy Susan. He swallowed, suddenly feeling very self-conscious. His – perception of time hadn't been skewed, it seemed.

"It was – very good," Ford said uncertainly.

For a moment, Lazy Susan gave him an appraising look. "Well!" She said finally, shaking her head ruefully. "I'll get another one comin' up."

Once she was gone, Soos exclaimed in what sounded like genuine shock. "Woah. Other Mr. Pines, that was amazing!"

"Well," he said, a bit weakly, "I suppose it has been a while since... You have to understand, this is not normal behavior for me. I don't usually eat this fast – or this -"

Soos held up a hand. "Other Mr. Pines, I have been to many a Ramirez family reunions in my life. I've seen worse." A shadow fell over his face and his expression turned grim. "...Things that cannot be unseen." Then cheerfully, face normal again, "You do you, dood."

"I – Thank you, Soos." Vaguely confused – was this how people talked in this day and age? - but reassured by the other man's message of acceptance, Stanford gave Soos a weak smile.

Lazy Susan returned ten minutes later with a second hefty plate. "You're not Stan Pines, are ya?" She said conversationally as she set it down.

Stanford dropped his fork, all appetite suddenly gone. With the most dignity he could muster, he said steadily, "I don't know what you're -"

"Hun, I've known that man for thirty years, and I've never seen him pass up a free pot of coffee before. But I have to say, that's a downright uncanny resemblance ya got there." The woman squinted at him. "Still felt like I've seen you somewhere before. What's your name, hun?"

"My name is Stanford Pines," he said defeatedly, "and no, you are correct. I'm not the man you know by that name. The circumstances behind that is – admittedly a bit strange, perhaps unbelievable, but I assure you -"
"He's Mr. Pines' long-lost twin brother!" Soos interrupted easily. "He got stuck in another dimension for like, thirty years, but Mr. Pines finally got 'im back a couple weeks ago."

There was a moment of stunned silence as Ford mentally reconsidered his life decisions that had lead him up to this moment. "Oh!" Lazy Susan said brightly. "Well, why didn't ya just say that in the first place? And here, I was wonderin' if them aliens already started replacin' people in this town."

He blinked, stunned by her easy acceptance of the frankly ridiculous sounding truth. "Yes, I'm – I'm Stan's twin. Ma'am, you said you've known my brother for – thirty years?"

"Sure I did! Heck, I was part 'f the very first group of visitors to the Mystery Shack! Think it was called somethin' different back then – huh, that must've been right after he stopped doin' his weird experiments out there in those woods."

Ford coughed. "Is there – anything that stood out to you, about his behavior then?" He tried, not particularly sure what kind of questions he could ask. "Or -" He paused. "There was a – car crash around that time, was there not? I know it was in the papers, at the very least - "

"Oh, that." Lazy Susan shook her head. "Unfortunate business, all around. Burned down a whole patch of forest off the side of the road heading out south. Sure, it's been a good thirty years since. But our town is a small town, see? We don't get none 'f that kind of business. Cut brakes!" She shivered a little. "Like somethin' outta a movie, that."

Cut brakes... "Did my brother act – oddly, after that? Anxiously, perhaps?" Ford swallowed. "Guilty?"

She gave him a blank look. "Well, I suppose. But once that news came up in the papers, everyone was actin' a bit off for a few days or so. Only other thing... he stopped comin' in with that nervous-lookin' friend of his. The one with the big nose."

"...Nervous-looking friend?"

Lazy Susan squinted. "Can't remember the name. Entire memory's a blank. Strange!" She paused. "Say, what's with all these questions? Is Stan in any kind of trouble?" She suddenly looked very suspicious. "If that's so, then forget 'bout everything I just said. Stan Pines is a morally upright resident of this - " She paused. "He's a resident of this town, anyways."

"No, Stan's not in any trouble or danger," Ford said quickly. "He just – drove off on his own, and I was looking for clues as to where he might have gone." And, just as importantly... why he had gone.

"Well, I don't see how any of that could have helped, but I wish you the best of luck. Though... " She thought for a bit. "When ya do, let him know that the whole town's interested t' know when the Shack is openin' up again. The mayor wants to make it a town landmark!"

"Yes, yes. Of course," he said, a bit distractedly. Then, Ford hesitated. "That car accident thirty years ago... where did you say that was, again? Something about the road heading out south?"

"That's right. Right off the left side of that road. Soos here knows where it is, doesn't he?" The handyman nodded.

Stanford's mind was made up. "Then that will be our next destination," he said firmly, standing up. "Thank you for your help, ma'am."

"But – other Mr. Pines, you didn't finish your - "
He was already halfway out the door, having pushed his way past waitresses and other customers, including a rather chubby white-haired boy who had been staring at his hands in wide-eyed disbelief. Soos and Lazy Susan watched him disappear.

There was a long pause. Soos looked glumly at his uneaten pancakes. "Can we, uh, get these to go?"

Soos stared at the forest. "Y'know," he said contemplatively, "there's somethin' different. Can't put a finger on it, though."

"But – this is the place?" Ford asked, unbuckling his seatbelt and loosening his death grip on the assist handle. "No more driving?" If there was, he was doubtful that he would survive the trip.

"Yep, no doubt about it! Y'see those trees over there, they're a lot smaller than the others 'cause they're so much younger - "

"What trees?"

"Those trees, right there -" Soos put down his finger slowly. "Oh, uh."

There was a moment of terrible silence. A beat later, Stanford swore loudly and practically jumped out of the car. His heartbeat thundering in his chest and a cold pit opening in the depth of his stomach, he jogged to the edge of the forest and stared at the destruction before him. Dozens of trees broken and smashed into pieces of various sizes, from wood chips to almost whole trunks.

This damage was not the work of individual tools, Ford thought to himself. This was the result of a blunt force plowing through the forest at high speeds.

This was the work of a car, and it had happened recently. Very recently.

"Woah," Soos said quietly beside him. "This is so weird. How did no one notice this before?"

Ford didn't reply. Instead, with no further hesitation, he began to make his way inwards, following the path of destruction with a lump in his throat. Twigs and branches snapped harmlessly under his heavy boots and scratched futilely at his pant legs. Distantly, he heard the heavy footsteps of Soos following after him.

As they moved deeper into the dark forest, Stanford's subconscious alarm bells began to ring. He didn't want to move forwards, of course not, and the best idea was to head back – he shook his head, and took his next steps. But the uncomfortable feeling persisted, the strange weight of a heavy gaze sending chills down his spine.

Though it was bright noon outside, the majority of light had been scattered and blocked by centuries worth of tree growth. But there was just enough to see his immediate surroundings and – most importantly – for Stanford to notice how the pattern of destruction had – changed. The broken pieces of wood at the entrance of the woods were evidently new, still sticky with the sap that was a tree's lifeblood.

But now, the hunks of wood under his feet were dry and brittle. Some pieces were blackened and turned to ash under his touch. The tall trees around him were scarred with fire of years long past, green branch nubs sprouting from underneath the darkened bark.

And then, he saw it. A familiar burgundy red glinted in the distance, a shade of color so different from the muted greens and browns of the surrounding forest that Ford could never have missed it, no
matter how much he wished he could.

But – Stanley couldn't have -

"That's Mr. Pines' car," Soos said weakly, startling Ford out of his horrified trance. "What's it doing here?"

There was no time for thoughts. His brother could be dying – could be dead – all while Stanford had spent the entire day – doing what? Trying to find yet another mystery where none existed?

He ran through the words, brushing past branches that reached out as if to stop him, and lunged for the driver's seat window.

"Stanley!"

Ford froze. There was no one behind the wheel. The car doors were unlocked and he swallowed before he stuck his head in, only to see nothing but yellowed receipts and discarded food wrappers.

No, his brother was not here, which was simultaneously an indescribable relief - and the worst thing he could have anticipated, because. If Stanley wasn't here, was without his car...

Where was he?

"Um, other Mr. Pines," Soos said quietly, with a note of seriousness that sounded strange from him. "You – Ya gotta take a look at this."

He pointed at the hood of the car, and breath caught in Stanford's throat as he took in the sight of the ridiculous, familiar red fez perched upon it. He reached out a single hand to touch it, almost as if to confirm its existence – but snapped his hand back at the last second.

"Soos," Ford said hoarsely, "you take it."

Then, he took a step back, taking measured breaths.

The Stanmobile was pristine, its coat of burgundy paint completely unscratched. There were no dents in the car at all, even though it had evidently smashed its way through at least a dozen meters of thick forest to get to this location. It was impossible and almost eerie, seeing the car amidst all the destruction of both past and present.

And, there was something about these trees...

"Other Mr. Pines," Soos asked, eyes seemingly unable to leave the fez in his hands, "what happened to Mr. Pines?"

Stanford put a single trembling hand on the tree bark and traced the symbol that had been carved upon it with his fingers. They were on every tree, he could tell then, reaching as far as his eyes could see.

This symbol was a familiar one, with its single circle and double diamonds. And... they weren't carved, he realized, feeling suddenly nauseous.

They were branded.

"I don't know, Soos," Ford said heavily.
Chapter End Notes

Trying to get the plot rolling. Next chapter should have more of Fiddleford and Stan, while Ford begins to investigate just what exactly he had branded on his brother, all those years ago.
CHAPTER SEVEN

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

*Gravity Falls, February, 1982*

"Lemme tell ya the truth here, Fidds. I shared a room with the man for fifteen years. Fingers ain't the only thing he has six of."

Stan cut off at the approach of their waitress, a vaguely familiar looking brunette with a lazy eye he was pretty sure he caused her.

"Hey, how 'bout some more coffee right here? Yeah, that's it - thanks, toots." He gave her a wink and she giggled all the way back to the kitchen. Oh yeah – even disguised as his nerdier, obviously less handsome twin, Stan Pines definitely still had it.

Across the table, Fiddleford shook his head slowly, a helpless smile on his face. "Nice try, Stanley, but you aren't foolin' me."

He put his hands up in surrender. "What are ya talkin' about? There's nothin' to lie about."

"You aren't the only one here who's roomed with Stanford, remember? The man doesn't have six ni -" The man cut off, a slight blush appearing on his face. "Six of anythin' other than fingers on a hand."

"Geez, harsh crowd," Stan muttered half-jokingly with an exaggerated sigh. "Know any of my brother's other college friends, Fidds? Maybe one of them will fall for it."

Fiddleford smiled weakly. "Ah, no – just me, I'm afraid."

So maybe Ford hadn't changed as much as Stan thought. Big shot poindexter or not, he just couldn't imagine his brother as the life of the party – *any* party. But Stan had to admit, he was glad that the one friend Ford *did* have was someone like Fiddleford Hadron McGucket.

It had been less than a week since the man had knocked on his door in search of Stan's missing twin and subsequently agreed to help, but Stan had already realized that Fiddleford was... well, put simply enough, a good guy. A genuinely good guy, which was – incredibly rare, a fact that a decade living on the streets had made Stan painfully aware of. He just – cared, maybe a bit too much at times.

Other than the whole... trying to shoot him thing. But hell, Fiddleford had come back to help in the end, and Stan had forgiven people who shot at him with *real* guns for far less.

"So, uh," Stan said, changing the topic because... *that* one sure wasn't going anywhere good. "To be honest, I don't get much 'f that technobabble you've been tellin' me. Stuff like that... well, it just goes in one side and comes out the other for me."

He shrugged somewhat apologetically – Stan was very aware that he wasn't exactly the sharpest knife in the drawer. More like a spoon, really.

"Not a problem," Fiddleford reassured. "It's some complex astrophysics for the most part. But, hm... in layman's terms..." He thought for a bit. "Tell ya the truth, I don't think it'll be too long 'til we get that thing fixed. A month or two, maybe. I still got most of the blueprints with me, so that'll speed
"A month or two..." He let out a slow exhale. "Well, that's a hell 'f a lot faster than I could manage on my own. Heck, I wouldn't even know how to start with that thing."

"Still," the other man offered hesitantly, "Stanley, you have to understand. For Stanford... even a month could be too long."

Right. Fiddleford had mentioned the other side of the portal from time to time, but the circumstances had never aligned so that Stan could be comfortable about asking just what exactly was there – and really, how the man had seen it in the first place.

"About that... " Stan swallowed. "When ya came over the first time, when you still thought I was Ford... I never got the chance to ask you 'bout some stuff."

Fiddleford tensed at that, but Stan forged on. "You mentioned some guy. Uh, Bill or something. Who's that, some old flame of Ford's?"

"An old flame -" The other man snorted, then broke into – almost hysterical giggles.

Stan stared blankly at him. "Uh -"

"No," Fiddleford said at last. "Well... I sure hope not. But with all the weirdness goin' on... " He shook his head. "Stanley, you've – seen the supernatural activity in this town. I'm sure Stanford wrote plenty on them in that journal of his."

"Yeah, sure." Not that Stan was particularly happy about it. Rats and roaches were bad enough – but dealing with little bearded men was not what he had signed up for, coming up here. And there was something about the surrounding forest... but Stan trusted his instincts far too much to venture in. "This... 'Bill.' He a part of that?"

"In a way. Bill is -" The man paused. "Stanford always called him a muse."

"...Uh -"

"A source of artistic inspiration," Fiddleford added quickly. "Though in this case, more of a scientific - "

"Nah, I got that part." Sure, Stan had never been much for school. But reading and books – the good ones, about adventure and exploring the world instead of numbers and boring old facts – that wasn't school. "But aren't they supposed t' be... ladies? Attractive ones? I mean, with a name like Bill -"

"Bill was not a woman. Nor," the man said gravely, "was he a muse."

"Vampire? Werewolf? Gimme a hint here, Fids, I'm not obsessed with this stuff like Ford is -"

Fiddleford adjusted his glasses. "You have to understand, I don't know this for sure. I never interacted much with – him myself. But from what I've seen -" He swallowed loudly. "Bill is a demon."

Stan stared blankly at him for a long moment. "...Demon," he said, a bit skeptically. "What, like fire and brimstone demon? Ya gotta understand, Ford and I bein' raised in the house we were, we ain't too familiar with the whole -"

"I don't know much about him. Like I said, I never saw him. Never talked t' him, not after - " The
other man cut off suddenly. "All I know is that – he's some kind of malevolent force and his plans... his plans -" He shook his head. "I believe he means to destroy this world."

Stan waited for a punchline that never came, and then let out a deep breath. "Well, damn."

What else could he say to that? This... world destruction thing was not what he had expected, coming up here to Oregon. But then again, what part of the past month or so had he expected? "This – You’re not messin’ with me, right?" He asked, just to be sure. “Cuz I gotta tell ya the truth, when I think end of the world, I don't see that as an, uh, actual thing."

At the man’s solemn nod, he put a hand to his forehead. "How the hell did ya two nerds get wrapped up in somethin' like this?"

And Fiddleford told him, a long, convoluted tale of overblown hopes and demonic possession - and by the end, Stan was tempted to just laugh.

A literal deal with the devil. Ford, really?

"Yeesh," he said instead, shaking his head in disbelief. "That's – Hell. At least I know what I'm getting' into now, I guess. So, that portal is supposed to, uh, end the world. That's what my brother is on the other side of."

"I don't suppose you have any second thoughts...?"

Stan snorted. Fiddleford sighed. "I thought so."

"...Fidds," Stan asked then, some half-forgotten memory popping into his head. “Didn't ya say you saw the other side of that portal?"

The man froze.

"So, uh, what's there?" Stan forged forward. "I mean, I know ya said Ford wouldn't last – too long, and sure - he's a bit 'f a weedy nerd, but he's got a mean left hook. -"

"That's... not it." Fiddleford swallowed. "Stanley, are you – by any chance – familiar with the works of Lovecraft? Or the concept of an eldritch abomination?"

"Never read any 'f them myself, but Ford mentioned them once or twice. Eldritch, uh, whatevers – they're monsters, right?"

"...In a way," the other man allowed, eyes dark. "But the nature of an eldritch abomination is that it is ultimately... alien. Inconceivable. Incomprehensible. Monsters are an inherently human concept. These... are not. How can you fight something that exists outside of the laws of reality? Just seeing them -"

He cut off, eyes distant.

Stan wasn't sure he wrapped his head around that, but sure. "So what, those are what's on the other side?"

It was as if he hadn't said anything at all. "It was like I was starin' inta a void, Stanley," Fiddleford continued dazedly, his accent getting thicker, his pupils dilating.

"Uh -"

"The whole universe jus' laid out before me, an' I – I knew things. Lots of things," he stressed. “And
"I – I saw th' end, when gravity fell an' when earth became sky -"

"Geez, Fidds, what are ya -"

"But they were lookin' back at me!" He shouted with a full-body shudder, his eyes wide and wild, pupils single black pinpricks. Stan realized then that Fiddleford was completely and utterly out of it. People at nearby tables were already turning to stare, and a waitress behind the counter was pointing at them while talking to a pretty beefy, mean-looking guy.

Stan gulped.

"Six eyes – six sights -"

Out of options and not wanting to be banned from the only restaurant in the town, Stan swore and threw a glass full of iced water in the other man's face. Fiddleford blinked and spluttered, but his eyes were normal again.

"What the hell was that?" Stan whispered after a long moment, once it was clear that the other man had come back to his senses. "The mutterin' and the shakin' and -"

The other man wiped at his face with a handful of napkins. "...Humans can't make sense of those things," he said wetly. "But... they can't make sense of humans either. I, I tried to make myself forget, but it's still there - it's all still there -" He went quiet abruptly.

Stan wasn't sure what to make of that.

"Fidds," he said slowly, "I'm a simple man. This is all confusin' as hell, so it, uh, helps if ya put this in simple terms. Those eldritch whatchamajigs are bad news, I get that. But uh."

Stan paused. "Since ya mentioned the whole 'end of the world' thing – I'm guessin' we don't want any of them over here. And that Bill guy – he does."

"Bit of an – understatement there," Fiddleford muttered, wiping his glasses with part of his shirt.

"But I mean, what do they want? Everything wants somethin', even – hulking alien monsters, or whatever they are."

The other man was quiet.

"Fidds?"

Fiddleford looked at him, eyes haunted.

"Stanley, that is something I try not to think too hard about."

*  

*Gravity Falls, August, 2012*

In retrospect, allowing a demon full control of one’s body had not been one of Ford’s better ideas. Allowing a demon full control of one’s body and complete discretion in his actions… had very likely been his worst.

To this day, Ford still did not know the full extent of what Bill had done while in his body. The demon had directed much of the construction of the lab himself, and after his betrayal, Ford had scoured his house from top to bottom, destroying as much of Bill’s additions as he could. He had
taunted, or intimidated, or did *something* to Fiddleford that had set the man constantly on edge. The fact that Ford managed to keep willfully blind to his friend’s increasingly desperate warnings remained one of his greatest regrets.

The red-hot symbol located on the side of one of the larger pieces of machinery in the lab had been one of Bill’s additions. It had been one of the more insignificant requests, especially compared to the other offerings his ‘muse’ had demanded, and Ford had never thought much of it. He had assumed that it was a symbol with some deeper meaning in whatever extradimensional society Bill had originated from.

Then came the fight, when Ford had *branded* his brother permanently. He could still remember the brief stab of shock as he realized what he had done, the sickening smell of burning flesh and cloth, and then - the cold regret and guilt that had made him stagger backwards, frantically stammering apologies.

But, what exactly did that symbol mean? There had been a reason behind everything Bill had done, and the demon and his brother had, in hindsight, a rather odd relation. How was it possible that Stanley had lived in this town for thirty years, surrounded by Bill’s images and influences, and not had *any* idea who or what Bill Cipher was? The man was oblivious in some ways, yes, but not *that* oblivious. And, while Bill clearly knew of Stanley’s existence, he had made no direct moves against him.

Yet, whatever the implications of the sigil, Bill had not taken advantage of it during Weirdmageddon - even when Stanley had been leading the resistance against him. It was only now that the old brand seemed to hold any significance at all.

And that there was the rub: clearly, Stanley had known this would happen.

He had made the call to Shermy and waited for the twins to leave for Piedmont. He had confronted Ford, clearly expecting to be told to leave, and had been so - shocked, so terrified when Ford had told him to stay. And then, he had left anyways.

Now, his brother was missing - and the sigil that Ford had branded on him, however accidentally, had something to do with it.

Ford licked his fingers before flipping each page of his brother’s journal - or, to be more accurate, his diary. Because it was, really - each entry was written familiarly and oddly conversational, as if speaking to a close friend. It was clearly written for someone to read, because there were odd emphases on certain events and, at points, extensive, unnecessary justifications of his own actions - and yet it had lied under those floorboards for decades, molding away.

*What had changed?* He wanted to ask, but that was a mystery that could wait until - after.

Instead, Ford quietly read through the dozens of repeated mentions of bad dreams, *odd* dreams, with growing alarm. Dreams, the subconscious domain - that was *Bill’s* domain, his and the other creatures of the Mindscape. It would make sense that Bill would have made contact with Stanley - after all, they had a common goal, even if the demon’s ulterior motives were quite different.

But dozens of these dreams and without any mention of a triangular, one-eyed creature… up until his final moments of hubris, Bill was an efficient creature that would have gained no great enjoyment from this kind of taunting, especially when Stanley clearly had no idea what was going on. This was an out of character, disorganized, almost *confused* approach, as if Bill had no clear idea what he wanted from Stanley.
Unless, this wasn’t Bill. The green eyed motif didn’t fit, unless the demon was attempting some kind of symbolic reference to Stanford’s relationship with his brother -

Ford shook his head with a groan. Now, he was stretching it.

Regardless, there was some kind of connection here between the dreams, the brand, and Stanley’s disappearance. If only there was someone who had known his brother well enough during that time who he could ask. Even that waitress had known his brother only superficially. Maybe Soos might -

Then he saw the next entry, and he knew.

* *

So uh, good news. That friend of Ford’s came back - Fiddleford, I think his name is. He says he’s gonna help, but he looks pretty frazzled. He’s got a whole folder of these papers I can’t make sense of, but as long as he can, I’ve got no complaints.

Maybe I actually have a chance now, but I’ve got no idea what comes... after that. What I can say to make you forgive me. Hopefully I’ll figure it out before then.

Sixer, I didn’t mean to do it. Any of it.

* *

When that rippling hole in reality had opened up scant feet in front of him, all those weeks ago when he was still trapped in the other dimension, Stanford had allowed himself a few seconds to - gawk, really, because after thirty long years, he no longer harbored any hopes of rescue.

Not that he had any in the first place, really.

And then, he was furious. There was only one person who could have fixed the portal, and that was his brother. His foolish, headstrong twin brother, who had evidently ignored Ford’s copious warnings in order to assuage any guilt he felt about pushing him into an interdimensional portal. So he had made his way through without second thought. He had buried the heavy emotions under righteous anger - the feelings that had bubbled up with the words that had lumped up in his throat, the moment he saw his brother for the first time in thirty years and realized suddenly that they had become old strangers.

Stanford had dealt with those agents, introduced himself to the children, finally talked to Stanley about the elephant in the room, and -

- and it was only after, as Ford stared up at an unfamiliar ceiling from his threadbare couch, that he had asked himself a very important question.

How?

The only person who could have fixed that portal was his brother, and Stanley hardly had the drive or knowledge necessary to do so. He hadn’t even graduated high school, for God’s sake.

Of course, there was the possibility that his brother had somehow self-taught himself the complex astrophysics and quantum theory that was necessary to operate the portal, but there had always been an inimitable, inhuman aspect to the portal’s construction. As galling as it was to admit, even Stanford could not have completed it without Bill’s help.
It had been an uncomfortable question, one that Ford did not know the answer to - and didn’t _want_ to know the answer to, really. The most likely possibility was that it had been a minor malfunction that had shut the portal down - some kind of blown fuse, perhaps - that did not require any extensive knowledge, one that even Stanley could have fixed with time.

Well, now he knew.

Fiddleford… now, that was a name that hurt to think about. His best - and in hindsight, possibly _only_ - friend throughout college, and the man whom Ford had driven away inadvertently because of his own obliviousness. Back then, he had assumed that Fiddleford was - jealous, perhaps, of his fascination with Bill.

Oh, how wrong he had been.

The man might have driven himself into insanity, but Stanford had been the one to set him on that path. If only he could have paused that night and - listened to Fiddleford, talked it out, explained the misunderstandings and sorted it all out… Things would be very different. Maybe together, the two of them could have stopped Bill’s plans in their tracks.

But… he had never expected Fiddleford to come back. The last he remembered, his old partner had cut off all contact and even… went to some extreme methods to forget the horrors he had seen. Ford had to admit that he could not blame him.

Ford was sorry - deeply, unspeakably so - but though Dipper and Mabel had informed him excitedly of his old friend’s marked recovery… he could not bring himself to go see him. He knew he didn’t deserve Fiddleford’s forgiveness - not when he had cost him his future, his youth, his _son_. He also knew that there was no way he could make up for it all.

Stanford Pines was used to running away from his mistakes. But he glanced down at the entry again, at the scribbled out phrases that he couldn’t make out for the life of him, and…

...maybe he couldn’t, any longer.

Chapter End Notes

I do think that Fiddleford and Stan would get along really well in a Mystery Trio and/or otherwise canon divergent setting, because Fidds is both a nerd like Ford and a genuinely good person (though his good will towards others... is sometimes taken to the extreme. Sure, you think you're helping, but a cult?) and Fidds has Soos-levels of intuitions, I like to think.

I had another scene originally planned for this chapter, but I figured I should stop ending on cliff-hangers. But, Fiddauthor reunion set for next chapter - as well as certain past complications.

By the way - if anyone wants to talk about GF, the finale, this fic, or - anything really (or just to get a daily dose of GF reblogs) I'm dubsdeedubs on tumblr (because WDW was taken, and apparently I'm not creative enough to think of another name.)
Fiddleford made a nervous, aborted gesture toward his face, as if trying to run his hands through a beard that was no longer there. He looked distinctly uncomfortable in his ill-fitting clothes, hunched over as if ready to scamper away at any moment. He did not meet Ford’s wide eyes.

Stanford’s six-fingered hands clenched bloodless white around the journal, and he found that he could not look away.

There was a loud cough and a creak as Tate quickly shut the door behind him, evidently desperate to escape the suddenly stifling atmosphere of the room. Ford wished, somewhat inanely, he could follow him. He cleared his throat and tried to speak through the lump in his throat.

But Fiddleford beat him to the punch. “Yer - yer th’ real Stanford?” He picked at his hands, fingernails scraping against dry skin, oddly worried. “Not th’ other one. Not - Mr. Mystery.”

“...Yes,” Ford replied weakly, trying to find the words that seemed to have fled his mind. “The other one - that was my brother Stanley. I told you about him, before all of this, but -” He forced himself to pause. Rambling was pointless - what he needed to do now was say what he needed to say. “Fiddleford, I -”

“My -” Fiddleford fidgeted. “My Stanford?”

It was as if his words had turned to ashes in his mouth. Ford realized, with a sudden jolt of shock, that he could see his old friend and partner in the strange old man before him.

He knew about what had happened to Fiddleford, of course. Though their accounts were clearly colored by childhood innocence and naivety, Dipper and Mabel had told him just enough to put together the pieces about the origin of the Society of the Blind Eye and the strange going-ons in Gravity Falls, shortly before he had secluded himself permanently in his home. He had even - he thought he had seen the man during the Weirdmageddon, hunched over and long bearded, attacking Bill’s allied demons with an almost bestial ferocity (and - a banjo?)

He had also been told of the man’s slow recovery, and it was true that the Fiddleford before him was a far-cry from the ‘Old Man McGucket’ (as the townspeople called him) Ford had seen during the battle against Bill. But he was also nothing like the well-spoken, quietly intelligent young man that Ford had known, back when they had both been bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, positively jumping to take on a world of endless mysteries to be solved.

But by all accounts, the Fiddleford that Ford had known had not existed for a - long, long time. Surely, that Fiddleford wouldn’t have started some kind of - cult that forcibly wiped memories. After all, he had been the voice of reason within their partnership - the one who had vetoed the (in hindsight) more ill-thought out research proposals and was able to see the consequences of their progress with unclouded eyes.

Yet… he felt queasy as he remembered Fiddleford that night, his crazed rantings, the wild look of fear in his frantic eyes. Something had changed him for the worst, and Ford knew that it was his fault that Fiddleford was… the way he was.
He dragged one shaking hand through his hair. “It - It’s me, Fiddleford.” The other man stared back at him, a tad blankly, and Ford tried, “...How much do you remember?”

“Eh, those memories of mine - sure, they’ve been gone fer thirty-odd years. But ever since those lil’ fellers helped me out, they’ve been rushin’ back faster than ya can say ‘Toot-toot McBumbersnazzle!’” Fiddleford was - beaming, the previous tension in his frame gone, and that was enough evidence for Ford to conclude that Fiddleford clearly did not remember *everything*. If he did, smiling would be the complete opposite of what he would be doing. “I know lots ‘f things now! Didja know there’s a kind ‘f fish that can swim up your ureth -”

Ford knew where this was going. “About us, I mean,” he said quickly.

The other man blinked at him obliviously. There was a bead of drool collecting at the corner of his slack, open mouth. Ford sighed, letting go of a hope that he really - shouldn’t have held in the first place.

“We - went to college together, thirty years ago. We worked together, here in Gravity Falls, and we were - “ He swallowed down the words he really wanted to say. “...Friends. The best of friends. Though… That might be a bit one-sided on your part. I... wasn’t a good friend to you, in the end. I’ve done some things that were -”

Fiddleford scratched at his bulbous red nose. “Always told ya that durn triangle fella wasn’t t’ be trusted,” he huffed.

Ford froze. The other man stared back at him, almost innocently.

He closed his mouth with a click. “You *do* remember,” Ford said dully, a hinting suspicion arising in his gut. “The portal, everything Bill did in my body -”

“Too many sides, that’s what I think!” Fiddleford interrupted carelessly, “Now, a circle - “

Ford ignored his old friend’s confused (?) ramblings and leaned forward, covering Fiddleford’s frantic hands with one of his own. The other man stilled at that, an unreadable expression flitting across his face, far too fast for him to even guess at what it was, and went abruptly quiet.

“Fiddleford,” he said slowly, “I’m sorry.”

For a sudden, startled moment, there was no trace at all of insanity in the other man’s face. His clear eyes pinpointed Ford’s with alarming intensity.

The breath caught in Ford’s throat, but he forged on regardless. “I should have trusted you. I should have put you above him. I was… foolish to believe what he told me. Blinded by my own arrogance. When he said I was - special, that I was one in a thousand, in a million -” His voice broke. “I *wanted* to believe. I was - seduced by that vision of success - of *acceptance* that he promised me, that I -”

“But you were already accepted, Stanford,” Fiddleford said quietly with only the slightest twinge of an accent, his voice clear and cutting and terribly sane. “You were already loved.”

“I-” He shook his head, images coming into his head unbidden of the younger Fiddleford, who had given up so much - too much - for his sake. Of Stanley, who had always been there giving more than he got, that Ford had tried to convince himself that his brother was only doing it for his own benefit. Ford swallowed hard. “...I know. Far too late to make a difference, but... I understand that now.”

It was easy back then to fall to the allure of Bill’s promises of power and easy friendship. Even when everything he had really wanted had always been within his reach, they were tempered by human
faults, and Ford had been too fearful of failure to accept that - not when his muse had been at his side, tempting him with a (twisted) perfection.

“I should never have told you to come,” he said with finality. “You could have kept working on those - ‘personal computers’ of yours. You could have been -” Ford swallowed. “I cost you your youth. Your future. Your family. I did this -” he gestured at Fiddleford’s bent frame, a tad weakly. “- to you. And… I know there is not much I can do to rectify that. I can’t give you your life back, and I don’t expect - forgiveness, but -”

“Ya weren’t the one who did this to me, Stanford.” Fiddleford said, cutting him off without hesitation. His head was lowered again, but Ford could just make out the tight grimace on his face. “I did this t’ myself. I din’t want t’ remember, so I made somethin’ so that I didn’t have to. It’s a - It’s easier not t’ remember.”

He raised his head, and though the heavy accent had returned to his voice, his expression was clearly lucid. “Stanford, ya got nothing t’ be sorry for. Can’t say trustin’ that Cipher fella was one of yer better decisions. Or that I wasn’t hurt that you kept all that demon business from me. But all this…” He gestured down at himself a tad ruefully. “I was the one who ran away from my problems, see? Ran ‘til I didn’t even know myself.”

Fiddleford smiled mirthlessly. “The lil’ fellas - Dipper and Mabel, they told ya about how I was livin’ before, din’t they? Tell ya the truth, Stanford. Spendin’ decades of my life in the dump, marryin’ a raccoon, bein’ the laughingstock of the town… can’t say I’m much pleased about that. But buryin’ my head from reality, pretending nothin’ was wrong, not even knowin’ that I had problems… that was easy. Easier than facin’ the end days, or realizing what I made myself into, or -” He cut off. “Or you seein’ what I’ve become.”

Ford had sat wordlessly through the entire confession, mentally shaking his head in denial. “If I had believed you when you first warned me about Bill - if I had talked to you after you left - ”


“I am looking,” he said roughly, recognizing the familiar steady undercurrent of shame in his old friend’s voice - one that did not belong there. “And ashamed is the last thing I am.” His old friend gave him a look of disbelief. “The biggest mistake I ever made was pushing you away, Fiddleford,” Ford admitted. “Please - don’t make the same decision I did.”

Fiddleford stared at him with clear, wide eyes, utterly speechless. Ford dragged a hand through his hair. “I admit… this was hardly what we expected for our futures, back then. But, Fiddleford - you’ve done much more than I could have, in your position. Dipper and Mabel told me about how you saved them from the Society of the Blind Eye. And during the Weirdmageddon, I saw you out there fighting Bill’s demons -”

“Y-Ya did?” Fiddleford stammered in surprise, a light blush dusting his cheeks. “Why, I mean… that ain’t much -”

“Fiddleford, I know how - tempting it is to hide from one’s problems,” he said, already thinking about that decade of - first frequent, then occasional phone-calls, with a caller who hung up before Ford could get a single word in.

About how he could never muster up the courage to call back.

“But… You did fight back, Fiddleford. Even after a year of living with me hosting that demon in my
body, even after the horrors you saw on the other side of that portal.”

Ford paused momentarily, eyes darkening as he remembered for the first time since Fiddleford opened his mouth why he had come in the first place.

“Not only that, but… you - came back for me, didn’t you? After all I did to drive you away... You helped my brother repair the portal and bring me back, even though you knew what were on the other...”

He trailed off. Fiddleford’s somewhat loopy grin was replaced suddenly by an utterly unreadable expression, as quickly as if some internal switch had been flipped in the man before him.

“At least, that was what Stanley wrote,” Ford added quickly, not sure where he had misspoken - or indeed, if he even had. “If there was anything more to that, I don’t -”

“I’m sorry, Stanford,” Fiddleford in a quiet voice that nonetheless cut through his words with knife-like precision. “I couldn’t stop ‘im.”

Ford blinked, somewhat taken aback. “Well, of course I’m not blaming you for Stanley bringing me back through the portal. ...Though, I admit things might have been quite a bit simpler if the interdimensional rift was never formed. But we were still able to defeat Bill in the end. Why… as much as it had endangered the world… selfishly, I’m quite glad to be back in this dimension. Those were a,” he swallowed, thinking of the decades he had spent surviving on the edges of alien societies. “…a rather difficult thirty years on the other side.”

But his friend didn’t seem to register any of his words, a familiar blankness in his expression as his gaze bore onto a spot slightly over Ford’s left shoulder. “I could’ve - I should’ve done it then, Stanford. It wasn’t too late for him, I don’t think.”

...Something was wrong here, bigger than he could see. “Fiddleford -” Ford reached out a single hand to place over Fiddleford’s shaking shoulder, smiling weakly against the sick twist of deja vu he felt in the pit of his belly - back to that night, three decades ago. “Get it together, man. Too late for what?”

“Stanford, I didn’t know,” Fiddleford told him earnestly. “Why, I only remembered - just a couple ‘f days ago. I must’ve wiped the knowledge outta my head dozens of times in the past. I couldn’t believe it back when th’ memory first came back.”

“Believe - what?” Ford raised an eyebrow. “I’m afraid you’re losing me, Fiddleford.”

“I said to myself, that ain’t possible, Fiddleford!” The other man said, voice hushed, as if Ford had said nothing at all. “But -” Fiddleford shook his head. “I’m - not as brave as ya think, Stanford. I couldn’t bring myself to help him and -” His voice broke. “They came for ‘im.”

“Who’s - they?” Ford asked uneasily. Somehow, he knew that this was a question he did not particularly want an answer to. But he - had to know.

There was no reply.

“Fiddleford, please. Stanley’s gone missing, and I have no idea where he could have gone. That’s - part of the reason why I came,” Ford admitted. “You’re the only one who can help me, Fiddleford. A clue, maybe something he said -”

“They’re what I saw on the other side,” Fiddleford said finally. “...Why I tried to erase my memories.”
That did not mean much to Stanford, who had never known exactly what his partner had saw in his brief glimpse of the other side of the portal. What he knew, however, was that the pieces were not lining up.

“I don’t understand,” Ford said slowly, finally finding his voice. “But Stan didn’t… he doesn’t even know about -”

There was a pitying look in Fiddleford’s eyes. “Stanford,” he said quietly. “Your brother is not what he seems.”

Gravity Falls, March, 1982

After the disastrous talk in Greasy’s Diner, Stan had done his best to refrain from asking Fidds anything that might set him off again. He already knew what he needed to do to get Ford back. Everything else - end of the world, demonic muses, yadda yadda - was just extra.

Besides, the other man seemed to be doing enough damage to himself without Stan asking any uncomfortable questions. Whether it was drugs or drink or - something else, Fiddleford had been acting increasingly weird over the course of the past month. It was a subtle thing - some occasional, unprompted, nervous movement of his hands, a few strange outbursts in the middle of an otherwise normal conversation.

If he didn’t know better, Stan would’ve told himself that Fiddleford wasn’t the type of person to mess himself up like that. But years on the streets had taught him that there was no ‘type of person’ that got involved with this kind of thing. Anyone could, anyone would - provided that something bad enough drove them to it.

And with the haunted way that Fidds looked at the contents of Ford’s weird pyramid fetish room, or whatever the hell that was, Stan had some inkling as to what it was.

Problem was, how was he supposed to bring up a topic like - that? On one hand, even with a completely pragmatic point of view, letting Fiddleford continue his downward spiral wasn’t going to do any good for anyone. On the other… any mention of Ford’s old demon buddy - or the thing in Stan’s dreams - could very well send the man running for the hills.

But as it turned out, that decision wasn’t Stan’s to make.

“Stanley, I understand if this is a - sensitive topic but,” Fiddleford said a bit nervously, “I - think it will be helpful if you can tell me a bit more about how Stanford was sent through the portal.”

Stan froze in his step, lowering the bundle of wires he had been carrying. It had been weeks since the engineer had started coming over nights to work in Ford’s old lab, and really, he should just be surprised that it had taken this long for Fidds to ask, but -

“Oh, yeah,” he blurted quickly. “Sure, it’s no problem - ‘course not… I mean, why would I have a problem with that? Hah!”

Fiddleford stared at him blankly. “Is - there something wrong, Stanley?”

“I’m not being suspicious,” Stan said, and immediately regretted it.

“...Of course, I don’t - mean to pry, and I understand that you and Stanford had a complicated relationship. But knowing just the mechanics of how the accident occurred, how the portal malfunctioned…” Fiddleford shrugged. “I would know what not to do, at the very least.”
Stan blanched. The option of continuing his previous lie about lab accidents was quickly considered and discarded - he sure as hell didn’t want to admit, to his brother’s boyfriend especially, that he had been the one to push Ford in. That it had been his fault. But if pretending to be innocent meant giving up his brother’s life - then, it was hardly a choice.

“...I, uh, might have told a teensy little - not a lie, just a… stretching of the truth, really,” Stan stammered. “...About the accident… it wasn’t - completely an accident. I mean, neither of us expected it to happen, but - I, uh, should probably start from the beginning.”

“...I think that would be best, Stanley.”

“Ford sent me a postcard, tellin’ me to come up to Oregon. I... did. But when I got there - he was actin’ crazy. Almost shot me in the face with a crossbow, shoutin’ about how I was going to steal his eyes.” Stan dragged a hand through his hair in nervousness. “...Turns out he wanted me to hide that journal of his. And, uh... we started arguing. And then punches were being thrown, and somehow the portal turned itself on, and -”

“And Stanford was sucked in?” Fiddleford asked.

“I pushed him in,” Stan said blankly. The other man tensed, something hard in his eyes, but Stan kept going. “It was my fault, Fidds. He - well, he burned me. Accidentally. And, God, it hurt, and I wasn’t thinking, and I just shoved his damn book at him - I didn’t know it was going to - “

“So you’re saying that you and Stanford fought,” Fiddleford cut in. “That’s how he got sucked up by that thing.”

“...Yeah.”

“Well, I can’t say I see a lie here. That certainly sounds like a lab accident to me.” The man closed his notebook with finality. “Stanley, you have to understand - I helped build that portal. There are dozens of safeguards built into that thing - I know, because I forced Stanford to add them in. There’s undoubtedly something… peculiar about the device turning itself on, but -”

He shook his head. “That is beside the point. What I am hearing here, Stanley, is that the two of you both did something - and I’ll be honest here, something as colossally idiotic as get in a brawl, next to an untested gateway with effects of anti-gravity… and an accident happened. That was all. Honestly,” Fiddleford continued, muttering to himself, “I knew Stanford’s grasp of laboratory safety procedures were shakey at best, but…”

“Uh,” Stan managed, somewhat unintelligibly. “...I, er.” Any words of gratitude remained in his throat, though maybe it was better he didn’t manage to voice it.

“Though… I am a bit concerned about that - burn you mentioned?” Fiddleford mused.

“There was a weird symbol on the side of that console there - exposed hot metal and all that.” Stan grimaced. “Ford… might have kicked me onto it. Hope ya don’t mind that I covered it up… Not exactly something I want to see, uh, ever.” Hell, he still couldn’t force himself to fry bacon.

“A - weird symbol?” Fiddleford paused. “I would like to take a look at it, if you don’t mind. If there was an exposed brand anywhere inside of this lab, it certainly wasn’t there when I worked here.”

“It’s right on the back of my shoulder - gimme a sec.” Stan reached backwards, pulling the fabric of his undershirt aside. “You see it, Fidds?”

Fiddleford dropped his pen. “…Does it look familiar?” Stan turned his head. “And, uh, I know
you’re not a medical doctor or anythin’, but it’s kind of a weird color for a burn, right? I don’t think I’ve ever -”

“Stanley…”

He blinked. “Yeah, that’s my name. What - What’s wrong?” Stan turned around quickly, only for Fiddleford to cringe back. “...Hey, if it’s bad, just tell me, alright? I got enough cash to find a doctor if I need it.”

“...That’s been on you ever since Stanford went into th’ portal?” The other man asked quietly, eyes fixated on the spot on the back of Stan’s shoulder, as if it would attack him.

“That’s what I said. But Ford - well, both of us were pretty caught up in yellin’ at each other and all, and he didn’t know that thing was on the side of the console.” Stan shrugged helplessly. “It wasn’t his fault -”

“...Dreams,” Fiddleford croaked.

“Uh, what?”

“Have you -” The man made an odd, spastic gesture with his hands. “ - had any. Since then.”

...Alright, so maybe he should be the one backing away here, not Fidds.

“Well, I mean…” Stan shrugged somewhat non-committably, trying to hide his confusion. Somehow, he knew that mentioning specifics was probably not a good idea. “Some, sure. I mean, doesn’t everyone? Look, Fidds, I don’t know what exactly’s messin’ with your senses right now, but… you trust me, don’tcha?”

The look Fiddleford gave him was not exactly encouraging. Stan relented. “...Just gimme some idea of what’s goin’ on here, would ya?”

“...Dreams were how Stanford first made contact with that demon,” the man said dully. “Back in college, he couldn’t sleep for more than a handful of hours a night, at best. Then in Gravity Falls, he was sleepin’ away entire days and makin’ excuses about doin’ his best thinking in his subconscious. Soon enough, he was walkin’ around shouting about his cells dying and fish swimmin’ up the urethra.”

Stan snorted. “Fidds, I wish I was sleepin’ entire days. Hell, I don’t even remember the last time I got a decent night of sleep.”

“Then, you have - had dreams.”

...Shit. “Well... yeah. I mean,” he composed himself, trying to choose his words carefully. “Sure, some were weird, but look - I’ve had weirder dreams after late-night quesadillas, for God’s sake.”

Fiddleford’s face was ashen. “Did you say yes?”

“Huh?”

“Stanley, I asked ya,” he swallowed, “did ya agree to anythin’?”

Oh.

“...Is this what this is about?” Stan almost felt like laughing. Honestly, what kind of demon would want to make some kind of deal with a guy like Stan Pines? Ford was a genius, a regular ol’
poindexter, so that was understandable at least.

But Stan… “Alright, even if some demon is tryin’ t’ talk to me in my sleep… Fidds, look at me. Do I look like someone who would make a deal with the devil? Hell, do I look like someone the devil would want to make a deal with?” Stan, on the other hand, was just a conman and a convict - a dime a dozen in these parts.

In any parts.

None of Fiddleford’s anxiousness dissipated. “Yes,” he said instead, eyes narrowing.

“…Seriously? Come on, I was askin’ that as a joke -”

“If they told ya they could save yer brother, ya would.” The man’s stare could burn holes in paper.

“Fidds, I -” Stan laughed, maybe a bit weakly, but there was nothing funny about the situation. He walked forward a few steps towards the cowering Fiddleford, both of his hands still held up in surrender. “You know that - that I wouldn’t.” His protests sounded lame to even his own ears.

“Fiddleford, I swear to God, I haven’t been makin’ any deals. Tell ya the truth, I have been seein’ some - green-eyed spookums, maybe, but unless ya count some cursing on my part, there haven’t been any talkin’ involved -”

He froze in place the minute the muzzle, for lack of a better word, of Fiddleford’s lightbulb-gun leveled itself directly at his face. “Green-eyed - ?” The man choked out, eyes dilating, his hands clenching on the handle of the - whatever it was.

Maybe a few weeks ago, when Stan had known nothing about the man before him, he would have been tempted to just - walk forward the last few steps, harmless looking toy gun or not. But having seen the engineer’s work, Stan knew that he did not want to be shot by this thing. Knowing Fiddleford and his penchant for obliviously dangerous inventions, if he had deliberately made this to hurt… harmless was the last thing this was.

“Put it down, Fiddleford,” he said through gritted teeth. “Come on, we’re friends, aren’t we?”

“It’s because we’re friends that I have to -” Fiddleford broke off, shaking. “Stanley, you’ve got to understand - this is for your own good -”

“No, I don’t understand,” Stan growled. “At least tell me why you want t’ shoot me before you do it, yeah?” Shit, shit, shit. How the hell was he supposed to get out of this situation? He was at point-blank range - dodging was out of the question. And while Fiddleford was wiry, he was hardly weak - “Or hell, tell me what I can do so you won’t have to shoot me. That would help a whole lot, ya know,” he finished, unable to keep the sarcasm out of his voice.


“I - I thought we went over this weeks ago, Fidds,” Stan stammered, brushing aside the fluff for the important bit in there - forget about Stanford? “I’m not giving up on my brother. You - agreed with me on this, remember? You said -”

“That was before I knew they were already here, Stanley!” The other man hissed, eyes wild. “If the portal is opened now, then they’ll have a permanent anchor in this base of reality. And it is simply a matter of time before they find an alternative -”
“We - can deal with that after Ford’s back! He’ll think of somethin’ -”

“No, he will not,” Fiddleford said with a note of finality. “Stanley - give up. I want him back too, but I can’t -” He swallowed down his justifications. “...For the sake of the world, for your sanity, for your humanity - Stanley, give up now.”

There was only one reply that Stan could give to that. “Then, I guess ya better shoot me.” His voice was grim. “Because I can’t give up on him. And - I thought you of all people could understand that, Fidds.”

“Please don’t make this harder than it is, Stanley.”

“Yeah?” Stan demanded, trying to sound braver than he actually was. Oh, hell, if he was going to get shot by that thing either way... he didn’t want to hurt the guy, but - “Trust me, I want to make it a lot harder for you than ya want it to be.”

He lunged forward, a hand outstretched to knock the lightbulb gun out of Fiddleford’s grasp like he did during their initial meeting, except -

The man sidestepped him at the last moment, a matter of milliseconds, and Stan heard rather than saw him pull the trigger - a sudden, final click.

Stan stared, expression frozen in wide-eyed fear, as electricity coursed into the bulb of the gun, the beginning of some kind of light beam building at its end - and just beyond that, Fiddleford’s tearful eyes behind his cracked glasses.

T-That’s right, he suddenly thought vehemently, glaring back despite the cold crawl of panic as the light grew brighter, brighter, brighter. Let him see -

Fiddleford’s hands jerked to the right.

A bright beam of some kind of energy flew past Stan, a millimeter to the side of his ear, and before he could react, he heard it hit the machinery behind him.

The portal behind him. Stan paled.

Oh shit.

It might have been a terrible decision, given the man who wanted to shoot him just a few feet in front of him. But then Stan saw the smoking console, electricity crackling over exposed wires, and his own well-being was suddenly the last thing on his mind.

There was the groan of metal, and the lights flickered suddenly. Stan whipped around, realization blossoming on his face. “Fidds -”

The man stared back at him, a look of dim surprise on his face. A second later, it turned into an expression of sheer panic, and Fiddleford let out an odd mixture of a choke and a whine. He dropped onto - all fours (what the hell) and scampered backwards like a scared animal. He gave Stan a look of horror, his eyes glazed and unfamiliar.

Stan cursed, already knowing what was coming but still taking the one futile step forward. “Don’t -”

Fiddleford ran for it, moving surprisingly quickly for a guy on his hands and feet, and Stan had only taken another two steps forward when the lights went out and the lab was plunged into pitch black darkness. After that... he couldn’t even see his own hand in front of his face, let alone a little guy like
Fidds.

Distantly, he heard the sound of the elevator ascending.

It took ten minutes for Stan to finally make his way up from the lab, by which time Fiddleford was nowhere to be see. He sucked in a breath and kicked the wooden wall of Ford’s cabin in frustration.

Great. The side-effects of whatever Fidds was using sure picked a great time to act up. With the guy in the state he was, it probably wasn’t a good idea either for him to just go runnin’ around in the woods, willy-nilly. Stan had been the one to give Fiddleford a ride to the Shack, since the man adamantly refused to drive for some reason.

Then he saw, halfway through his mental ramblings -

There, a flash of movement through the open window, in the bushes just beyond where his El Diablo was parked.

Stan swore again, as colorfully as he could make it, but it came out stunned and dibelieving and - hopeful. Without a single word more, he yanked on his red jacket and ran outside.

“Fidds!” He shouted, scanning his surroundings. It was - incredibly dark, almost unnaturally so, but Stan ignored his instincts shouting at him to go back inside.

He didn’t even know where Fiddleford lived, and he had an inkling that he wouldn’t be seeing the man for a long time if he left him to make contact. Maybe ever. “Fiddleford!”

Stan made his way to his car, swearing yet again as he tried to unlock his door without being able to see - anything, really. It didn’t help that his right foot was soaked - there was a puddle on the ground right next to the El Diablo, which he unfortunately only noticed after stepping in the oddly warm liquid.

He jumped inside and slammed the door, immediately shifting into reverse and backing out of the makeshift driveway. Stan knew his car. He had done 70 miles an hour on the winding Rocky Mountain paths with his El Diablo, Carla screaming and laughing at his side.

This, was nothing.

Stan kept the window open as he drove, eyes narrowed against the cold Oregon winds as he scanned the road for movement. Fids couldn’t have gone far, really, and the forest on either side was rapidly becoming a blur of dark green. Stan was driving a bit faster than necessary, hell, a bit faster than he initially intended - maybe the El Diablo needed a tune-up.

He stepped down on the brake, and - paused.

Stan tried again, but there was no use. The pedal was going down too easily, and Stan was still going too fast.

He looked down in a kind of frozen disbelief, mouth suddenly, suffocatingly dry. The dim light of the car made the fluid on his boot shine with an oily sheen.

The strange men hanging around the diner, the movement near his car - the puzzle pieces clicked together to form a picture that sent a jolt of strangely dull dismay through his body.

Oh, hell.
It took everything he had to straighten his neck against the momentum of the car and look up. Despite the darkness of the night Stan could make out the rapidly approaching pines through his windshield - and the turn just ahead that he could not make. Not at these speeds.

In the split-second before impact, Stan saw green.

Chapter End Notes

3 days till the finale... Can I crank out the next chapter by then? Probably not, but I'll try!
Chapter Notes

As always, thanks to Sarielle for the awesome character of Shermaine Pines.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Gravity Falls, August, 2012

Fiddleford, to his credit, had explained the best he could. Unfortunately, that didn’t mean much, considering the nature of the message he had to convey. His good intention was certainly lost on Ford as he paced fervently around the room, alternating between nervously picking at his fingers and simply wringing his hands in panic.

“Stanford,” Fiddleford tried. “This ain’t the way to -”

Ford stopped abruptly in his tracks. “My brother is an idiot,” he said blankly. “A complete knucklehead. How on Earth did he manage to delude himself into thinking that this was a - a remotely good idea? How did he even - What was he thinking?”

“By my reckonin’... he wasn’t. But from what I’m seein’ here, Stanford… right now, you ain’t doin’ much thinkin’ either.” The other man shook his head. “I’m sorry, Stanford, but there ain’t anythin’ you can do stompin’ around like that, other than wear down Tate’s new carpet.”

They looked at each other for a long moment. “Stanley made a deal,” Ford said finally, his tongue strangely heavy in his mouth, “with a creature from the other side of the portal. With - an entity that exists outside the dimensions, the one that drove you insane with a simple glimpse. All for the knowledge with which to rebuild the portal, to - to get me back. I don’t see how calm I can be under these particular circumstances, Fiddleford.”

“Well,” Fiddleford said, somewhat philosophically, “the ‘insane’ part was all me an’ my memory gun. All that the critter was responsible fer was givin’ me a few months of unendin’ nightmares and a brief glimpse at knowledge beyond all human comprehension.” He paused, then with a wild smile, “An’ everythin’ else is just good ol’ conjecture!”

“That… doesn’t exactly help, old friend.”

“Oh, I know,” the old man said dejectedly. “But, well, I - I don’t ‘xactly know what I can do t’ help.”

“...Fiddleford, are you sure you don’t know more?” Ford asked, just a hint of desperation creeping into his voice. “A… possible motive, or their whereabouts, or… anything at all -”

“An’ anythin’ I can offer would be just plain ol’ guessin’ on my part, Stanford.”

Ford let out a hiss of breath. “But what you’ve said, you’re certain of. Those - things were able to make contact with Stanley because of the sigil that I -” He paused, not wanting to explain the entire convoluted story in the limited time frame available to him.

“That ya accidentally branded on ‘im,” Fiddleford finished without missing a beat, and sighed. “No
need t’ explain, Stanford. Yer brother filled me on everythin’ that happened between ya two.”

“Well, yes,” Ford said, a tad awkwardly, suppressing the sudden, illogical desire to ask the other man exactly what his brother had thought about their altercation. “...That. You’re sure of it?”

His recollection of that brief moment of time might have been clouded by remnant anger, but it was defined in his memory by the hot rush of adrenaline in his veins and the sick, sour twist of guilt in his gut in the panicked moments afterwards. Over the years and decades, Ford had tried to justify it to himself - that he hadn’t known the brand was there, that, really, Stanley had been the one to pick the fight.

But nevertheless, it had been Stanford’s foot pinning his writhing brother to the burning surface, like a butterfly on display. Because, for those long seconds before the sound of screaming hit his ears and the smell of burnt cloth and - other things - became sickenly apparent, he had felt almost triumphant. He had thought, blood rushing in his ears, Stanford, now will you listen to me?

After that, it had been too late. In more ways than one.

“I’m sure, Stanford.” It is clear from the guilt written across his face that Fiddleford understood the implications of his question. “I saw, in the portal -” He fidgeted with his hands again, but stopped when Ford placed a hand over them. “...I can’t explain it, Stanford. I can’t explain anythin’ I saw on the other side, how I know anythin’ I know, but… the sigil is theirs. It’s what ties ‘em to this plane, how they can make contact with -”

And, it was this symbol that Ford had branded on his brother. For all he wanted to keep his family safe, to keep them from being hurt by all the various powers he dealt with on a daily basis… ironically, he had put the equivalent of a homing beacon on his own twin brother.

“I understand, Fiddleford,” he interrupted, a grimace on his face. “There’s no need to go on. I do have… one last question, however.”

The other man perked up, clearly eager to help in any way possible after all the bad news of the past few minutes.

“After my brother showed you the sigil, after you ran,” Ford tried, “did you have any further contact with him? I have to admit my confusion on that point, old friend. You did not mention any additional meetings, but you are very certain that - a deal was made, and I just want to clarify if...”

He trailed off, realizing Fiddleford’s only reaction to his query was stony silence. “...Fiddleford?”

“I don’t remember.”

“...Well, I can’t say it’s unsurprising - thirty years, of course, is a very long period of time -”

“No,” the other man interrupted, voice strained. “I don’t remember, Stanford. There - there used t’ be something there, but -”

“ - but not anymore,” Ford said, with slow realization. Meaning, not only had something happened, but whatever happened had been significant, terrible enough for Fiddleford to have scoured it from his own mind specifically.

“I’m - ‘m sorry, Stanford. Maybe - well, everythin’ else has been comin’ back, an’ maybe with a bit more time…”

“Don’t apologize, old friend,” he said heavily. “I’m afraid that time is something we do not have.
Tate had been kind enough to offer him a ride back to the Mystery Shack, though that did nothing to lessen the sheer tenseness that had permeated the twenty-or-so minutes the trip required. The younger man stared forward, eyes pointedly avoiding Ford’s general direction - as far as he could tell, what with Tate’s eyes perpetually hidden under his thick mane of hair.

It was clear that he had extended the offer for the sake of his father only. But, really, it was understandable. For all of Fiddleford’s protestations, it had been Stanford’s mistakes that had taken Tate’s father from his for almost three decades.

The car pulled into the lot outside of the Shack, and Tate unlocked the car doors without a word. There was a few strained seconds as Ford hesitated with his hand on the door, feeling as if he should say something but just not - knowing what.

“...Tate,” he said at last, “I’m… if you or your father need anything at all, if he experiences any relapses, or…” Ford sighed. “...If there’s any way I can help your father, please let me know. And if he’d rather never see me again, I understand completely. It’s the least I can do.”

The younger man made no reply. Weary but ultimately unsurprised, Ford eased himself out of the car and onto the gravel road, and slowly made his way down the path.

“Visit him again,” he heard, a gruff voice that came from behind him. Ford whipped his head around, and met Tate’s unwavering stare. “Dad likes seeing you.”

Before he could make any reply, the other man rolled up the window and pulled off onto the main road. Ford stared after him, momentarily speechless, the unfamiliar airy sensation of joy stirring in him.

He made his way to the door of the Shack, steps feeling strangely light, and let himself in. Ford switched on the lights, spirits dimming at the sight of the empty living room, devoid of everything - everyone that had turned the house into a home for him, over his past few weeks in this dimension. Out of the corner of his eye, the red light display on the landline blinked on and off.

Ford blinked and strode over, vaguely confused. Saved messages? Those certainly hadn’t been there when he had left the Shack that morning, which meant that someone had called since. Shermy, perhaps - after all, who else could it be?

He pressed the button. There was a loud click, and then the message played.

Bzzt - please leave a message after the - “Grunkle Ford! Grunkle Stan! Guess who it is!” Ford blinked at the familiar high squeal. Mabel? But -

“Mabel, I’m pretty sure they can guess who you are,” came a lower voice, sounding a tad annoyed but just as familiar as the first. “Uh, hi Grunkle Stan, Great-Uncle Ford. Sorry if it’s a bad time, but Mabel wouldn’t let me sleep if we didn’t call -”

“Hah! Like you were going to sleep anyways, Dip-dop! What, did I imagine that giant book you
were hiding under the covers? Didn’t Mom and Dad tell us not to read gross, germy library books in bed?”

“Mabel, that’s not what’s important right now! ...Besides, according to studies I’ve seen, library books aren’t much dirtier than the average doorknob -”

“Message is still recording, bro-bro.”

Dipper broke off suddenly. “Oh, uh. Sorry about that, I didn’t… Anyways! Mabel and I are calling because we just got home last night, and we wanted to just let you two know that we’re okay.”

There was no point in hiding the helplessly large smile that had spread over Ford’s face over the past minute or so, all of the worry and stress that had piled onto his shoulders in the past day melting away. These kids -

“...Just tell them, Dipper,” said Mabel, uncharacteristically serious. “Or I will.”

“I wanted to build up to it,” Dipper replied defensively. “I didn’t want to just -”

“Nonna - Grandma Shermy asked us a lot of weird questions about you two,” Mabel cut in. “...She called Dad right after we got back, and said she needed to talk to both of us. Mostly about Grunkle Stan’s fake IDs, and how he faked his death, and - mostly, if you two acted weird at all.”

“I think she meant, ‘how Stan acted while pretending to be Great-Uncle Ford.’ And, uh, about that...” Dipper trailed off. “We told her, by the way. Not about all the weird stuff that happened this summer, but just about how both of you are in Gravity Falls and some stuff about the portal. I don’t know if we were supposed to, and if we weren’t I’m sorry, but she said she already knew that you were both alive and some of the questions she asked were -”

“- weird,” his twin finished. “Really really weird. Like, she was worried about something and kinda scared, but she shouldn’t be! That’s why we explained, because she was acting like we were in danger or something - which we were! But I mean, not because of our Grunkles - and then she asked to talk to Dad, and he got kinda pale, and -”

“- anyways, we just wanted to let both of you know. It’s probably nothing, but... when Nonna gets that way about something, she’s really intense. Um,” Dipper swallowed audibly. “Uh, Grunkle Stan, Great-Uncle Ford - is something going on? She said Great-Uncle Ford called her about something but she didn’t say what, and... Mabel and I were just a bit worried.”

“Is - is it Bill?” Mabel asked quietly. “Was what we did with the - holding hands and the circle thing not enough? Do you need Dipper and I to come back? Because we’ll find a way - Dipper says my fake IDs are getting pretty good -”

“I said, “only if the person looking at it was blind,” Mabel.”

“Hey, you never know. I’ll take my victories where I can,” she said confidently.

“But yeah… Grunkle Stan, Great-Uncle Ford - stay safe, alright? ...Please. Mabel and I - we just got two grunkles, and we’ve taken down a lot of bad stuff but we can’t -” BEEP. Zero new messages available.

Ford stared forward at nowhere in particular, confusion and an odd feeling of foreboding clouding his mind. Why had Shermy asked Dipper and Mabel, of all people? Surely, she wouldn’t have involved the children for no good reason.
The only possibility in his mind that Shermy had found something in her investigations, and it - clearly hadn’t been good. Something that had been the straw that broke the camel’s back, and it was utterly telling that she had not contacted him for any kind of clarification.

But there was no point for speculation. His heart pounding a rapid staccato in his ears, Ford dialed his sister’s number.

The other end rang - once, twice, thrice, and then there was a click of connection.

“Hello?” Came Shermy’s voice through the speaker, terse and distracted, along with an odd whistling noise in the background. “...Actually, y’know what - whoever this is, I’m actually in the middle of something here, so if you could call back later -”

“Shermy,” Ford said quickly, “it’s me.”

She was quiet, and after almost a minute of that nervous silence, Ford’s resolve weakened enough for him to continue on. “It’s - Stanford, Sherm. I think we need to talk. I received a phone call from Dipper and Mabel, and -”

“I know it’s you, Ford,” Shermy said heavily. “No fucking shit we need to talk.”

He blinked, shocked at the sudden rancor. “I don’t understand,” Ford said carefully, heart racing under his forced calm. “Did you… find out something about Stanley?”

She gave a disbelieving, almost hysterical bark of laughter. “Yeah, you can say that.”

“Shermy,” Ford said, somewhat tersely. What was she not saying? “I swear to you, I don’t know anything about what Stanley may or may not have done. But - that’s not important right now. I have new information that suggests that he might be in very serious trouble, and -”

“Stanley,” Shermy said clearly, a knife-sharp edge in her voice, “is dead, Ford.”

“...What?”

“You wanted to know what I found out about Stanley? That’s what I found out. He’s been dead for thirty years and something happened this summer that made you -” She cut off, her ragged breaths coming through the speaker as clear as day. “I just - don’t understand, Ford. You can complain about joint pain and teenagers all ya want, but you aren’t that old. And, after all these years, why now?”

His hand clenched against the body of the receiver. “I’m sorry, I don’t - ” Ford swallowed, grasping for some foothold in the influx of new information he had no idea how to deal with. “Shermy, didn’t you investigate? There must have been - police records, or -”

“There sure as hell were,” his sister said blandly. “Didja know there was a whole police investigation into the crash? It was ruled as a homicide, Ford. Guess cut brakes weren’t the most inconspicuous way to off a guy. Maybe half a dozen guys ended up indicted, part of some drug dealing group that was doing shit straight out of an internet horror story - y’know, picking up people off the streets to use as mules across the border. I don’t know how Stanley was involved, but God…I have a pretty good guess.”

She paused, regrouping herself, and Ford was too confused to interrupt. “...Anyways, there was a ton of stuff in that file. Turns out, this case started off a whole series of arrests and convictions. People started pointin’ fingers, rattin’ each other out. What I’m getting at is… it was a damn detailed file. Testimonies, records,” and Shermy’s voice turned choked. “Pictures.”
Ford’s brother always called him the world’s dumbest genius, but in this instance, he knew exactly what his sister was hinting on. But the words remained stuck in his throat, and no matter how quickly he whirled through mental possibilities, he couldn’t think of another.

He knew his brother had made a deal, but he hadn’t known the answer to the most important question of all - in what circumstances would Stanley - who so disliked the supernatural and Ford’s obsession with mysteries - say yes?

What did ‘they’ offer him? Ford had automatically assumed that Stanley had simply hit a dead-end in his work on the portal. But why hadn’t he done so earlier? Another scenario was emerging rapidly from Ford’s whirling thoughts, and

It came out as little more than a croak. “It was him?”

“...It was him,” Shermy confirmed tersely. “I could tell, he looked just like Isa -” She swallowed down whatever she wanted to say. “...Ma and Pa must’ve been able to, too. He - musta been thrown out the front, or... Goddamn it, Ford. I never wanted to see him like that. The funeral was bad enough.”

But that would mean that Stanley had died in that crash. But that would mean -

‘They’ must have brought him back, Ford thought vehemently, frantically to himself, clutching the receiver so hard he couldn’t feel his fingers. Some way or another, because Ford knew his brother. And there was no question that the man who had brought him back through the portal, had saved him from Bill’s Fearamid, was Stanley Pines.

Because if it wasn’t, that would mean Ford didn’t know his brother at all.

When Shermy spoke again, there was a new edge in her voice. “And damn you, Ford. You knew about it. Don’t tell me you didn’t. I’ve seen the interview transcripts - you came out and told ‘em everything they needed to find those - the guys who... did that to him. Sure, there were others too, some waitress from the local diner or somethin’ like that. But the key witness was you. You - you knew.”

"I - what?"

Her voice went quiet. “...Ya know, I never knew you two talked so much back then. From what Ma said, I just thought you two went your separate ways for ten years. In hindsight, that’s pretty ridiculous, huh? With all you’ve done for me, there’s no way you would’ve let Stanley go. Not completely.”

“That’s -” exactly what happened, Ford didn’t admit. “Sherm, that wasn’t me,” he said instead, words coming out in a rush. “...It was Stanley who gave all that testimony. But, it’s - so much more complicated than you think -”

“Our dead brother testified about his own murder,” Shermy said flatly. “Ford, just - I’ll be honest, this looks pretty damn bad right now. If it wasn’t for Dipper and Mabel -”

“Dipper and Mabel,” he repeated, eyes wide. “...That’s right! You asked them about Stanley, and - they told you, didn’t they? They spent the entire summer with him, for God’s sake - “

“They told me that there was an interdimensional portal underneath your old tourist trap, and that the real you was some sci-fi adventurer trapped on the other side. That you - that Stanley was pretending to be you all along in order to bring the real you back through. Am I missing anything?”
Ford blinked. "...Well, actually, that sounds - about right."

Shermy made an odd noise, halfway between a choked laugh and a strangled sob. "...Yeah. That’s what I meant."

“Shermy…” His sister thought he was insane, and that was the last thing Ford needed at this point, on top of everything else. Ford floundered, thinking and almost immediately dismissing any idea he had to convince Shermy of the reality to his claims. "...Do you think I would have willingly told those children about my past with Stanley?"

“No,” she said heavily. "I don’t think so. And - I’ll be damn honest with you, Ford. That little bit of doubt… plus everything you’ve done for me during those years… that’s the only reason I’m coming up here without backup. Maybe talking things through face to face will help. ...Or maybe it won’t.”

“Coming up here - ?” Ford listened to the sounds from the other end. Really listened. The slight hum of ambience noise that he had initially written off - that was the sound of wind at high speeds.

“You’re driving right now. You’re driving to Gravity Falls right now.”

There was no reply, which in this situation, was as good as an affirmation. His heart skipped a beat.

“No, no, Shermy, this - really isn’t a good time -”

“I’ll see you soon, bro,” Shermy said without inflection, and hung up.

“Sherm,” Ford pleaded, even after he heard that telltale click.

Slowly, he lowered the receiver and pressed his other hand to his mouth. He felt ill, the shock of everything happening too fast, too much. His brother was dead. His brother made a deal. His brother was alive. But now - his brother was gone, and Shermy thought he had gone mad, and despite it all, Ford’s initial, fundamental question remained unanswered.

Where was Stanley?

Every clue that had been left for him had been explored. Fiddleford had given him a lot of information, but not an answer. His talk with Shermy had been disastrous. And Stanley’s journal… had put him on the path to finding his old friend and research partner, but was otherwise quite useless. If there was a reason why Stanley had hid the thing, Ford didn’t know it now.

Except, there was one last person he could ask, wasn’t there?

Though, ‘person’ might not be the best choice of words.

Stanford got to his feet, a tad unsteadily, and started to walk. It was an awful idea. An absolutely terrible one.

But what other option was there? Every other alternative had been tried and discarded, and now Ford was on a time limit, with Shermy already on her way up to Oregon and demanding explanations.

The journals had burned during the Weirdmageddon - Dipper had told him afterwards, guilt in his eyes as if he thought Ford would blame their loss on him. The destruction of decades of work had hit hard, and Mabel had been ready to call for the ambulance for a nervous few minutes, but - there would be plenty of time to rebuild his records. The truly irreplaceable things had survived the apocalypse intact.

But though the summoning circles and materials were lost along with the tomes, his memory of them remained as clear as day. Some nights, he saw them behind his eyelids.
Ford made his way down the stairs unsteadily, squinting his eyes against the darkness as he took careful steps into the unknown. Ever since he had dismantled the portal all those weeks ago, the basement had been quiet, the ambient sounds of machinery gone with the loss of supplied power. It had made for a useful, if slightly eerie workplace while he brainstormed weapons and inventions to stop Bill in his tracks.

...He hadn’t been down here since the end of Weirdmageddon. He hadn’t had much reason to, after all - with the children and Stanley upstairs, planning parties and dragging him into Ducktective marathons, any further investigations into the town’s weirdness or scientific innovation had been pushed to the back of his mind.

But now they were gone, all of them, and Ford was alone, again.

In the encompassing darkness that carpeted the basement laboratory, a single light burned a furious orange-red. It came from a distance, emitting from the side of a vertical surface, and while Ford couldn’t quite make out what it was, he took a few steps forward and squinted -

Oh.

Ford swallowed, a cold sensation congealing at the base of his stomach. Had that - always been on? He certainly hadn’t noticed if it was, and it didn’t quite make sense, seeing how that drew on the same source of power as the portal and every other piece of machinery in the laboratory.

Unless they knew he was coming.

The lights no longer worked, but Ford’s lantern shone well enough in the darkness that he was able to make his way through with only minimal stumbling over exposed wires and various debris. He crouched down and set the light at his feet, before palming the piece of chalk he always kept in his pockets (just in case.)

He drew the circle first, ignoring the nauseous twist of his gut and quieted the voice that screamed at him to stop, what was he doing, you don’t know that the barrier between dimensions can hold entirely, you’re damning the entire universe and he could come back. Then, each segment, each symbol - the six-fingered hand, the shooting star, the pine tree, and so on - surrounding the sigil that Ford had branded on his brother, three decades earlier. The circle that had sent Bill and his monstrosities back where they had come from.

The same circle that might bring his brother back.

The very moment Ford connected the final line, the entire summoning circle burst into white-hot flame. He flinched back and away from the heat, but the fire didn’t spread from its initial confines. Then, just as quickly as it came, the circle of flame extinguished itself, leaving only the sigil glowing a vivid...

...Pale green?

Ford straightened up, suddenly very aware of the weight of a heavy gaze boring into his back.

YOU

Ford steeled himself - this was for stanley this was for stanley - and turned around slowly.

What stared back at him had him caught halfway between horror and fascination, but again, that had been the default state of Stanford Pines toward any oddity or monstrosity of the past four decades. Yet, he just - couldn’t look away, not from this infinitely shifting mass of -
Whatever they were, they weren’t a corporeal being. There seemed to be no strict separation between their form and the rest of the hungry darkness - for all Ford could tell, they were one and the same.

He stared forward into nothingness, a void, a space without, where odd tendrils of something twitched and writhed, that flickered odd translucent shades of hues that his very human eyes struggled to translate into true comprehension.

Almost instinctually, Ford found himself searching frantically for something that he could look at, something he could understand - and latched onto eyes of a familiar, sickly shade of pale green.

...No, they weren’t eyes, not by even the loosest definition, seeing how they lacked any kind of anatomy traditionally associated with them. But there was too much of an odd intensity in them for them to just be the pinpricks of light they seemed to be, and they were the one part of the entity that Ford could look at without feeling vaguely nauseous.

For all the rest of the entity seemed to exist outside of natural laws, Ford saw something within them that was - not human, but at least a kind of consciousness.

There were six of those ‘eyes’, pinpointing him as one, and he remembered suddenly what Fiddleford had told him. About what he had seen beyond the rift, about what this thing was -

“Six-Sights.” It came out surprisingly clearly, given the dryness of his mouth. The entity’s eyes dimmed in response, as if it was narrowing its eyes - and Ford really had to stop giving human qualities to clearly inhuman creatures, an instinct that thirty years of experience really should have broke him out of.

WHY ARE YOU HERE

It was as if each word landed with a dull thud finality, conveyed through a media that was not quite sound and not quite thought. They just were, not quite English or any of the dozens of alien languages Ford had picked up on the other side, but Ford could understand every word perfectly. It did not seem to have the mechanisms for speaking, but he had no real desire to look back into the madness to find out.

Under normal circumstances, Ford would be jotting down notes eagerly, because this was an oddity that he had never seen the likes of before in all 58 years of his life - like weirdness personified. But these was no ordinary situation. It had taken his brother, and any sense of wonder or excitement he held was forced to the back of his mind in favor of cold, numbing fury.

His hands clenched at his sides. “You know why I’m here,” Ford said, as calmly as he could manage. “...Where is he? Where is my brother?”

Chapter End Notes

THIRTY YEARS AND NOW IT’S BACK
THE MYSTERY FIC IN THE MYSTERY SHACK

(aka I really have no excuse for how ridiculously late this is, so I'll kick my own ass and start working on the next. shamelessly admitting this is seriously not my best work but i
couldn't keep editing it for another month, so)
You said you can give me anything, huh? The ol’ money, fame, infinite power kind of deal. Anything I want. What are ya going to offer me next, my own galaxy?

...Save it. I don’t need any of that, I told ya already. I don’t care what happens to me.

I just want my brother back.

They tried to pull themselves up, dull fingertips scrabbling helplessly against cracked wood until they bled. Their trembling legs did nothing to hold them up, but instinct drove him to grab onto an outreached branch with both hands.

For a long moment, they simply stood. He took a single breath in and they exhaled, air whistling through their teeth.

They felt the cutting cold of the early morning wind raising goosebumps on exposed skin, the roughness of the bark digging into his hands, the softness of the dirt under their feet, the warm glow of the flaming star just barely visible over the horizon.

Then, slowly, they blinked.

Aw hell, was he naked?

Gravity Falls, August, 2012

His words hung in the long silence that stretched between. The entity seemed agitated by the question, its eyes blazing a harsher, more poisonous shade of green as its tendrils formed and reformed, almost nervously, faster than his eyes could follow.

GONE There was a heavy pause. LEAVE, NOW

Despite the circumstances, Ford could not help but laugh out loud, a single bark of it that echoed strangely in the empty laboratory. The pinpricks of green light dilated, almost imperceptibly.

After everything, all the maddening revelations and disturbing truths of the past day, was it even possible for him to simply let it go? With Shermy on her way up to the Shack and a straitjacket practically in the backseat, with Dipper and Mabel asking earnest questions that Ford had no idea how to answer, with all the risks he had taken to bring this creature here - how could he possibly turn back now?

“No,” he said, with a calm that he did not feel, ignoring the ambient hum that spoke of danger to his gut instincts. “No, I don’t think so. You manipulated my brother into making a deal with you, thirty years ago. He is gone, yes. But you know what happened to him. You know where I can find him.”

YOU CANNOT
Ford let out a breath; in truth, he had already known. The deal Stanley had made allowed him to escape death, and that was something humanity, for all its achievements and progress, would never quite reach. The answer to his question never had been a physical location.

“But you can,” Ford said slowly. “You did before, didn’t you?”

The effect was instantaneous. The entity exploded into frantic, panicked action, losing what little of coherent mass it had to be everywhere at once. Pinpricks of eerie green light decorated the floors and walls.

Then they were there, mere feet, inches in front of his pale face, and in the shock of movement, Ford fell backwards and landed hard on his bottom. The intensity of the light from their saucer-sized eyes forced him to look away, eyes helplessly watering.

Despite all else, they did not touch him. Ford wasn’t sure what the substance cosmic horrors were made of could do to human skin and flesh, and he was thankful not to have to find out.

**L E A V E, SIXER**

Ford whipped his head around, eyes narrowing against the light. “...Sixer?”

The entity made no movement in response, seemingly frozen. But Ford didn’t need much more - just hearing the sound of that familiar epithet sent a jolt of sick realization through him, the phantom sensation of electric shock on bare skin momentarily distracting him from his present situation. Almost unconsciously, he reached up, towards the still healing skin of his neck.

“You work for Bill Cipher.”

NO

Surprisingly, they shrank back slightly at that, giving Ford some well-needed breathing space. He pushed himself back up, gritting his teeth past the dull pain of recent wounds not quite healed, and met the thing eye to eldritch abomination equivalent. “You did. You know the name he called me. You’re from the same damn place he is.”

Six-Sights made no reply, and in a split-second moment of epiphany, Ford realized there was an opportunity there. “Bill’s gone,” he said vehemently, and took a step forward. The creature shrank back. “He’s beaten, banished from this dimension, along with every single one of his henchmaniacs. They’re trapped in their rotting prison dimension, until the end of time.”

With every foot of forward distance he gained, the entity retreated just as far into the distance. It was actively avoiding him, and the realization sent the warm thrill of triumph through his veins. Could it be afraid of him?

“Humanity did that,” Ford told them, then as if sharing a personal victory - because in a way, it was: “I did that. And I can do it again. Unless...” He trailed off to take a moment to wet his dry mouth, because now was the true decisive moment. “Unless you lend me assistance in my endeavor. You clearly have the power to bring back my brother. Return him, and...”

He swallowed, hard. The idea of anything like the creature before him existing in this dimension, in this town, was nauseating, but... “I’ll turn a blind eye to your continued existence in this dimension.”

It was a bluff, of course - one that relied on far too many unknowns for Ford to comfortably resort to, but he had no other choice. He didn’t have all the members of the zodiac, what with Dipper and Mabel back in Piedmont and Stanley... obviously incapacitated. Nor did he know, for sure, that the
same ritual would work against this particular entity - which, if Fiddleford was correct, was far more powerful and incomprehensible than Bill himself. Yet, incorporation in this reality seemed to have weakened the creature greatly - after all, a mere glimpse of its form had driven Fiddleford insane.

YOU CANNOT they said suddenly, final as a death knell. Ford halted in his tracks, feet physically frozen to the ground even before the thought to do so went through his mind. The entity was retreating no longer, all signs of vulnerability replaced by a second wind of confidence. It simply lingered, sending the force of half a dozen stares his way. WE ARE TETHERED TO THIS DIMENSION, STANFORD FILBRICK PINES

“A tether?” Ford asked with trepidation, over the cold clench of his heart. “What do you -”

WE REQUIRED AN ANCHOR IN THIS DIMENSION they paused, unmoving other than the slow background squirming of its various limbs and appendages within its odd subspace of existence. STAN PINES BARGAINED WITH HIS SOUL

The words hit like a physical blow, and for a second that felt like centuries, Ford felt all breath knocked out of his lungs. Then logical thinking and experience emerged, and a kind of uncertain relief arose within him.

A literal deal with the devil, and it sounded almost ridiculously cliche, selling a soul - even Bill’s pact with him had been based on use of his body as a physical form to carry out his bigger plans. None of the various supernatural creatures he had come across in Gravity Falls and the countless alien civilizations had the slightest desire or use for the metaphysical concept that was a life or soul. In fact, back when he had still believed the demon to be a muse, he had brought up the trope as a matter of curiosity.

Hah! Think about it, would ya Sixer? What would I even do with a thing like a soul - collect them like a stamp collection? Can’t do anything with ‘em. Total waste, like using a supernova to heat up a swimming pool, really, and then the ol’ reaper reams me out about edging on his territory and destroying property. Ugh. Lemme tell ya, Sixer, those things are wa-ay more trouble than they’re worth.

(In retrospect, he probably should have seen Bill’s betrayal coming.)

They were lying, they simply wanted to scare him off and challenge him to abandon his quarry. They had to be.

“Creature, I want the truth,” Ford said - choked out, really. His voice sounded weak and raspy to even his own ears, despite all of his previous justifications to himself. “You have no need of souls. If you want me to believe that’s what my brother gave up in this deal -”

WHY WOULD WE NOT

A SOUL IS ENERGY they intoned. A HOLE IN THE WORLD - AN EXISTENCE - AN ACCUMULATION OF WASTED POTENTIAL AND UNSPENT LIFE

For a long moment, they were quiet - then, at last, FUEL

It was the most the creature had spoken since its summoning, but at the same time, it had also said close to nothing. Regardless, the implications of their words had Ford reeling. The pieces were there, ready to connect if only he had the slightest urge to do so - which, of course, he didn’t.

...But then, he had been hiding from truth for far too long to do so again. What reason would this
entity have to lie? If they truly wanted to be left alone, they would have sent him on some fool’s errand to some other being.

Ford let out a breath. It made sense, in its twisted way. After thirty years, they had finally collected on its price. Stanley must had known it was coming - that must had been why he had left quietly, in the middle of the night, without a word to Ford or the children.

His brother - the idiot, the absolute knucklehead - hadn’t wanted his family to get involved. If only Ford could tell Stanley how completely counterintuitive that had been - their sister would never leave without answers, and with her came the entire rest of the extended family.

Ford looked up, directly at the thing that had taken his brother from him. “My terms haven’t changed,” he said flatly. As it turned out, the exchange was just far more direct than he had expected. “Give me my brother back, and you can remain… tethered to this dimension. I will not interfere.”

NO

He gritted his teeth. “…What more do you want?” Ford demanded, mind already whirring in thought. Anything more might put the world, the universe in danger… but that was a problem that could be faced after.

WE CANNOT GIVE YOU YOUR BROTHER BACK

“…What?” Ford asked, stunned. He had not planned for this. “Why?”

THERE IS NOTHING TO RETURN

Their eyes flared a poisonous green. FUEL MUST BE BURNED TO BE USED

There was a long, long silence before the other shoe dropped. “No,” Ford said finally, thickly, struggling with a tongue that felt strangely heavy in his mouth. The revelation hit almost physically. Almost involuntarily, he took a step back and away - but he couldn’t look away from them, despite it all. “No. You are lying to me, creature. I, I would know if Stanley was… He can’t be -”

Would he?

And just like that, came the flash of pure, searing anger burning a trail through his veins. “You - you did this,” He choked out. Ford hadn’t felt this kind of fury since the other side of the portal, those thirty years of scavenging and surviving to find, invent something that could destroy the demon that hurt him. It was automatic, now, the categorization of weaknesses, the mental list already emerging of possible weapons and energy sources that could work -

STAN PINES WAS ALREADY DEAD they said, drawing forward confidently.

Ford knew. He wished deeply that he didn’t.

He had lost his brother long ago, and he had no idea until now. The realization sapped the adrenaline from his limbs, the rage pressing on his chest. He suddenly felt very, very old.

“But you can’t bring him back, like you did before. Because…” - edging on his territory and destroying property - “- there’s nothing to bring back, is there. You - burned him. Stanley’s gone.”

The silence was damning.
And then, Ford crumpled forward, legs numb and unsteady underneath him. His knees hit the ground hard, sending a jolt of pain through his body despite the protective coarseness of his pants. At the corner of his eyes, the entity froze in their metaphorical step.

He couldn’t bring himself to care, not through the haze of grief clouding his mind, the thunder-loud sound of his heart beating blocking out all sound from his ears. His mind struggled to comprehend, truly understand the facts laid before him. For all the suffering he had experienced on the other side of the portal, he had gone through them knowing, or at least assuming, that Stanley was safe and sound in normal human civilization.

Even before then, during that long decade apart, Ford had expected his brother to be doing - if not well, but at least surviving. After all, Ma had given him occasional updates, even if he had pretended not to care when the calls came his way. And maybe, just maybe, he kept the television on at ungodly hours just to catch a glimpse of a familiar face in a ridiculous commercial.

He knew better now, of course, what exactly his brother had gone through on the streets - but then. His brother had always been there, even when he wasn’t.

But now was different. Because, because, because -

*Stanley’s gone.*

And he was, by every definition there was. In seconds, Ford mentally drew up and rejected every manner of resurrection he could think of. There was no body to reanimate, no ghost to reincarnate, no - no soul to pull back from whatever kind of afterlife that existed. Nothing he knew about science or the supernatural could help him, not when it mattered the most. Not now.

He felt hollowed out. After all this time, Ford had finally managed to learn more about his brother and the life he had made for himself in his absence. After the lengths he had gone to in his investigation, after Stanley’s unfinished journal and the call to Shermy and the voicemail from -

Oh, God. Dipper and Mabel.

That, in the end, was the breaking straw. Ford barely recognized the growing wetness of his eyes. He didn’t notice when the first tear hit the ground.

**WHY**

“Leave,” Ford said without looking up, too broken to even muster up hatred. Oh, how the tables have turned. “Leave now.”

But they lingered. If he didn’t know better, he would have said they seemed uncomfortable.

**GO TO YOUR FAMILY, STANFORD FILBRICK PINES** they said at long last, words as flat and unreadable as always, but there was something else there as well. Almost imperceptibly, the intensity of their eye-lights dimmed. **STANLEY PINES WAS NEVER WORTH ANYTHING TO ANYONE**

Ford whipped his head up, wide eyes meeting all six of the creature’s. “How dare you,” he said, breathless with anger, a hand instinctually flying to his side, reaching for a plasma blaster that he no longer carried. Still, his fists ached for a weapon, any weapon, even those brass knuckles that Stanley had always favored. “You don’t know *anything* about my brother.”

Fury brought new energy to his limbs - he was up and forward in seconds, unsure of what he could
do the creature in front of him, but impossibly certain that he would do *something* to make them regret their words.

Because, if there was one thing he had learned over the course of his investigation, it was that Stanley Pines was loved. There was an easy closeness between him and the younger twins that Ford could never hope to find for himself - that, if he was honest, he was incredibly envious of. He was an important figure with a life and history in this little town of Gravity Falls, with a population that - righteously - saw him as a hero. He had found friends and family here, be it with the handyman Soos or the redhead who manned the cash register - or even the waitress at the local diner.

For all he was a cheat, a liar, a con-man, when it came down to it, he was a man who would give up anything for the people he loved. He was - a good person.

That was something Ford could not say for himself. He didn’t belong here, with the people he had hurt with his inadvertent actions. He didn’t deserve to be happy, didn’t deserve to be *alive* when Stanley had died for him.

He faltered in his step when realization hit. A moment later, the beginnings of a plan emerged.

It… wasn’t a good one. But it would do.

“You’re still here,” Ford said out loud. “Still - tethered to this dimension.”

**YES** they said, a note of confusion there that he might have subconsciously inserted himself. It didn’t matter.

“You still have the energy to keep yourself here,” he continued, and went for the metaphorical kill. “You still have the *fuel*.”

Ford could practically see the moment the realization hit the entity that he knew, though he would never be able to explain how. He continued on regardless, talking even faster to get his spiel out before Six-Sights made their move. “I know that Stanley’s still there. Some of him. Somewhere. I know you’re using what’s left of him up in order to stay in this dimension - and that there is nothing I can offer you that can outweigh that.”

His smile showed teeth. “Except, energy is energy. All you need is something to tether you to this reality. ...It doesn’t have to be Stanley, does it?”

**NO, NO, NO**

He ignored it. “I do want to make a deal with you, Six-Sights,” Ford said, as clearly as he could, and tried to stop his hands from trembling. “I want you to return Stanley Pines to life, as close to his original state as you are able. I want you to leave my family alone. And in return -”

**DON’T YOU DARE**

“- you can have anything you need from me.” Ford finished. Though slightly confused by the creature’s vehemence, he knew it was just a matter of sweetening the pot, so to say. “I’m the one who sealed the door between dimensions. I know how to cast creatures like you out. My brother doesn’t. He can’t do anything to stop you.”

**NO**

He gritted his teeth. Surely it wasn’t that hard? “I *said*, take me instead.”
YOU DO NOT UNDERSTAND WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO YOU

“I don’t care what happens to me,” Ford said clearly, meeting their eyes without reservation. “I just want my brother back.”

There was a long moment of tension-filled silence. The entity seemed frozen in place, even its many tendrils stilled and its eyes widened to the size of dinner plates.

Suddenly, they moved. Ford had seen them angry, furious, agitated - but nothing like this. The creature seemed to somehow expand in size, its tendrils reaching forward and drawing back, fumbling over each other like a bucket of electric eels. There were sparks, too, not of electricity but of an energy that he had never seen, that flashed colors that hurt his eyes to see, from a spectrum that even mantis shrimp would not be able to see. The intensity of their eyes became almost blinding.

He felt heavy, suddenly, as if several dozen pounds of pressure had been placed on him on all directions. There was a crackle of energy in the air, the faint smell of ozone, and he had not planned for any of this.

Then, they spoke.

FORD, YOU ARE A GODDAMN IDIOT

“What -” Ford said blankly, pure shock eclipsing any kind of logical thought -

- and that was all he got out before a very human fist slammed hard into the right side of his face, and sent him sprawling.

His head whipped automatically to the side, and Ford stumbled back just a few steps before he fell hard on his bottom. Instinctually, he pressed a hand over the emerging, tender bruise on his face, glanced up -

- and froze.

“ - and a complete knucklehead. Explain this to me, Poindexter - how the hell can a guy have such big ears and hear so bad? ‘Don’t do anything stupid,’ I said. And what didja do? Something stupid. How the hell did you think it was a good idea to get involved and try to sell your damn soul -”

“‘Hear so badly,’” Ford corrected automatically, unable to tear his eyes away, complete confusion and the sheer number of questions he had made it impossible to form an actual relevant reply. “Grammar, Stanley. And - you wrote that, in your note. You didn’t say it.”

“Save it, Ford, you know what I meant - oh.” There was a long pause, as the speaker blinked and took in the situation. They shuffled their feet, a bit awkwardly. “Shit, uh.”

Ford stared, speechlessly, in front of him. There was a humanoid figure half-hidden in the shadows in front of him, dressed in a familiar black suit but missing the distinctive fez. What little he could see of their face was achingly familiar - it was, after all his own.

"I didn’t mean to... I mean, hell, I didn't know I could still -”

“Stanley?”

The figure slumped slightly in defeat, and turned slightly into the light. Now, Ford could see how the sharp cut of the Mr. Mystery suit blurred strangely at the edges, how their right hand occasionally unraveled into - something else. The other, however, was still clenched into a left hook.
And then, those now sickeningly familiar eyes, now partially hidden behind glasses frames that did nothing to obscure their pale green glow.

All six of them.

“Yeah. Mostly. It’s - a long story, Sixer.”

Chapter End Notes

yay, stanley’s back! kind of

next chapter: ford finally gets the whole truth and doesn’t like it (lets just say ford was more wrong than he was right... and 6sights, the opposite), sibling bickering, and flashback to stan’s (?) first meeting with our ol’ friend bill cipher!

EDIT: for an incredibly written tag to this chapter, featuring shermy’s thoughts during her drive up north... check out sarielle's newest chapter of the pines family scrapbook! [http://archiveofourown.org/works/6039937/chapters/15670912]
CHAPTER ELEVEN

Chapter Notes

After what, three weeks of radio silence, I have officially realized that every instance of me going, "Yeah, I have a lot of time this week, I'll get the chapter done early" translates to it coming out a day /late./ So no more of that.

A special, special thank you to Sarielle who betaed this chapter for me and stopped me from going mad with power (read: run-ons, Zalgo text overload, you name it, they fixed it.)

Anyways, this chapter was supposed to have more Stan+Ford interactions, except the flashback completely got away from me. So hello, 6k word chapter. You're welcome.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gravity Falls, August, 2012

Ford couldn't look away, his mind racing through everything he had known - he had thought he had known, scrambling helplessly for an answer in the dozens of possibilities and conclusions that came automatically to the foreground of his brain.

Nothing made sense. The mismatched jigsaw pieces of information he had compiled over days of investigation seemed worthless and ridiculous in the face of the very real truth, standing just a few feet from him, fidgeting almost sheepishly and giving him a look of mild concern.

"So, uh," Stanley said, word gravelly with disuse, "are ya gonna say anythin', or... should I go?"

His words were white noise to Ford's ears, whizzing right past his concern as he attempted to school his thoughts and focus on the first matter at hand. "Stanley, you're alive," he breathed. "You're here."

"...Yeah." It's said with a shrug, and he has to fight the automatic, instinctual urge to chide his brother for it. Ma had hated the habit, had said it was something turtles did, not a respectable young man - "For now, at least."

"How is this possible?" Ford demanded, to no one in particular. "The entity, they said you gave up your soul, they said you were gone -"  

He stopped. That thundering voice was gone, and so was that oppressive presence that had threatened to bring him to his knees. All that was left was Stanley, with his flickering form and the piercing pin pricks of green light that shone from the shadows of his face -

"You're possessed," he breathed, horror quickly sobering his muddled mind.

His brother grimaced. "Come on, Ford. Just let me explain-"

"Get out of him!" Ford demanded, ignoring the other's protests. Panic seized his heart - he, of all people, knew what it was like to share a body with a creature utterly distanced from humanity in both thought and form.
Because 'sharing' was inaccurate, really. A finite mortal life was nothing in comparison to an omnipotent being millennia old - like Bill, like this thing. He himself had been dragged along for the ride, kicking and screaming, by the metaphysical equivalent of a comet. And the thought of his brother, even now, suffering the same… "Whatever my brother did, I'll - "

"We can't."

Stanley's (?) blazing eyes belied his - their? - tenuous surface calm. "This hasn't got anything to do with possession, Sixer. Think about it. It's not like I got a body to share, remember?" He winced. "Since, well… assumin' you talked to Sherm, ya know what happened."

Ford stood up, wobbling slightly on unsteady legs. His heart clenched coldly as his brother's words registered in his mind. "You died, you - mean." Even with his best efforts, his voice cracked on the last word.

"...Yeah, sounds about right." His brother looked slightly sheepish, the effect was belied slightly by the inhuman glow of his eyes. "For the record, it wasn't exactly what we imagined."

Ford snapped his head up, cold realization washing over him like a wave. "...You said 'we,' just now. And before..." When Ford had made his demands - Stanley hadn't answered as himself. He had answered as if he was… "What are you? What are you really?"

"I'm - Stan," he swallowed. "Your brother." There was a long, heavy pause before Stanley continued. "Just... something else as well."

"Something." That, at least, comes out clear. It takes no thought at all for Ford to reach the next conclusion, as much as he didn't want to. "...You're Six-Sights. The entity from before."

They nodded, a look of clear discomfort written over his face. "Yeah, well. 'Stanley' is fine, ya know. Or 'Stan.' We'd prefer it. Thirty years bein' called something, it just kind of... sticks."

"Thirty years," Ford echoed, mouth painfully arid. "You've been like this for - thirty years."

Ever since his brother had first made the deal under… extenuating circumstances, no doubt. But even more uncomfortably, it meant that his brother had not been entirely himself for the entire time Ford had been in this dimension. Despite the past few weeks of paranoia and anxiety, he hadn't even noticed that some kind of cosmic monster had been hitching a ride on his own twin.

"Stanley, I - I can help you." He said suddenly, urgently. Everything his brother heard, the entity heard as well - but this was something his brother had to know. That this time, Ford wouldn't fail him. "I know a dozen different exorcism rituals from several alien civilizations - even if this is not a standard situation, they should have some degree of viability."

"Yeesh, Ford." They paused, then said, slowly and evenly, with every word carefully enunciated. "We told you already. It's not gonna work. It's - " There was a huff of exhaled breath."...Not what you think. Look, ya chased us down, ignored every damn thing I told ya not to do - well, ya got what you wanted. I'll explain everything to you, Sixer. We swear. Just... listen, alright? For the first goddamn time in our lives."

They stared at each other for almost a minute before Ford nodded once, a sudden, reluctant jerk of his head.

"We never wanted to tell you all of this, alright?" Stanley said suddenly, plaintively. "We didn't want you to know. But you just had to -" He cut off abruptly. "What we said before. About the anchor and the fuel and - all 'f that. We weren't just sayin' that to scare you off. I'm not - We're not - "
"What?" Ford demanded, desperate. "What are you talking about?"

"We're – we're not really him."

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**Gravity Falls, March, 1982**

The lone figure in the woods glanced down in vague dismay.

Crap. There was no way in hell no one noticed the raging fireball careening into the forest, and he did not want to be there when people finally showed and started asking, uh. *Interesting* questions.

Seriously, if the cops were gonna catch him buck naked in the middle of a damn forest, then it had better be for better reasons than this.

They took the first step forward. His bare foot landed directly on a sharp twig, and they sucked in a breath immediately at the novelty sensation of pain. The faint sounds of car doors slamming and human murmuring, however, sent a jolt of familiar fear that they could not stop to second-guess.

He ran.

Thoughts flew through their mind to the beat of each impact of his feet on the hard ground. Get back to the Shack without getting found, lie blatantly when the cops eventually showed up to ask questions, and… figure out what the hell was going on. His recent memories were nothing more than a confused muddle of semi-coherent images, but he knew better than to straighten them out in the middle of the woods.

They wiped idly at their right eyes, shivered briefly against the cold wind of the morning, and popped the fur hood of his jacket over their head. Foliage crunched harmlessly under his boots as they forged on.

It was a long walk into town, but without the familiar burn of exertion in his legs, he barely noticed the distance. Early in the morning, the streets of Gravity Falls were empty of people. Thankfully so, because he wasn’t too pleased with the prospect of the old pair from the convenience store, or any other person living in this ridiculous town, catching a glimpse of his bare a-

He glanced down at his gloved hands, partially obscured by long sleeves, and paused in sudden bewilderment.

He could’ve sworn that -

It had hurt without them. They wanted these - the ripped-up pants, the threadbare red jacket, even the shoes with soles so thin he had been able to feel every other piece of sharp gravel under his feet. Clothing like this had served him well in the past decade, had shielded him from snow and rain and the cold that settled deep in his bones, had kept him together and going as he watched light slowly illuminate dark sky through the cracked windshield of hi - their car.

They knew because they had seen -

He stilled, finally taking in the presence of the alien - no, not alien, they were here, they were them, they were *him* - chain of thought. For the first time since he opened his eyes in the woods, it hit him that things were not what they seemed.

There was a long, quiet moment as fractured pieces of memory and experience over twenty-eight years of human life struggled to reconcile with the metaphysical equivalent of a black hole,
millennia-worth of being and experience and not much else. Two completely incompatible existences, and he was a single pebble on a mile-long beach, a grain of seasoning dissolving into a large pot of cosmic soup, going, going, gon -

They felt distant, elevated. It felt strange having fingers and toes now, ten of each - _why ten_? - and there were just so many _parts_ to keep track of and keep corporeal. They'd never had them before, never had much of _anything_ before, and... it was frustrating, in a way, the stubborn physicality of this dimension. How the ground stayed where it was, how objects remained in just one stage of matter, how –

_OH, THINGS ARE JUST SO BORING AROUND HERE. YOU HAVE NO IDEA, SIX-SIGHTS. YOU KNOW WHAT I THINK? THESE GUYS NEED A BIT MORE WEIRDNESS IN THEIR LIVES. SOME SPONTANEITY NEVER HURT ANYONE._

_S O L E T G O_

They started. That had not been one of their thoughts, they knew. Admittedly, they hadn't had many, not until now - _not until him_ - but they were certain regardless. It had been a command, an order from something they vaguely defined as kin, and it was instinctual to follow it. Why not? After all, there was nothing at stake here for them. There never was, and never would be.

And it was correct. It would be so _easy_ to let go of this uncomfortable form, slip back into the nothingness of their existence up to this point and show this reality what lied beyond their wildest imaginations.

For millennia they had drifted, an endless cycle of consumption and regeneration, coming across planets and civilizations and galaxies and leaving them changed in their wake, twisted in their image. They could do it again. There were cracks in this dimension already, centered underneath the Shack, _oh God, did Ford know, was this why_ and spreading outwards like strands of spider silk thread. Just a prod, a twist, a call towards the rest of them there on the other side...  

_No, please, you promised_

Through dim, green-tinted vision, they saw their form crumbling at the edges, pink human epithelium fading and paling, returning to the basic beige cosmic stuff from which it was formed. Their thoughts had already broke free from the limitations of a physical presence and the painfully slow train of thought conducted by neurons instead of split-second will, and yet there was a part of them that recoiled and fought and shouted, not again, they wanted to stay -

Then, from several meters away, came a high-pitched female voice. "Eh? Mr. Mystery, is that you standin' there in that convenient, mysterious dark alleyway?"

They turned around instinctively, disoriented nonetheless. "Bwuh?" They said, only somewhat intelligibly.

There was a long, frozen silence as the two regarded each other with mutual confusion. Her eyes opened saucer wide, at least until one eyelid flopped down involuntarily. _Human, female, just short of middle-aged_, he thought blurrily, fumbling with labels they did not quite understand but inexplicably fascinated nonetheless. _Flesh, biomass, clumps of cells, each individual slowly growing, always decaying_

He blinked. _...Wait, isn't that the lady from that diner just outside town? With the creepy lookin' eye?_

She screamed - a high-pitched, earsplitting screech, one that made them instinctively take a single
step back in alarm.

He raised a flickering hand and felt at his face experimentally, and in a sudden burst of self-awareness, he realized that they were not in any position to complain about creepy eyes.

"Um," they said, desperate to make her stop the irritating sound but at a complete loss for words. There were options - there always were - but at this moment those were undesirable, they didn't want to -

(want?)

But he knew how to handle this. And he was there, of course, just a bit... more so now than before. Hell, he always had been. Just had a bit of a mix-up, a little lapse in judgment. But now he was clambering up and through the metaphorical murk and reclaiming what, by most definitions, was already his.

Sure, there was a whole lot of junk in the way. But they weren't him. All it took was a bit of a nudge, a reminder of why he had come so far, and -

He thought and then he - was, experimentally clenching flesh and blood hands, that wide con-man's grin coming instinctually into existence with the rest of him, a lie already curling around his tongue. All of a sudden, the world seemed that much clearer. Stan Pines was not one to be at a loss of words, and this was no exception.

"Hey. Hey." Stan waved a hand. "Quiet down, would ya? It's just me."

The woman's mouth shut with a click. "Stan?"

"Yeah. And you are, uh -" He paused for effect, and stepped up his grin another notch. "Wait, don't tell me. I never forget a pretty face. Sally, right? From Greasy's Diner?"

She squinted, an action that looked odd with her single shut eye. "Name's Susan, actually, but..."

Shit. "Yeah. That was my second guess."

"Well..." Susan said slowly, but she seemed to be reassured by his casual callousness. "No worries, hun. People get it wrong all the time. But uh, if ya don't mind me askin'... Your eyes seem t' be doing a bit of - " She paused, searching for an appropriate phrase. "...Glowing."

"Uh, these things?" Stan scoffed uncomfortably, glancing to the side instinctively. "I'm... tryin' out some new exhibits for the Shack, and ya know. Gotta dress for the part. Some stickers and lights, whatchamacallit, LEDs. But they're, uh, top-secret, can't risk letting the competition in on it. So if ya could keep it down -"

"Oh, a secret, huh?" She exclaimed with a small giggle, with no apparent irony. Not for the first time, Stan mentally thanked whatever deities out there for the sheer gullibility of near every hick in this town. "Why didn't ya say so earlier? They won't hear a word from me, hun. Customer loyalty. I've been with the Murder Hut from the start, ya know!"

"Actually, it's the Mystery Shack nowadays. Ended up renamin' it coupla weeks ago since..." Susan looked on expectantly as he trailed off, with the sudden realization that this conversation would lumber on for ages, given the chance. Time he didn't have, as the second wind of sheer will that kept him solid began to falter.

Stan winced. "I, uh, gotta go. Right now, actually. I, uh, left the stove on, yeah." It was better than
just shouting 'nonspecific excuse,' but not by much.

Without any further elaboration, he turned tail and ran.

Susan shouted something after him, but they didn't stop to listen. He kept a single hand shaded over his face in a pathetic attempt to shield their eyes from view - because they wouldn't go away, no matter how hard they thought and forced their will. They didn't stop running until they reached the familiar doors of the Shack.

He didn't realize until he had already sunk down on his favorite couch in relieved exhaustion that he had never opened the door.

"What the hell," Stan said flatly, to no one in particular. "What the hell."

No, maybe they had said it, or both, or neither of them. The lines in between were blurred and twisted like the oil paints he remembered from high school art class, stubborn flecks defying homogeneity up until the very end. Even now, there was only the vaguest of separations, because he had become them and they had become him and neither knew what that meant, really.

Start from the beginning, they told him. Yeah, sure. As good of an idea as any, considering he didn't have any other ones.

Last he remembered, he had died, kicked the bucket, met the reaper - a surprisingly decent guy, for a skeleton in a robe with a horse. He had let his guard down after a few weeks in this hick town, like an idiot - and that was when ol' Rico and gang had finally tracked him down. Fiery car wreck, that final crack of bone, the rush of heat. He's pretty calm now, thinking about it. It wasn't all too bad.

At the very least, it was over.

But then, it wasn't. Ford was still on the other side, the portal had to be fixed, and - he couldn't go, not just yet.

Last they remembered… well, that was a far more complicated story, because they didn't.

They had never had any of that human concept of thought, nothing that would be considered consciousness, not until now. Instead, they knew. Knew, for example, that many, many years of knowing had occurred, that they understood many things, that they saw the potential in the constant and mundane. They existed to change, had been more of a force of nature - or unnature, as it was - than any kind of living, discerning entity.

'Had been' being the key words.

He had bargained with them because they needed to stay and he needed to live. Somewhere along the line, it had stopped being so simple.

The deal had been binding, under cryptic rules that superseded even their existence. Or, in actual people words, they had both fucked up and signed up for something neither had fully understood.

Somehow, they had managed to con each other.

Not that they were complaining. The new world around them was constantly in motion, from the sun that rose and fell and brought with it night and day, to the humans who lived and grew without disregard to rules and expectations. Nothing happened as they should, and they were fascinated by the endless possibilities spread out before them that hinged entirely on a split-second fire of a neuron.
And they liked being him, even if maintaining a physical form was at once baser and more difficult than anything they had done before. There was something new and exhilarating about sentience and the free will that came with it, how they could choose and want and love and hate. It was intoxicating, the heady rush of emotion that rushed through his, their body from the mere thought of things.

There were the simple ones. He liked thick-cut steaks and banana cream pie, the kind he could only afford at grungy looking diners after one of his more successful cons. He hated Rico and Jorge and a whole host of faces that set his teeth on edge with fear, prisons, and - they remembered suddenly, with a grimace of disgust - the grossly sweet cherries that topped fancy milkshakes.

Everything else… was a bit more complicated. 'Friends' brought up memories of gangly scientist types and the aching burn of betrayal, while 'family'… family was a whole different mess together. There was anger and there was guilt, but under all that, and beside the throbbing part of him where hope had once flourished, there was the stubborn, warm curl of love and affection that attracted them like moth to flame because they had known nothing like it before.

Because… Pops had just been trying to get him to grow up, he must have been or what was the point, and Ma had even kept in contact, even though she couldn't offer much more than platitudes and sometimes, a little bit of money to help out for the month.

And Ford, Ford was -

The realization hits with all the subtlety of a battering ram.

They knew how to bring him back.

Those incomprehensible equations in that journal of his, the ones Stan had cursed over and over during many sleepless nights - they made sense now, the numbers coming together to make coherent, logical explanations. All he had to was get downstairs to the portal, and even if he couldn't figure out that damn thing with what they knew now...

They would drag their brother back to this dimension themselves.

Stan forced themselves up, gritted his teeth from the effort of making his legs solid enough to stand on again, and -

"Hey, hold on there, buddy." The tip of a cane tapped them on the chest, deceptively gentle despite knocking them backwards off his feet, and prodded them back into place. "What's the rush, Six-Sights?"

The voice was high-pitched, nasally, and utterly unfamiliar. Stan looked up into a single, long-lashed eye and the floating, glowing triangle it belonged to, and decided immediately that there might actually be a logical explanation for his brother's collection of pyramid paraphernalia. This thing had been the one to bring them to this dimension, they remembered, as distant as a - dream, yes, that's what it was like. He had sent them in Stan's direction, and that was a fact that he, they weren't sure how to feel about.

Fiddleford had talked about him, hadn't he? The weird muse turned demon, except there was a lot less horns and brimstone than Stan had expected. More… geometry. Not that they had any room to talk, really.

"Bill Cipher," they said, clearly enunciating each unfamiliar word.

For a moment, Bill seemed surprised. He leaned forward slightly, eye just centimeters away from
Stan's own. "Got the hang of speaking, huh? I gotta say, I didn't expect that out of ya, Six-Sights. No offense - I mean, I'm a huge fan. Loved your work with the Pagolan Cluster, by the way," he said conspiratorially. "Heard the Time Police were rearranging body parts for centuries after that."

"Um," Stan said blankly. "*Where was that again?*

"Now that *that's* done with... what's with the hold-up, pal? Now, I hate to criticize, but the party really should have started *hours* ago. Almost thought that you made a wrong turn somewhere, and that poor sucker gave it up before you got there. Gave me a real big scare for a moment there, buddy. Sure, I'm not exactly a 'plan guy,' but when human stupidity ruins everything not just once, but *twice* - well, that reaaaaally grinds my gears."

The demon sighed dramatically. "...Well? What are ya waiting for? I like the eyes, sure, but it's time to drop the ugly mug and blow down the walls between dimensions already. Even Xanthar's getting a bit impatient, and that's saying something." The cane prodded him again. "Come on, do I really have to ask twice?"

"'Ugly mug?' Kind of a low blow, that," Stan said automatically, narrowing his eyes. They were more confused than offended, actually, but it was kinda the principle of the thing. "Especially coming from a floatin' corn chip."

Bill stared. A long, tense minute passed before he broke suddenly into peals of screeching, grating laughter, his single eye screwed shut in mirth. "Oh. *Oh*, Six-Sights - you really *are* new to this, aren't ya? Still got a bit of metaphorical Cheeto dust on your fingers, huh? Don't worry, typical newbie mistake - not that I speak from experience, of course. When it's over, you'll be laughing about it with the rest of us. Or not. I'll be, at least!"

"...Cheetos," they said flatly. "What, like the cheese puff snacks?"

"Lemme put it gently," Bill said cheerily, the tone of his voice making it clear that he had no intentions of doing so. "Do ya think you're actually human?"

Stan hesitated, unsure of how to answer the question when a literal dream demon was floating in front of him. "Been for all twenty-eight years of my life, sure. Just, now there's -"

Bill's cane banged painfully against the side of his face. "Bzzt! Wrong-o, buddy. You, Six-Sights, haven't been a human a single day in your existence. But ya know, I get it - that's the thing with human memories. They're just so - gross and *sticky*, and if ya aren't careful, those suckers *stain*. They come off eventually, sure. But what a pain, am I right? Must be pretty embarrassing, too - I mean, ew, who'd want to be a greasy, leaking sack of flesh?"

They caught the next blow in his hand. "I'm the real deal, pal." Stan said gruffly. "We're the same person we were before, just a bit -"

"Person? Buddy, pal, you sure *are* in it deep, huh?" Bill groaned, throwing his hands up and letting the cane disintegrate in Stan's grasp. "Stupidity really *is* contagious. I bet I wouldn't have this problem if I used ol' Sixer for the base stock, but that's humanity for you. Mucking up plans, getting themselves knocked right into another dimension."

They blinked. "What - *What was that*, about Ford?"

"Hm? Oh, that." Bill waved a stick thin hand in dismissal. "I had things *all* lined up for ya, Six-Sights. Six fingers - fits the theme, y'know, a reaaaaal smart guy, and boy, did he get the whole awe
and worship thing down. A bit dull, sure - but that's part of his charm, I say!"

The cheery note in his voice abruptly disappeared. "And then - that annoying beanpole of an assistant ended up snitching, and Sixer got all self-righteous on me. Y'know, 'you never told me this would destroy the universe,' yadda yadda." Bill rolled his eye in exaggerated exasperation.

"It didn't hurt to teach him a bit of a lesson. So, threw him down a few flights of stairs, turned his dreams into unimaginable nightmares, that kind of deal. How was I supposed to know that he would end up paranoid enough to stick a metal plate in his head and ruin the fun? Or that big lug would push him through the portal."

Stan reared up instinctively. "I didn't push him through, I didn't know that thing was on -" Then, he went quiet, as all of the demon's previous words finally registered fully in their mind.

The stairs, the nightmares, how Ford had looked almost feral with exhaustion and paranoia by the time Stan had showed up on his doorstep...

"Geez, reign it in, would ya? It was pretty funny at first, but now it's getting old."

YOU

Bill blinked and went quiet, smug expectation glittering in his eye -

But, right now, that was the furthest thing from Stan's mind. Their hands trembled with the fury that rushed hotly through their body and pooled strangely at the base of his gut, exhilarating and tempestuous.

"You hurt 'im," they said hoarsely, through gritted teeth and a too-dry mouth. It's almost surprising how familiar the sensation is, that surge of deep burning protectiveness that comes over their mind. Except, of course, it isn't. He had done this many, many times, up until he couldn't anymore - because, by then, Ford's greatest enemy had become Stan himself.

"He - he hadn't been sleepin', hadn't been eatin', was driven so outa his damn mind he pulled a fuckin' crossbow on me. All that, BECAUSE OF YOU"

"What, hurt Fordsy?" Bill looked at them lazily, as if examining a particularly interesting specimen. "Well, yes. Definitely. Abso-lutely."

Stan lunged forward without thinking, but with an easy sidestep on Bill's part, he crashed helplessly into the TV. Before they could regain their bearings, it had already hit the ground hard. A single hairline fracture spread across the glass screen, and despite the circumstances, a part of them winced. That was going to cost money to replace, damn it.

"Buddy-o, you have got to calm down. Loosen up, cool it, take a chill pill! I mean, why do you care so much about ol' Sixer, huh?"

"We're his damn brother, that's why. And don't call 'im that," they bit out, his accent sliding out easy and comfortable onto their tongue.

"Sixer? What, because that's what Stanley called him?" Despite the lack of a mouth or really, any real facial features, Bill still managed the convey the impression of a smirk. "I don't know about that, pal. Fordsy sure wasn't complaining. In fact, I think he liked it."

The next few seconds were - uncertain, to say the most.
There was the sudden, painful urge to hold the damn demon down and make him hurt - to take him apart, brick by fuckin' brick. Unfortunately, not only was Bill floating several vertical feet out of reach, he existed in another plane entirely.

But desire was a powerful thing - in their (current metaphysical concept of) hands, even more so. For a long moment, there was only their concentrated want want want versus all reality and logic - then, without much fanfare, the latter backed down.

There was a sudden sucking noise, a slight gurgle in existence -

- and then Stan was pressing a wide-eyed Bill to the ground, sparks leaping off of his triangular frame as impossibility itself wrapped around him and held him still. They grabbed at a single stick-like arm, far more preoccupied with their present task than any questions of logic or probability.

YOU DON'T DESERVE TO CALL HIM THAT he said or shouted or maybe even screamed. "Not after everythin' ya did to him, not after you tricked him into making that damn portal for ya -"

"Oh, that's cute. What, ya really think ol' Sixer needed any convincing? Well, I get that you've never met the guy, but boy, you really don't know him at all. All I had to do was tell him how special, how different he was, and he worshipped me."

Bill looked them calmly in the eyes. "You know… for someone so proud to be a genius, Fordsy sure was a knucklehead."

There was a loud pop as they pulled, hard, and the demon's right arm came right out of its socket.

A second later, the deafening sound of inhumane screeching filled the room. Bill shifted through forms beneath their grasp as he screamed without pause, distorting and stretching until finally, flames burst from his surface and his single eye turned a menacing, flickering blood-red.

But they did not loosen their grip, even as fire licked painfully at their body. Almost as an afterthought, they let the disembodied, stick-like arm in their grasp clatter onto the ground.

They felt good, better than ever. There was the warmth of satisfaction and almost smug vindication - but there was something else, that airy sensation of liberation. It felt like a heavy weight had been taken off their back and there it was: anything and everything was right there in their grasp. NO they said, trembling, because 'knucklehead' was what Pops had always called him and never Ford, never ever. NO, HE -

They stopped. The shrieking sound had changed, no longer screams of pain but - laughter, high and derisive and knowing.

"Oh, look at you," Bill managed through giggles. "Welcome back, Six-Sights!"

WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?

"Look, I'm real proud of ya for getting through this phase, but... you're no one's brother, pal. You want the truth? Sixer's real bro-bro got himself killed by his own stupidity, just like everyone thought he would. You… well, you're just the thing that deluded yourself into thinking you're him."

NO they said, jerking away. WE'RE STILL -

"Pal, buddy, it just doesn't work that way. Look at yourself! How human are you really, huh?"
They did, into hands and arms that flickered like static, into the dark mass that had once made up stars and comets, into the void between worlds and the things that moved within.

They trembled.

**BUT WE REMEMBER**

"All those human emotions and memories - they aren't yours, pal. You're just clinging to a dead guy's brain, leeching off every scrap of human experience you can get. Lemme break it to ya, Six-Sights. You aren't human, and you're not gonna be human no matter how hard you pretend."

Bill's voice turned cruel. "Not that you have that long, anyways. That husk of a soul isn't gonna last. Heck, you have enough trouble keeping yourself together as it is! Sooner or later, that little stain of yours is going to wash out."

**IT** they said, and regrouped. **IT DOESN'T MATTER**

They were here for one reason only. It didn't matter what happened before, it didn't matter what would happen afterwards. As long as -

**WE'RE STILL GOING TO BRING HIM BACK**

"Oh. Oh, this is adorable. 'You're still going to bring him back,'" Bill said mockingly. "What, ya think Sixer's gonna thank you for bringing him back, once he finds out you're just a monster wearing his dead brother's skin like a fancy suit?"

They were quiet.

The demon picked himself up, another arm slowly, nauseatingly regenerating from its socket. There was an air of victory about him as he regarded them with anticipation.

"But since I'm a nice guy… here's another option, Six-Sights. Do what you're supposed to do. Open up the walls and start the party, and y'know… I'm sure Fordsy will find his way back eventually. And once he does, I'll make sure personally that he's a guest of honor! And, best of all, he won't ever find out how you burned poor Stan-o off this plane of existence."

Bill held out a hand, ablaze with blue flame. "How about it, huh? Just let go."

**THIS WORLD**

"Will lighten up, for once! What's so great about a few boring buildings? Make a chorus of grizzly bears! Give a water tower some extra teeth! Look around you - sure, it's a good start, but I have waaaay bigger plans."

They did.

The parts of the ground where he had stood warped and distorted, occasionally burping out rainbow-hued bubbles. His favorite couch had grown a tongue and teeth and was now in the process of chewing up the carpet. Countless tiny, dark hands reached out from inside the crack in the TV and, before their eyes, began to clamber out.

The parts of this reality they had touched in their lapse in physicality. Their doing, however unintentional.

They shifted uncomfortably. **HUMANITY**
"Eh, those guys can keep on doing what they usually do - I don't know, apply for loans. The ones that survive the weirdness, anyways. Some of my buddies haven't eaten for a while, and I don't think they're too picky about what they eat."

They shouldn't have thought, and yet they did. Because - for all that Ma talked it up about being a real psychic, she would have a heart attack if the fridge grew arms and legs. Pops might have fought in the war, but he wouldn't last long against demons and monsters. Shermaine was just a kid (how old was she now? They hadn't seen her in so long, not since -) and the people here in Gravity Falls, sure they weren't too bright, but they had been nice enough -

And that was the rub, wasn't it? They might not be of this world, but this world was of theirs.

Bill blinked, realizing his error. "Hey, like I said, my gang and I will keep Fordsy in one piece. Whaddya know, I actually miss him! Well, mostly his groveling and offerings, but -"

NO

The demon was silent. "I must have misheard you, pal -"

WE SA-id no," they said, straightening up, one hand - blood and flesh and bone, all coming back at once - pushing themselves up. "We'll - find another way -"

"Another way? Don't make me laugh! You'll last another three days, at best. And then, we'll bring this -" Bill gestured at the room around them. "- worldwide. Whether you want to or not."

"Get the hell out of here," they said through gritted teeth. "We don't have anythin' to say to ya -"

"Y'know what, Six-Sights? This might be fun! Heck, I'd give anything to see the look on Sixer's face once he realizes what happened to his -"

"Leave, dammit. Or do ya want us to find out how long it takes you to stop regenerating?"

Bill quieted, momentarily cowed. He looked at them thoughtfully. "Your wish is my command! See ya in a bit, Six-Sights."

The yellow sheen on the surface of his form blazed into a blinding white glow as he floated up into the air, the edges of his body fading into the background. "But look, I'm feeling generous today, buddy, so I'll leave ya with one last piece of advice.

You were never human, Six-Sights. The sooner ya realize that, well… the easier things will be for the both of us."

Chapter End Notes

AKA where the name of the AU finally comes into play
so, uh. in my defense, i was gone for a week long summit in DC and my original plans for this chapter ballooned (to give you an idea, this chapter of 7k words was the first half of the original chapter.) but here it is!

Betaed by the inimitable, incredible Sarielle who was honestly the biggest reason this chapter exists. I can't thank them enough.

((ALSO, IMPORTANT!

Are any of you going to the Farewell to the Falls exhibition at Gallery Nucleus? I'm going on August 6th, and I don't know if I'll be going with any IRL friends, so I would love to meet up with any other GF fans there. PLEASE HMU.))

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*Gravity Falls, 1982*

They sat quietly, arms around their knees, back against the wall, their mind completely blank. Out of the corner of their eyes, the television sprouted several spindly legs and began to lurch toward the door in slow, excruciating movements. They watched it go.

Bill did not return. But then again, why would he? He said what he had wanted to say. As far as he was concerned, he had won. All he needed to do was wait, and he wouldn't be back until he knew they couldn't say no. And as far as they knew, it was the only thing they could do too.

Day had already darkened to the hazy light of a spring evening when their television - which had cost good money, *their* money, because apparently Ford didn't think a damn TV was *necessary* - finally reached its destination. But with its lack of arms, hands, and most damning, opposable thumbs, there was nothing it could do but slam itself weakly against the reinforced wood. Like a dumb fly and a mirror.

*Thud. Thud.*

It didn't stop, it didn't think, it didn't tire. It didn't *live*. It knew its purpose, and that was all it needed. Just like *they* were supposed to be. Just that *easy*.

*Thud.*

And that was the last straw.

Maybe it was annoyance, or anger, or just plain old jealousy, but they're up on their feet in a flash, something hot and electric propelling them into sudden motion. They staggered forwards (their legs getting all wonky on them again, imagine *that*) and reached for their bat, still tucked under the couch.

The TV didn't even see them coming. They took it apart, blow by blow by blow. Shattered glass and dented plastic littered the carpet. The TV wriggled a dozen black legs in helpless fear, almost buglike, before a particularly hard strike stilled them.
And then, they moved onto the others.

The carpet was beyond all salvation - God \textit{dammit}, because any carpet guy working in the middle of nowhere would charge a damn fortune for a job like this. The couch, they took apart and burned without feeling particularly guilty. It was cotton and polyester, right? Probably couldn't feel pain, like - one of those lobsters or something. The remnants of the TV went in the garbage, which would be fine if no one looked too hard at the twisted metal. But they knew from personal experience that there were all kinds of weird shit in the trash that people paid no mind to. They had definitely seen worse.

Somewhere in the back of their mind, a little voice told them that they were just trying to distract themselves, and doing a shit poor job of it too. Just doing whatever else that needed doing, so they didn't have to ask themselves the hard questions or really think about, well, \textit{everything}. So they didn't have to remember that in a few days, none of this - not replacing the carpet, not stealing another TV - would matter.

...That all that they were doing was wasting valuable time.

Well, fuck it. The house needed sweeping.

It must have been past midnight when they finally finished washing every leftover dish, wiping every speck of dust, and drinking every drop of Ford's surprisingly extensive collection of alcohol (a stash in every room... \textit{geez}, Sixer, they sure did teach you a lot in college.) They were drunk out of their goddamn mind - and wasn't \textit{that} a pleasant surprise, that booze still worked if they wanted it enough. It did help, however, that the alcohol dampened their thoughts and fogged up their long-term memory. He felt more concrete than he did the whole day.

And then, because they was such a fountain of great ideas, they took the elevator down to Ford's lab, a half-empty bottle of pretty crappy whiskey in his hand.

They kind of stumbled - they wouldn't be surprised if there was more alcohol than blood in their veins at this point, especially given the whole... \textit{not human} thing - towards the portal that loomed over them, still dark, still dead, still \textit{broken}.

"Alright," they said, to nothing in particular. "Alright."

They knew how to fix the portal now, but the issue was time. It would take weeks to get this thing working, not to mention all the materials he needed - the steel, the circuits, the toxic waste. Weeks they didn't have, because they couldn't hold onto this reality for that long. Even if they drank his body weight in alcohol every damn day. They needed something more permanent to forget, something that wouldn't go away with a hangover in the morning. Something they didn't fucking \textit{have}.

Or, they could go for the simplest option - reach back into the void of the multiverse and grab his brother themselves. It was easy enough, seeing how the walls between dimensions melted like butter when they were involved. Thing was, he wasn't too keen about the whole... 'damning the world and destruction of humanity' thing. And even if they \textit{were} okay with all kinds of weird creatures taking over the planet, Ford would chew him out over it.

The biggest problem, however, was that doing it meant the end of \textit{him}. Kicking Cipher's triangular ass had been satisfying, but they had almost succumbed to the influx of power it required. The more they relapsed, the less of a grip they had on this dimension - and on himself. The amount of energy required to get Ford back... it was a death sentence, as much as it applied when he wasn't actually alive.
Both options were shitty - one maybe less so than the other, but seeing how both involved the end of the world, they figured the difference didn't really matter.

They finished up the bottle and stared balefully at the metal monolith before them. Then, gripped by a sudden wave of anger and sheer pettiness, they flung the empty bottle right at the frame of the portal.

Glass shattered with the sound of birds as they stomped forwards, half delirious from the foreign human emotions of guilt and self-hatred. None of this would have happened if they weren't here. He would have stayed dead like he was supposed to and there wouldn't be anything about - ending this world and eradicating humanity, or anything like that. Ford would still be on the other side, still lost, but did that mean anything? After everything they had been through, everything he had done, they still hadn't found a decent way to save his brother.

Their feet landed on something elevated and just a bit slippery, and with the least amount of grace possible, they stumbled and fell hard on their bottom.

It was his book - not a journal, because Stan hadn't reached that level of pretension just yet. He had bought it because it was on sale and after accidentally throwing away his notes in trash again, he figured there had to be some merit to the 'journal' idea if his brother had been so into it.

On instinct, they flipped through the pages, numb fingers fumbling with the thick paper. Notes and calculations, that was all it started off as. Then in moments of annoyance or hopelessness, he had scribbled down his half-hearted rants and helpless fears. He started describing the days he had worked, the people he met, and when Fidds' little astrophysics lessons started making some sense, he told Ford about that too.

Because that was what it was, wasn't it? Stan pretended like he was writing directly to his brother, telling him his hopes and dreams, failures and successes, because he hoped - maybe, just maybe - that when Ford finally made his way back home, he could just tell him to read this thing. This book explained everything he had done - everything he had gone through to fix this damn portal.

And then Ford would… understand. Maybe not be quite in the mood for the whole 'hopping on a boat and sailing the world' plan, but… maybe he would even forgive him, in his wilder moments of fantasy. Stan had never been good with words, so maybe he could show him how much he regretted that night, more than a decade ago.

Maybe he could prove to him how much he wanted to make up and work through their issues, to go back to what they had before. How much he wanted his brother back.

But this was all of Stanley's hopes and dreams, all wrapped up in a cheap plastic cover. Not theirs. Never theirs. These words had been written by a dead man, one whose presence had been wiped off the face of existence. They were just a voyeur; in the most twisted way they could think of.

At least, according to Bill Cipher.

And that there was where they hesitated, suddenly feeling very sober as they finally thought, really thought about the demon’s previous revelations.

They didn't know much when it came down to it, not much more than they did from being Stanley. As it turned out, omnipotence and all-encompassing cosmic knowledge was highly overrated. They knew things, many things, but only in a vague, static way that might be heaven for nerds like Ford or Fidds, but as useful as money pants for a guy like Stan.
Yet, a thousand instincts, natural and alien alike, screamed the same message: Bill was not to be trusted, Bill has his plans, Bill lied. The triangle had everything to gain and nothing to lose from them giving up and letting go. He had the look of a con man, the universal 'better-than-thou' aura of a guy who had never had the tables turned on them. He knew the right buttons to press, how to hit them where it hurt. Bill was good, no doubt about it. Hell, even Stan had fallen for it - for a couple minutes, at least, before reality had prevailed.

Yet Bill had not been lying, not this time. They saw it in the smug sure glint in his eye and knew it like a fact, like the distant burn of the galaxy's central star and the slow turn of the planet's axis. That was, Bill had been telling the truth, but only as he knew it to be.

But, Stan thought rebelliously, that meant nothing, really. The hell did a talking triangle know about humanity? He talked about people like they were ants and dismissed Ford like a particularly entertaining pet, and that was more proof than they needed to conclude that, for an omnipotent dream demon, Bill didn't know shit about people.

Besides, Stan had never been the kind of guy to care that much about all the messy, over complicated philosophical stuff. Despite his upbringing, he wasn't a spiritual guy at all. He lived a life measured by hours and days and never really thought about what came after everything else. He stuck to his simple moral code and didn't mess around with the maybe's, the what-if's, all the stuff that made a guy hesitate for the split-second that would lose him a meal or a place to sleep for the night. Maybe even his damn life.

It was true, what he said before - it didn't matter, all of Bill's rambling about memories and identity and whatever the hell else. They couldn't prove who they were, sure, but they couldn't prove who they weren't either. They knew the important stuff. They could do what needed doing, as long as they kept their head screwed on straight.

And, what did it even mean to 'be' Stanley Pines, anyways? It wasn't as if there was anyone on the planet who cared if he was dead, or alive, or replaced by a cosmic entity of pure chaos.

‘What, ya think Sixer's gonna thank you for bringing him back, once he finds out you're just a monster wearing his dead brother's skin like a fancy suit?’

They sagged.

...Except, there was, wasn't there?

Or rather, there would be, once they dragged him back to his home dimension. And, he knew with the absolute certainty that came with being twins, Ford wasn't the kind of guy to accept something at face value. Not without going through it with a fine-toothed comb, half a dozen research studies, and some kind of proof with hard numbers and black-white certainty.

They couldn't lie to him, in equal terms of ability and desire. And, when Ford found out what had happened to him, who they were -

Ford would hate them for the part they played in what happened to him, indifferent to what they remembered or thought or wanted. They weren't human, and they had been Bill's ally, weren't they? He had been the one to bring them through and had been astonished by their refusal to obey, like a pilot dropping a nuke that simply would not go off. Ford would hate them for representing all the things that had hurt him.

Either that, or his brother would be utterly fascinated by them. Stan had read that journal, had seen through the lines how his brother reacted to creatures that were oddities to him with a bright-eyed but
clinical interest. They were things to be examined and prodded and understood, approached with a
wonder that valued what more than who.

They weren't sure which was worse.

Stanley's book felt far heavier in their hands than it had any right to, weighed down by far more than
paper and plastic. If they had tear ducts, they would've cried.

In the end, they couldn't bring themselves to get rid of the thing. Still, they hated even looking at it,
the bland blue cover a cruel reminder of their own dumb hopes. They could fix the portal, get it
working again, even bring Ford back through it. Maybe. But what about afterwards? If he and Ford
couldn't even talk about some research journal without getting into a huge fight, what were the
chances of them being able to talk at all about... this?

They stuck it under the floorboards and forgot about it - best he could, at least. It helped that they had
bigger problems to worry about.

Each hour felt like a countdown, and as much as he wanted to prove that floating triangle wrong,
they weren't so sure anymore. Their eyes wouldn't go away, no matter how hard they thought, or
how much of Ford's alcohol stash they decimated. They couldn't stay solid enough to go off on
supply runs. So, they made a sign that declared 'CLOSED' in big red letters, hung it from the front
door, and tried to think of a plan.

No one came to the door, or at least bothered to knock. Not until one evening, not too soon after they
lost all concept of time, that they heard a sharp, nervous double-tap from outside.

They peered blearily at the door from underneath a pile of every blanket, towel, and piece of clothing
in the house. WHO, they started, winced, and immediately went into a coughing fit. "The Mystery
Shack is closed, alright? There's a sign!

There was a tentative silence. "Stan? I - it's me. It's Fiddleford." The voice sounded strained and
dazed, a little slurred - hell, even a lot more Southern than they had last heard remembered.
"...There's somethin' that I'm here ta say but I don't remember jus' what and - Stan, please open the
door -"

They blanched. What the hell, Fiddleford? Well, not that they were complaining, exactly, but the
guy sure did choose a shitty time to come wandering back. And - he had thought Fidds was gone for
good, what with the way he ran off like some scared animal after he found out about them -
(Oh. Oh. Fuck, wasn't that a kick in the pants. They barely remembered that initial encounter, just a
vague awareness that for an almost infinitesimally short period of time, something strange and small
had been staring at them and - screaming. But, well. It was clear that Fidds remembered it a lot better
than they did.

Shit, how were they supposed to apologize for something like this? Sorry, we didn't mean to drive
you cripplingy insane? It just kinda happened?)

Fiddleford was muttering to himself now, voice wavering in volume, like he was getting further from
the door and going back again. "Stanford? Stanford, you can't listen to him, he used the forks on
purpose, he wants to hurt -"

They fought their way out of the cloth heap and groped blindly for the bright pink Hawaiian
sunglasses that Ford had left behind. Hopefully they were dark enough to distract from the whole, uh, *six glowing eyes* thing.

"We're coming! Don't go anywhere. Just give us a few minutes!" He shouted as they ran to the front of the house.

They unlocked the door hastily and flung it open with a clang. "So uh, Fidds, about the dreams we were tellin' ya about… I've got a funny little story -"

Their mouth closed with a click as they stared at the scene before him, eyes wide.

Fiddleford cowered before them, unshaven, wild-eyed, and dressed from head to toe in dark red robes. He blinked blearily up at them from underneath an overlarge hood, a brief glint of awareness in his eyes.

"Stanley," he gasped. "I'm sorry."

Fidds wasn't alone. Their doorstep was full of - what must be a dozen, at least, red-cloaked figures of varying heights and sizes. They couldn't tell who or what they were, what with the overlarge hoods that concealed most of their faces. In each of their right hands, they held a familiar light bulb gun.

The most imposing figure stood next to Fiddleford, his form completely shrouded but for an unnaturally pale, strong jawline.

"...Is this some sort of *cult*?" They asked blankly, looking back and forth. Maybe it was the alcohol, maybe it was the omnipotence, but there was something really fucking hilarious about this situation. No wonder Fiddleford acted so damn *weird*. A fucking cult. God.

"We are the Society of the Blind Eye," came a deep baritone voice. The man next to Fidds yanked off his hood, exposing a severe face covered by an excess of tattoos. "We are the denizens of this town who refuse to cower from the supernatural strangeness of Gravity Falls. With the memory erasing guns invented by our founder, here -" Fiddleford squirmed. "- we are able to help our fellow troubled townsfolk by erasing the memory of the strange things they have seen."

"...Yeah, okay. We weren't askin' for your whole life story here, pal."

Mr. Amateur Tattoo Guy glared, with an intensity that would be menacing if this situation wasn't completely ridiculous.

"As I was saying. Several days earlier, our founder returned to us… disoriented. Disturbed. Deeply traumatized by the horrors he had seen." They winced. "From the little he said, we have determined that your ventures pose a great danger to the normalcy of this town. Dr. Stanford Pines. Your mind *must* be erased, and we shall be the ones to - "

"Yeah, uh. Hold on." They raised a hand, palm facing outward. "Did ya just say - memory erasing gun? And we're just guessin' here, but - they can erase memories, yeah?"

"Well, yes -"

That was all they needed to hear. They had an idea - one that was, on second thought, a pretty horrible one that was fueled by both desperation and intoxication. Sounds about par for the course for Stan Pines. But if it *worked*…

"So. Is there some sort of limit to those, or what?"
The guy looked confused, like he had just taken a dive into a kiddie pool a dozen feet deeper than expected. "We - haven't come across any restrictions on its use, but -"

"Perfect." They cracked their new knuckles with deep satisfaction. "We'll take a dozen."

"...What?"

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*Gravity Falls, August, 2012*

" - but it turns out it's harder to steal a television in this town than I thought," said Stan, or the entity, or whoever - whatever they were. The words were casual, but they spoke too quickly, too nervously, for them to be as nonchalant as they clearly wanted to appear.

"Please stop talking," Ford said, distracted.

"But uh, the carpet thing worked out pretty well. Ended up just stripping the whole lot and putting in floorboards over the entire mess -"

"Stanley, I said *stop.*"

He - They went quiet, green eyes widening in shock. "...Right. Sorry," they said weakly, each word weighed down by quiet resignation.

For a long minute, neither of them spoke. Then Ford dragged a hand through his sweat-matted hair and took a deep breath in a vain attempt to stop the hammering rhythm of his heart.

"It's not possible," he said, more for his own benefit than anything else. "It simply - does not make any sense. I know what you're doing, Stanley. You've been trying to stop me all this way. This is just another tactic of yours."

But there was still that nagging thought on the edge of his mind, one that had been there since he had first started on this journey. Gravity Falls had taught Ford not to trust, had shown him that things were not what they seemed and rarely for the better. From the beginning, he had known somewhere deep in his gut that he would not like what he would find out.

"No, Ford. It *is* possible, it *did* happen -" They took a deep, ragged breath, one that Ford was certain they did not actually need. "Look, we read your journal, alright? The stuff you wrote about that one experiment of yours, #210 -"

"The Shape Shifter?"

"Damn, Sixer - you're even worse than Pops about naming things," they muttered, then stiffened immediately in self-awareness. Ford stared back at them. "That just - it just slipped out. Forget about it. ...My point is, that thing could change forms, right? Could turn inta anythin' from a turnip to a person, and it knew exactly how to act to fake it. You… couldn't tell the difference. That's what ya wrote, anyways."

"Are you - *equivalating* the two of you?" Ford said in disbelief. "Experiment #210 was an extraterrestrial creature with no true moral compass or understanding of humanity's norms -"

"*So are we.*"

The two of them stared at each other for a long moment. Then Stanley dragged a crude
approximation of a hand through their flickering hair in clear aggravation. "...I told ya what Bill said, didn't I? We're - we're not human. We're not your brother. We're just - some mindless, cosmic horror thing who... who just doesn't know any better."

Ford flinched. "Don't say that," he said, voice clipped. "The way you act, the things you remember, there's no one else you could be - "

"Ya sure?" They asked, voice quiet. "You couldn't tell with that Shape Shifter thing, couldn't ya?"

"I know my brother," he said immediately, but it came out slightly less sure than he hoped. Ford regrouped himself. "...Look, Stanley. You stayed in this town for thirty years to fix that portal and bring me back. If this is truly some kind of... impersonator situation, surely it wouldn't have gone on for - three decades."

"I - We had to do it," said Stanley, but Ford could hear a note of uncertainty in his voice. Their form flickered briefly, like television static. "That was the deal, alright? To bring you back. That's why we kept working and working. It wasn't a choice, Sixer. We were bound to it; we were - forced. That's why we couldn't stop and let you - y'know. If it was just me, I would've just - given up."

Ford stared, just because it was so - unexpected. He had never once questioned his brother's thirty years of devotion, had never even thought to. Perhaps in terms of ability, because he doubted even Stanley's brand of raw determination couldn't make up for a decade's worth of higher level education, but never in desire.

That was just the person Stanley was.

"Is that what Bill told you?" he asked, suddenly suspicious.

Stanley's silence was answer enough.

"And - you believed him?" Ford demanded, aghast. "Stanley, surely you have enough faith in yourself to know that he was deceiving you. This is ridiculous. Of all people to fall for his deception..."

He took a breath. "Bill lies, Stanley. That's what he does best. He lied to me about the true purpose of the portal, he lied to you about the three days -"

"He wasn't lying about the three days, Sixer."

" - and it is clear to me that..." He trailed off as his brother's words clicked. "Well, clearly, the world hasn't ended. And you're still very much here. Unless three days actually meant three decades^-"

"We found a loophole. Sorta. As in, it literally knocked on our door."

Ford blinked. "...What?"

Stanley sighed. "McGucket paid me a visit. Must've been two days after, uh. Everything." He winced. "He came with friends. Big bald one of Fi - McGucket's gave me the whole spiel about their brain-erasing memory gun while our guy apologized ta me the whole way. They talked big and all, but one look at us sent 'em running. Didn't even get the chance to give any of them the ol' left hook."

Ford stared, hoping vaguely for a better explanation to come into his mind. "You flashed a cult?"
"...Well," his brother said slowly, "it sounds bad if you say it like that. It wasn't like we dropped our towel or somethin'. Just, uh, our physical form. For a second. Though, uh, maybe that would've been better on their eyes than the towel."

"Stanley..." Ford said slowly, both parts fond and exasperated.

"Anyways," his brother emphasized, "seein' how they left a whole bunch of memory-erasing guns right there... We thought - hey, we're just like what that philosopher guy said, right? We're whatever we think we are. So if we didn't remember anything other than ol' Stan Pines, then maybe we won't have to worry about any of the other stuff."

"So you used it on yourself?" Ford said incredulously, immediately grabbing onto the implications. "Stanley, that gun erases minds -"

"Well, we tried to," they sighed. "Turned out, well, 'unlimited knowledge' really is a whole lot of stuff. And it wasn't like I could just type 'Everything Other than Stan Pines' on there. This, uh, wasn't something we wanted to risk gaming the system on. So we just - tried to forget as much as we could. Shed some extra baggage."

"That's -"

"Kinda rough in hindsight, we know. And we had to relearn all that astrophysics over the decades, but, uh. It worked okay, we guess. Lasted us this long, right?" He forced a grin.

"...Then, for the past thirty years," Ford asked weakly, the beginnings of a possibility materializing in his mind. "Did you know you were anything other than..."

"- than just Stan Pines? Sure we did," Stanley shrugged. "...Wish we didn't though. Kinda got the worst of both worlds, y'know? All the existential crises and none of the winning lottery numbers. And things just kept... coming back," they sighed. "We're just a little bit of the whole chaos entity hive mind, right? We're mostly cut off across dimensions, but once in a while, we just wake up - knowing things. Used to zap 'em out, until the last of Fidds' memory guns lost its juice couple of years ago."

Ford was quiet for a long moment, mostly because he wasn't sure how to word exactly what he was thinking. And of course, Stanley immediately took his silence in the worst way possible.

"That's the truth, Sixer. The whole truth," they winced. "...now ya know. Um. We're - we're sorry. We never wanted ya to know, so we understand if you..." They trailed off, looking at him with an unreadable expression, a kind of dull, accepting sadness that reminded him suddenly of the look on his brother's face, the day Pops had thrown Stanley out of the house.

His next words practically jumped into his mouth.

"What?" Ford said blankly. "What, no! I just wanted to say that your plan might be the single riskiest, foolhardiest idea I've ever heard of. What if you had erased the wrong thing from your mind? You could have ended up brain dead, or comatose, or a gibbering lunatic! Why, if everything you've said is true - then you might have even inadvertently unleashed the apocalypse singlehandedly."

"Uh -"

He took a deep breath. "But evidently, it worked. Somehow."

"...Thanks for the vote of confidence there, Sixer," Stanley deadpanned.
"Actually, no," Ford said after a considering pause. "I can't say I'm surprised." He sighed. "After all, you've always had the uncanny ability to do the impossible, Stanley. Your ideas are ridiculous, but they have a surprising rate of success. What makes this time any different?" His brother stiffened at that. "Ford, haven't you heard anythin' I've been saying? We're not your -"

"Stanley," he said crossly. "Listen to me. What does Bill know about humanity? What does he know about Stanley Pines? What I really don't understand here is how you would even consider believing him -"

"Ford, it's not about us believin' him or not," they said quietly. "What, ya think I don't know he's a lying sonuvabitch?"

Ford hesitated. It made no sense. "If you know that, then why would you -"

"Because Bill doesn't lie when the truth is in his favor, Sixer. And the the thing is, I - We -" Stanley hesitated. "...We know that he's right."

The words came out reluctant and soft, in little more than a whisper, but they hit Ford with all the subtlety of a battering ram. He sucked in a breath, slightly nauseous and not quite sure why. He opened his mouth to - demand an explanation, or dismiss his brother's insecurities, or say something, anything at all.

But nothing came.

"Sixer," they said, voice usually subdued, "the truth is, we just don't... feel like Stanley Pines, sometimes."

"...What does that mean, exactly?" Ford asked finally, voice tentative, his instinctive fear quashed by sheer confusion.

"After all those millennia of plain old nothing, we must've... we wanted to be human," they said flatly, staring straightforward as if even looking at Ford would cause them debilitating injury. "So we pretended. We figured out how to say the right things and we got lucky a few times and... We wanted to stay your brother and be the kids' Grunkle and..."

They went quiet. "We just kept pretending. Don't know how, but somehow, we managed to con all of ya. Those kids, Dipper and Mabel, even Sherm - they think I'm a good person. But we're not. Hell, we're not even a person. But they don't know any better. They never knew the real Stan Pines. They don't know we're just an old fraud who lied and cheated their way inta getting everythin' that's good in our life."

The pronouns changed and shifted without warning, and Ford had no idea who and what he was speaking to - or even if it mattered. But there was a common thread in these ramblings, one that he recognized from his own sleepless, late night thoughts. They echoed the same message as the derisive voice he often heard in his own head, the one that had plagued his early years and still dropped by occasionally to jeer and taunt, now in a voice both high-pitched and frighteningly familiar.

Liar. Imposter. You'll never be good enough.

'Cuz guess what Fordsy? You're a fraud, and everyone else knows it.

"But I know Stanley," Stanford said, voice distant even to his own ears. But there was something certain in his voice, firm and steel-like, because whatever doubts he might have had before, they were gone now. He couldn't explain why because it was not a confidence built of hard facts and
weeks of research.

He just knew, because he could see now that despite everything else that he shared with his brother - a dream, a face, a family - it was their mutual demons that bound them together against the world.

"I grew up with my brother. We've been connected our entire lives. I might not understand him; I might not even be able to maintain a conversation with him for more than ten minutes without devolving into a petty argument. But I know him. Better, perhaps, than I know myself. And..."

Ford hesitated, and broke into a helpless smile. "As far as I am concerned, he is standing right in front of me."

Stanley stood silently, expression stricken. Slowly, as if he was moving through molasses, he turned to face Ford with wide glowing eyes. "Ford, how can you be so damn sure? What makes a guy who he is, huh? All the talk about souls and minds and identity - well, we don’t got a body, that's six feet under. And it's not like we can hold out a glowing bit 'f light and prove a soul. We - we remember, and that's it. Memories and trust, that's all we can base this on. And we don't even trust ourselves."

"Simple," Ford said smoothly, words coming far more easily to him than he could have ever imagined. "Only my brother could be such a knucklehead about all of this."

There was a long silence.

"Ha ha," Stan said flatly, trying to mask his nevertheless clear confusion. "Hilarious, Sixer."

"No, Stanley." He raised a hand. "Listen to me. You left a note to let me know that you were leaving, with a message of no longer than a dozen sentences. You told me not to tell the children, you left our sister a cryptic voicemail, and vanished from the town you spent thirty years in without a word to that handyman of yours or anyone else. You drove your car a kilometer into the woods and left it there. How could you possibly think that you wouldn't have been missed?"

"Shut it, Ford," Stanley said leadenly, what little of his visible face ashen with what Ford hoped was guilt.

"I've spent the past few days talking with more people than I've ever seen beyond that portal, Stanley. I don't know about the terms of your deal and while I have severe doubts that it had anything to do with your decision to bring me back to this dimension, I can safely say that you had no obligation to do anything else you ended up doing."

Stanley stared at him, unmoving. Ford took a deep breath. "Over the past thirty years, you've made an undeniable impact on those around you. You looked out for Dipper and Mabel all summer long. They adore you. You helped Shermy when she needed you, and that was more than I ever did. And that boy of yours, Soos, he clearly idolizes you as a father."

His brother flinched. "Look Sixer, I'm not Soos' anything 'cept his boss -"

Stanford forged on, cutting effortlessly through their weak protests. "You didn't have to do anything, but you did, because you're Stanley Pines. Because you're my brother."

"We -"

"I'm very well aware that it isn't all that you are." He stressed, gesturing vaguely at them, all of them, and tried not to look too hard into the murk of shifting shapes. "But - and I refuse to rattle on about the laws regarding conservation of energy in the universe - it is apparent to me that memories are the least of what you share with Stanley. At this point, I doubt there is a line that can be drawn between
my brother and - well, everything else. I… admit Bill knows more about your existence than I ever will."

"But I will make a correction." Ford straightened. "I disagree with the idea that humanity is somehow innate. There are plenty of monsters in this world who are indistinguishable from any pedestrian on the sidewalk. That is to say… Bill is correct in saying that much of you were never human. But I think that your actions over the past thirty years has earned you that label. ...Otherwise, Soos and the children wouldn't have left a dozen worried messages on the recording device, and Shermy wouldn't be practically knocking down my door demanding to know what's going on," he added wryly.

Stanley stared at him for a long while, eyes suspiciously bright with an extra sheen. "Sixer, I don't -" He sighed. "We ain't sure what to say. We want to believe ya, but... hell, we never thought you would be the one tryin' to convince us -"

And then, he froze in his tracks, so suddenly that Ford could almost imagine a record scratch. "You got Sherm and Soos involved?" He croaked. "You told them? And the kids?"

"Well," Ford said slowly, unsure of what mistake he had just made. "...Yes? I mean, just the fact that you had gone missing, since they were my only sources of information. And with Dipper and Mabel, I had no intentions of letting them know, it just so happened that Shermy asked them a few questions -"

Stanley swore, loudly and colorfully. "Ford, what the fuck?"

"I -" He paused. "What did I do? Stan, you told me to call Shermy -"

"We didn't mean tell her everything! Just in a - friendly, I dunno. 'I'm back from the other dimension and haven't talked to ya in thirty plus years' way -"

Ford stared. "You want me to lie to her? Do you have any idea what that would do to her? ...Not to mention, how am I supposed to do that without mentioning the fact that I was in another dimension in the first - oh, for Pete's sake, Stanley. I was just in the middle of addressing the ethical questions of identity and this is completely ruining the -"

"I didn't want to hurt her, Ford. Not her, not anyone else in our family. And y'know what, on that note - remember what was the one thing I said not to do, Ford? After 'not doing anything stupid,' which you did anyways." Stanley gave him a Look. "I told ya not to get the kids involved. And what didja do?"

"I - got the kids involved," Stanford admitted reluctantly. "That - was a mistake, and I regret it. But honestly, Stanley. Seeing how I just spent several minutes detailing every unwise decision you've made in the past 72 hours, I think you're the last person to talk here about 'not doing anything stupid.' Does abandoning your car in the middle of the woods ring a bell?"

"Does going up against an omnipotent triangle demon alone ring a bell?" His brother flung out what was once a hand. "Or, y'know, the whole 'turned into a gold statue' thing that happened right after?"

"That - was almost a week ago," Ford protested. "The statute of limitations has expired -"

"Oh," Stan said flatly. "Is there a statute of limitations now on dumb self-sacrificial ideas?"

Ford opened his mouth, half-ready to say: For your sake, Stanley, I hope so. Because I think there's one very big, very idiotic, very self-sacrificial decision that you've made in the distant past that I would like to bring up -
-and started laughing.

He doubled over, clenching his stomach and practically choking with laughter as if there was nothing funnier in life than him arguing with his cosmic entity of a brother over the legal intricacies of sibling bickering. Really, at that moment in time, there really wasn't.

"You, uh," His brother stared, clearly concerned but unsure whether to move forward or back away. "...You okay there, Sixer?"

"I'm fine," Stanford managed, still wheezing. "Just. I simply do not understand how you can still be unsure about the fact that you are Stanley Pines, when the two of us literally cannot maintain a conversation without starting a ridiculous argument. Or three."

His brother stiffened at that and stumbled back a single step, his eyes blown wide in realization. "Ford, we..." He started feebly, in a protest too half-hearted to fool anyone. Mostly he just sounded surprised at himself.

He heard the pause, the confusion, the tentative hope, and grabbed on to it. "Stan, what are you going to do, argue with me on this too? ...You do know that proves my point entirely, don't you?"

"Oh, fuck off, Ford," Stanley muttered instinctively, and blinked in surprise.

Ford raised an eyebrow.

His brother stared at him speechlessly. A long moment passed before a hesitant grin appeared on his face as well, a crescent sliver of white startlingly bright against the darkness.

"I - damn it, Sixer. I guess you're right. How the hell can we argue with that kind of logic?"

Ford couldn't resist the helpless smile that burst into existence on his face, wide and unrestrained and relieved. Ever since his brother had left the Shack, a heavy, oppressive pressure of intermingled worry and guilt had weighed him down. Now it had lifted, and for the first time in what felt like forever, Ford felt at peace.

"I'll have to mark this date down for history's sake," he said lightly. "This must be the first time I've ever won an argument against you."

"Enjoy it when it lasts, Sixer," Stan scoffed.

It was all so normal. Without the mounting pressure of an impending apocalypse or two, or even thirty years of unresolved issues, it felt natural to return to the easy conviviality that lied at the basis of their relationship. A blink of an eye ago, Ford had been sure that his life, as he knew it, was over. Now, the future looked brighter than it did in a long, long time.

Was this all it was? Just another moment of miscommunication between him and his brother, turned into something so much bigger by both of their personal issues and - dare he say it - martyr complexes. The latest in a long line of mistakes that neither of them had been willing to address. It had taken a lot to force them to confront their past and present, and even more to bring down the walls that had divided them for almost their entire lives.

There was still so much to work through; what had happened in the past half-hour barely made a dent in the overall scale of things. But it had opened the door, and Ford felt lighter than he had for decades.

"You know, Stanley? When Shermy gets here, you're the one who has to explain all this to her,"
Ford said, only half-jokingly. "I refuse to get punched because of you two times in one day,"

"Oh," said Stanley.

"Stan?"

His brother shifted slightly, every bit of understandable body language screaming discomfort and helpless awkwardness. "Um, yeah..."

...ABOUT THAT

There was an odd tone of resignation in - their - voice. Ford looked up, a question on the tip of his tongue, and his smile froze on his face.

He couldn't look away from his brother's form - not that there was much left of it. The ground near their feet looked like an especially nauseating optical illusion, at once grass and cold steel and an indescribable purple-pink substance that Ford had never seen before. Reality reached and shrank in intervals from what looked like a humanoid black hole intent on devouring itself.

He took a step back.

Stanley looked at him sadly. "...Just a little problem with that." Their voice sounded hollow, with an odd echo that sent uncomfortable shivers down his spine. "I'm glad we got the chance to talk, Sixer. But we left for a reason."

"I don't understand," Ford said pleadingly.

**OUR TIME IS UP, SIXER**

**YOU HAVE TO LET US GO**

Chapter End Notes

Alternatively: even a cosmic horror shies away in the face of Stan's impostor syndrome

...i... will have the next chapter up within a few days? (seriously this time too, since I've already written most of it.) There will be another two chapters after this. It's been a wonderful ride, y'all.

I tried to answer most questions in this chapter, so please comment if there was anything I forgot or didn't get through. I want to leave the Stan-Sights thing up to interpretation, but I can explain that too if wanted.

Also, shameless plug: if you like Pines family and Fiddauthor shenanigans, check out my other fic 'The Weirdest Family in the Galaxy,' in which Ford and Fidds are unconventional dads, and in the present time, Dipper and Mabel try to figure out what's up with their weird cousin Shifty.
CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"I don't understand," Ford said weakly, wide eyes fixated at his brother's increasingly vague form. Cloth and flesh and bone disintegrated like tissue in water, and what lied underneath... reminded him of the rip in reality Bill had shown him decades ago, when he had first confronted him about his lies and manipulations. It was not a pleasant realization. "Stanley, what's - what's happening to you?"

WHAT'S they said, grimaced, and tried again. "What's been happenin' ever since Bill ripped the rift right open, Sixer. The moment that happened… everything came rushin' back in. It was as if I never used Fidds' memory wiper in the first place. ...Hey, Ford. How long's it been since Weirdmageddon started?"

"Five," he said quietly, voice barely a rasp. "It's been five days."

"Good," said Stanley with deep satisfaction. "Proved that triangle bastard wrong."

"What are you saying?" Ford asked blankly, uncomfortably aware that the only reason he didn't quite understand his brother was because he didn't want to.

His brother let out a deep sigh, color leeching itself more and more from their appearance by the second. Their eyes shone eerily in contrast to his bone-white pallor. "...C'mon, Sixer. Use that big brain of yours. I… I didn't leave just cuz. We wouldn't have done that to you and the kids. Not to Sherm and the rest of our weirdass family. We would have waited it out, as long as we could. We wouldn't have gone until there was no one left to miss me."

"Then, why…?"

WE LEFT BECAUSE WE KNEW OUR TIME WAS UP

Ford flinched. Half was from instinct, the kick of discomfort he felt whenever he heard that hollow, soundless void of a voice. The other half came that harsh jerk of realization that - his brother had, like some feral animal, left home to hide and - die alone.

"There has to be another way," he stammered, a voice in his head repeating no no no and drowning out any hope of logical thought. He had come so far. He had lost hope to find it again. He had even - even talked to his brother, had made that first step towards reconciliation, and - there was so much ahead of them. Stanley couldn't - "...Fiddleford must have another memory gun hidden somewhere. or - give him an hour or two at the most, he can create another. I'll - I'll help him make it. It won't take any time at all. Then you can do what you did before -"

IT DOESN'T WORK THAT WAY, SIXER They said, shaking his head. NOT WHEN WEIRDMAGEDDON ALREADY HAPPENED Then, with visible effort, he added, "...Don't worry about it, alright? It's for the best. This was going to happen one way or the other, so better we get sucked back through the rift then us losing it out here, yeah?"
"Sucked through the -" Ford said in disbelief. "Why?"

"...You remember the giant hopscotch game you sprayed up, don't ya? The one that's supposed to, y'know," Stanley said flatly, "banish Bill and his buddies from this dimension. Or, well, y'know... Anything else that doesn't belong here."

He sucked in a breath. "Like you."

"Like us," his brother confirmed with forced nonchalance.

"But if you knew what the zodiac would do... why on Earth would you go through with it?" Ford demanded. "You didn't even say anything. You just - held my hand, I even corrected your grammar and you just-"

"What, did you have some other way to beat a chaos god hidden up your sleeve? Not to mention, we weren't going to last long here anyways. Let's face it, Sixer. We were outta options." Stanley sighed, looking at Ford's stricken expression. "...Look, I told ya already. This was the best way all of this could've turned out. These dimensions try to keep, uh. Homeostasis. Keep what's in 'em there, force the new stuff out."

He raised an eyebrow, curious despite himself. "...You remember that from high school biology?"

"Hah. No, who do ya think I am?" His brother scoffed. THAT'S ALL US They hesitated, and cleared their throat in embarrassment. "Uh, anyways. It wasn't... all too bad, the past thirty years. Just a bit itchy, like a mild allergy. Or poison ivy. But we had a good enough grasp on this plane. Then came everythin' else, and well..." They trailed off, but the implication was clear.

"But, what you're saying is - this all depends on the mechanisms of the deal that you made," Ford interrupted, eyes widening.

"Well, yeah, but -"

"That's the key to keeping you permanently bound to this dimension," he interjected excitedly, the beginnings of a plan already materializing into being. "If you made another, or if there's any terms of the initial deal you haven't fulfilled -"

Stanley cut him off with a shake of his head. "I've thought of that, Sixer. I'm not a dumbass, we had thirty years to figure things out. It's a dead end."

Ford hesitated. "Are you sure?"

"The deal I made with us was pretty damn simple, you know that," they said flatly, and sighed. "But fine. I... gotta admit, we thought that - maybe once we actually fixed up the portal and got you back from the other side, then... we would be fine then."

Ford was quiet for a few long seconds, mulling that over. "But nothing happened?"

"Well, something did," they muttered. "But it wasn't enough, especially with all of Cipher's Weirdmageddon bullshit." Even with the current incoherency of their form, they still managed what looked like a glare. "And to add insult to injury, not even five minutes in this dimension, you punch me. What the hell was that?"

Ford winced. "Well, in my defense, I was just in the middle of a climatic showdown against Bill and his murderous hordes of..." He trailed off. "Stanley, is this really the time?"
They looked at him pointedly.

"You punched me too," Ford replied dryly. "Just now. Hard. And I'm sure we can settle this issue once you're no longer, and I emphasis, disappearing into the void."

"There's -" Stan went quiet. "There is no afterwards, Ford."

"There can be!" He brandished his hands in emphasis. "I can make a deal with you, and then you'll be able to -"

"Sixer, we literally nixed that plan five seconds ago," Stanley said tiredly. "So what the hell makes you think I'm gonna agree to a deal like that? I thought we addressed our self-sacrifice issues."

"Well, clearly we haven't," Ford said through gritted teeth. A familiar kind of frustration prickled at the corners of his awareness. Why couldn't his brother just... listen to him? "Seeing how you're doing the exact same thing right now. That's not even what 'literally' means. It's been far longer than five seconds -"

"Come on, Sixer. We know what 'literally' means, we're just making a point. Besides, all of this is 'cuz we have no other choice -"

"Oh, really? Because you're vanishing in front of my eyes, and instead of helping me figure out a solution, all you're doing is telling me to -"

The two of them went quiet at the same time. THIS IS STUPID they said, just as Ford dragged a hand through his hair and muttered, "This is absolutely ridiculous." He had been momentarily thankful for it before, but... was it even possible for him and his brother to have a conversation without breaking into an argument?

Neither of them spoke for a long minute.

"...What is there to do, then?" Ford said finally, not really expecting to get an answer. He felt suddenly and startlingly lost. "If…"

NOTHING they said tonelessly. "There's... there's nothing you can do, Sixer. And I'm not lying 'bout that. Just... Let me go, alright?"

Ford made a strangled noise. "Stanley, what you're asking of me is impossible. I can't just -"

"Ford. I'm glad, alright?" His brother said clearly. Ford went quiet, mouth hanging open because there really was nothing he could say to that. "It's not all that bad. Hell, in the end, the two of us managed to put forty years of bullshit behind us. Kinda. Resolved some of it, even."

"Stan -"

"And y'know what?" Stan said loudly, purposely drowning out his voice. "Somehow, we managed to bring you back, before - all of this happened. You got to meet the kids, and - you're gonna meet our whole weird family, after all this, and... I'm thankful, you got that? I'm really fucking thankful."

Ford stiffened like he had been punched in the gut. "No."

And the words just - stopped there. Because what could he say?

"C'mon," his brother said in barely more than a whisper. "...Don't make this harder than this already has to be, Sixer. We WISH WE COULD STAY. We would do ANYTHING if we could.
Honest."

Stanley let out a strangled exhale of breath as another part of their form faded. Their voice came strangely garbled, as if it was coming from underwater - or more accurately, as if the sound of it itself had traveled through several layers of reality to reach Ford's ears.

"But ya can't always be the hero. Especially not now, especially not with us. Not everything works out, and. YOU CAN'T SAVE US. So get the hell out of here, alright? I don't know what's coming, but." They started forward, as if wanting to force him away physically and thinking better of it at the last second. Their last words sounded like a plea. WE CAN'T RISK YOU

Ford didn't move.

GO, FORD they said brokenly. It took a great deal of willpower for Ford to keep his eyes forward, to keep looking at the mess of impossibilities just a few feet in front of him. But he didn't look away, too afraid to even blink because if he did, what if Stan just - disappeared? THINK ABOUT DIPPER AND MABEL

Oh, no. Ford raised his head up, dazedly. "Stanley, please don't -"

IF THEY LOST BOTH OF US -

He staggered backwards, then blinked, surprised at his own action. And then, as if moving through a dream, he took another step back. Which he shouldn't, he couldn't, not when Stanley was still standing there with that resigned look on his face. And if he left now… it would be the end, in every way that mattered.

Once, Ford had proclaimed that a hero was someone who did the right thing, even when it seemed impossible. Now, he wasn't so sure. He had seen what the substance that made up Si - Stanley's form did to wood and steel and concrete. The thrum of energy was palpable, the smell of ozone nauseating. If he stayed, what would he be doing to his family? To Shermy and the children, left behind with no possibility of closure. The odds were a million billion trillion to one and it all seemed -

He had pursued his brother down here, demanded the truth, and - he had succeeded, didn't he? He knew everything there was to know, answered every lingering question, but what difference did it make in the end? Stanley had left because he was deteriorating, and nothing Ford had done did anything to change that.

His brother was right - all he managed to do was to make it worse for the both of them.

The entity before him pulsated. There was nothing human or familiar about it at all, not anymore, just a single bleeding wound gashed onto the reality of this world. On first look, Ford had compared them to a black hole. Now, he was reminded more of the collapse of a supernova, folding in on itself, crumbling into oblivion.

Somehow, Ford knew that his brother was smiling.

He closed his eyes. He took a deep breath.

"No," Ford said. "I'm staying."

The effect was immediate. The smile disappeared.
FORD the entity - no, Stanley growled, his thrashing creating odd rips in reality in the air around him. YOU, YOU DUMB PIECE OF - Ford stepped forward. GET OUT OF HERE, WE WEREN'T KIDDING, YOU HAVE TO GET AS FAR AWAY FROM US AS POSSIBLE

Despite the trembling in his legs, he walked forward briskly and smoothly. Ford ignored Stan's frantic demands and increasingly filthy expletives. His own thoughts, however, were slightly more effective in slowing him down. There was, of course, the nagging doubt that he really was making a mistake, that he shouldn't be doing this at all.

Because - what if Stanley was right and the worst happened, and their family never does find out what happened to them, and - what was the point of him staying, really? He could be with his brother, but there really was nothing he could do except make sure Stan had… company, for whatever came next.

They were standing face to (eldritch horror equivalent of a) face now, and Ford has to be careful not to look too hard into the abyss. He felt nauseous and light-headed, as if every molecule of his very human body was rejecting their current position. For his part, Stanley too was trying to draw as far away from his as possible, to no avail.

But logic - for once in his life - hesitated, staggered, and without much fanfare, died. There, right there, was his brother, for the last time he would ever see him.

And the words jump into his mouth automatically

"Are you kidding me, Stanley?" Ford asked, voice hoarse. "Don't you remember? ...Wherever we go, we go together."

There was a long, pregnant pause. FUCK YOU, FORD Stan said, voice somehow choked. THIS ISN'T WHAT WE MEANT

"Isn't it?"

NO, FORD, NOT LIKE THIS His brother hesitated. PLEASE. FOR ONCE IN OUR LIFE, JUST LISTEN TO ME AND LEAVE

Ford stood quietly for a second that stretched onto infinity. There was nothing he could say that he hadn't said already. His words were meaningless now, his logic useless against the harsh burn of reality.

And then, without thinking, he took the final step forward. With an ease and smoothness that belied decades of disuse, he wrapped his arms tightly around his brother's flickering form in a warm hug.

Despite the many long years, despite the circumstances, it felt like coming home again.

Stanley stiffened in his grasp, but Ford held on, steel-like, as if he could keep his brother on this plane of existence through sheer force of will.

But his brother didn't struggle, not like he had expected him to. LET GO, FORD, Stan said hollowly, voice distant and small. It was clear from the dim confusion in his voice that Ford wasn't the only one surprised that Stan hadn't immediately broken free from his hold. YOU KNOW WHAT HAPPENS TO EVERYTHING THAT TOUCHES US

He did know. Ford remembered all too well Stan's rambling accounts of the ruined carpet and wandering TV, and he could feel it too - the eerie coolness under his touch, the pin and needle
sensation that crawled steadily up his arms. If he wasn't too careful, it would give way underneath him and swallow him whole. Ford suddenly felt very grateful for the thick fabric and worn gloves that covered nearly every square centimeter of his exposed skin. Not that it would help for long.

But all the thought of consequences felt distant and negligible in comparison to the present.

"This is the first time we've hugged in forty years," he said distantly. In fact, Ford could count the amount of physical contact between him and his brother in the past four decades on one six-fingered hand, a fact made even worse considering that most of them consisted of punches, accidental brandings, and general brawling.

Stan was quiet.

"How stupid we were. We wasted our lives over a - a petty grudge, that was all it was." Ford sighed and sagged forward slightly. "All we had to do was talk. All it took was us to - understand each other, instead of jumping to conclusions at the drop of a hat. And we couldn't even do that."

SIXER...

"I… I should've contacted you after Dad kicked you out," Ford said quietly. "I wanted to, but I never knew what to say. I was angry. I was scared. I wanted to apologize, but I didn't know what for. And… after the first few years, it was easier. There was college, there was Sherm and there was Fiddleford and - I told myself that you doing fine out there. If you weren't, you would've come back home." His voice turned bitter. "But you weren't, were you? You - really, really weren't."

Stan tensed. FORD, YOU COULDN'T HAVE KNOWN he said in a low rumble. AND I WAS JUST TOO BONEHEADED STUBBORN TO ASK FOR HELP

"It isn't about that, Stanley. Not exactly. It's - everything. You could've died out there on the streets, while I -" Ford took a deep breath. "There's a lot I want to say. A lot I have to say. But there isn't enough time for that, is there? There isn't enough time for anything."

THERE'S ENOUGH TIME TO SAY GOOD-BYE

"No, there isn't. There really isn't." It comes out choked despite his best efforts. Ford swallows around the hard lump in his throat. He wiped at his emerging tears awkwardly with a hand he tried not to look too hard at.

"Stanley, you spent thirty years putting together the universe's most demented puzzle with a third of the picture. You gave up your existence and any chance you had of having a normal life. You fixed the portal and... you saved me."

FORD -

"But most importantly," Ford said, relentless, "you taught how me to stop being such a - such a knucklehead to the people around me. You showed me that I can't walk the road of life alone. And - that's why I'm here now, Stanley. After all the effort, the years, the sacrifices you made for my sake - of course I came to find you."

He took a deep breath. "So get this through that thick skull of yours, Stanley, because I get the feeling you don't quite realize it - I'm here to get you back, and I am not letting go. You hear that? I'm here. You did it. Now fulfill your end of the bargain and…" He hesitated. "Stay."

There was a sound like a garbled sob. FORD, PLEASE DON'T DO THIS, YOU KNOW I
"...You can't go, Stanley," Ford says, voice helplessly small. "I... I just got you back,"

That's when he feels the wetness on his neck, the spreading sticky stain on the shoulder of his suit.

Tears, and not just a little bit of snot involved, and there was only one person it could be coming from. In any other circumstance, Ford would have been vaguely disgusted. Instead, a wave of untimely humor and warm sentimentality rushed over him because Stan had always, always been a gross crier.

"Stanley, you're ruining my coat," he muttered wetly.

HA HA SIXER Stan said flatly, if a bit choked. REAL FUNNY. I CAN'T CRY

...Of course. Ford took the briefest of moments to curse Filbrick Pines and his expectations of masculinity. "Well, Stan, I don't know how to say this, but... you are now."

FORD, I DON'T HAVE THE TEAR DUCTS TO BE TEARING UP LIKE - LIKE SOME SAPPY OLD MAN

"What -" A familiar twinge of exasperation emerged. Ford pulled away slightly and raised the arm with the offending stain in question. "Stanley, just look for yourself. What's more likely, that I broke several laws of physics to wipe the contents of my nose onto my right elbow, or that you - God forbid - shed a tear?

Stanley was quiet for a long moment.

Then faintly, with the tone of a man who, after a lifetime of being screwed over by the universe, had found a winning lottery pinned to the dashboard of his broken down junker, he groaned, YOU HAVE GOT to be kidding me."

"...What?" Ford asked blankly, drawing back slightly. There was something about his brother's - "Stanley, what's happening?"

"I can't - I can't fucking believe it," Stan rasped, straightening up in his hold, voice rough with disuse but very much his. "After all this time. After all this fucking time."

Yet, despite the harshness of his words, there was nothing like anger in his voice. Just a kind of hopeful wonder that Ford last remembered hearing more than forty-five years ago, watching the sunset with a child's eyes and an arm slung over his back with his whole future spreading out in front of him.

To Ford's shock, two arms, hesitant but strong and reassuringly solid, laced themselves over Ford's back and held him close. A bit too close, given the grip was tight enough to cut off a portion of his air circulation.

But at that moment, Ford would not have given it up for anything.

"Stanley?" He asked slowly, hesitantly, as if speaking would burst the delicate bubble that had settled around them to cut them off from reality. "How are you doing this...?"

"It wasn't about fixin' the portal, Sixer," Stan mumbled, the sound muffled, "It - it was never about the portal. All along, we, I thought - I thought I just had to bring you back through that thing. But the deal was to get my brother back. And doing that - that didn't get you back, did it? In the end, the
most important part… it wasn't anything I could do at all."

His brother eased back a little, just enough so that Ford could see the wild, helpless grin on his vague approximation of a face.

"This whole time, this whole damn time... it was about you."

Ford stared at him, mouth open in a small 'o' of confusion. "...Stanley, I have no idea what you're talking about."

Stanley started to guffaw, loud and worryingly hysterical, as if he had told the punchline to the worst joke in the world. Then, as if a switch had been flipped, tendrils of cosmic star stuff and Gods-know-what-else suddenly came alive under Ford's hands, writhing nauseatingly in his grasp.

He jerked in instinctive shock, craning his head to see and understand and - shuddered, black dots prickling at the edges of his vision as his eyes returned visual input - abnormal data - that they were never meant to see. It, it was less of a physical reality than a suggestion of form, but something in Ford's mind clicked that - whatever it was, it was becoming flesh and muscle and bone, coming into existence and stitching itself together like -

(bile burned at the back of his throat, his eyes felt too large for their sockets, his skin crawled and itched and)

he couldn't look away -)

A hand clamped over his eyes and his vision went abruptly, thankfully dark. And just like that, Ford could breathe again. His knees buckled forward as he sagged in sudden, inexplicable exhaustion, but the arms around him stopped him from hitting the ground.

"Hold on tight, Sixer," came his brother's voice, a distant rumble that came from all around him. "And don't open your eyes, no matter what."

"Stan?" Ford rasped. "Stanley, what's going on?"

"Don't worry, Ford. Everything's gonna be okay."

It was absurd, it was impossible, because Stanford Pines worried, that's what he did, because he wanted things to be okay again, he had wanted it every day since he was seventeen years old. And yet there was something in his brother's voice now, something old and firm and knowing... that made him believe it.

"I wasn't kiddin' about the eyes, by the way," Stan muttered suddenly. "Trust me. This part, you don't wanna see. But I swear, I'll explain everything to you afterwards."

He couldn't keep the desperate hope out of his voice. "Afterwards?"

"Yeah," his brother said slowly, hesitantly, as if he couldn't quite believe it himself. "...Afterwards."

There was an odd hum in the air, heavy with promise. Ford closed his eyes, held onto his brother like he was the only steady thing in a storm, and waited for the future to come.
Near the end of 1972, about halfway through earning his first doctorate, Stanford Pines experienced an Epiphany.

Though slightly less graceful and Romantic than having an apple fall upon his head, or even reciting Goethe while gazing upon the rays of a setting sun (as always, Tesla never did anything by halves), the effect on the young scientist proved no less than electrifying. Certainly no less dramatic, judging by the foot-wide spray radius of the resulting half-mug of coffee shattered onto the floor.

A particularly difficult proof had been the catalyst; specifically, a problem that had been built on such theoretical ground that the soon-to-be Dr. Pines had to navigate several levels of hypotheticals and complete nonsense - that albeit did have some meaning with three textbooks' worth of context and a state-of-the-art graphing calculator 'borrowed' from a university laboratory - to even seriously approach the question itself.

A study of the relation of objects and velocity in zero-gravity conditions outside the known universe, which in fact had nothing to do with his field of study at all. Or any field of study relevant to humanity for the next hundred years, for that matter.

(Questioning why the man had spent forty-three sleepless hours validating a concept that had nothing at all to do with practicality and usefulness would show no less than a deep, fundamental misunderstanding of the person Stanford Pines was.)

Ford lifted a hand, felt his own face slowly, contemplatively… and was suddenly, unhappily aware that he did not remember the last time he had taken a shower. Still staring at the wall with unfocused eyes, he opened his mouth, somehow managing not to recoil from the immediate stench of his own Terrible Hygiene Decisions, and spoke out loud to the audience of himself and one snoring roommate.

- It is important to note, however, that words are rarely enough to express a particularly complex idea. Case in point, Ford's thought process had already finished the marathon when his sentence had just begun to leave his mouth, and in fact, was contemplating whether to jog back to the starting line for the complimentary juicebox.

He thought: space is enormous, space is complex, to an extent that it is necessary to accept that space is of a scale beyond all human comprehension. It follows then that most, if not all of the rules that governs it - if any existed, which was also up for debate - would not make any logical human sense. Perhaps, it was here at the edges of the universe that dimension boundaries blurred, that the divide between mind and body weakened, that reality itself gave a Great Big Shrug.

Then, perhaps -

"Space," Ford said slowly, softly, with the hesitant tone of a man who saw himself approaching a terrible, unknowable truth, "is big."

A tear welled at the corner of his left eye.

Stanford was Not Wrong. But had his roommate been awake and therefore, had thrown a pillow at Ford's head, there was no creature in the history of existence that would have blamed him. At least
two would have bought him a drink for the trouble.

Unfortunately, the magnitude of Ford's breakthrough was undercut somewhat by his sudden loss of consciousness and short-term memory about forty-three seconds afterwards, after an attempt to walk straight through the nearest wall. While he would live on despite reaching this critical mass of awful life choices, the fact that his human mind had erased all of the night's events in a desperate attempt at survival would turn out to be a missed opportunity.

Had he remembered, then more than thirty years later, hanging slack-limbed and dangling in a dark place that was both completely in his head and somewhere on the fringes of a distant galaxy, Stanford would have felt greatly validated in having proved his theory correct firsthand.

...Though perhaps, with the deep, leaden exhaustion that pooled in his gut and dragged at his every limb with near physical weight, the less things his overworked mind had to deal with, the better.

Not that there were many thoughts to be had in the first place. There were only two things that Ford was aware of. One, the nothingness he could 'see' - that was, the closest approximation in English to a much more esoteric concept - spreading out before him for miles in every direction.

Then, there was what he couldn't see but could feel nonetheless: the burning weight of a gaze magnified by a hundred, thousand times, coming from everywhere and nowhere at once. A mystery, one that would normally call out to Stanford Pines with a force greater than a siren's song.

But Ford was tired, too tired for anything that involved any kind of active consciousness. He had been on some kind of journey, one that had been long and difficult but ended too soon all the same. He had wanted more - more time, more chances, more of... something. Someone.

But that didn't matter now. He had finished. He was over, he was complete.

He could rest now.

And he did, because time had no meaning where he was now. He knew without knowing how that with a blink there would come a minute and leave a millennium. For the first in a very, very long time, there were no voices to be heard in his head, not even his own. There was no desire to think, to probe, to question. This was an ending, his ending, and because it was good and he was happy he should stay like this forever -

Ford!

- but.

It took every bit of strength he had for Ford to lift his head.

The darkness opened their many eyes.

He was surrounded from every side, every angle. He was within, somewhere deep inside the innards of some colossal existence, part of the bigger whole. But despite the cool slide of substance over his exposed skin and the eerie green brightness of the light that had illuminated his surroundings, he felt calm, safe.

He was protected here, he knew. He was theirs, after all.

And They Were His.

Distantly, Ford could see the glint of stars.
Ford, wake up already, would ya?

He could feel a pressure, a solid and physical hold that he could feel first on his chest and then tightly around his torso. It was different, incredibly so, from the distant knowing, existing, of the here and now.

C'mon, he heard, coming quick and fervently desperate, Sixer, please -

It wasn't a voice, not one that could be measured by soundwaves and governed by physical laws. He felt it more than he heard it, the superficial annoyance, the raw panic underneath, the bone-deep gnaw of familiarity that came with a nickname that had meant such different things to him over the course of his lifetime.

"Stanley."

The pinpricks of light around him shuttered,

blinked,

and

Ford opened his eyes, cautiously and slowly, with the dim confusion of someone who didn't remember closing them in the first place. He squinted groggily through a pounding pain in his head that felt somewhat like a particularly bad migraine, or if he had been momentarily been blinded by some kind of thousand-watt camera flash.

...Something had happened.

Well. Yes. Clearly, he thought irritably just a moment afterwards. It was just incredibly difficult to think while being rather roughly shaken, which did the very opposite of help his headache or sort out his jumbled thoughts.

Ford let out a long, pained groan, too dazed to form coherent words, and flung - flopped, mostly - his arm upwards. He hit something solid - and sentient, he thought, when he immediately heard a surprised yelp.

The jolting movement stopped abruptly. A moment later, he heard his brother's voice, hoarse and uncertain, somewhere on the edge of his narrow line of sight.

"You… you good there, Sixer? Genius brain of yours still - tickin' on okay?"

Stan sounded concerned, but Ford couldn't imagine what for. In lieu of an answer, he pushed himself back up, eyes still clenched shut in a vain attempt to lessen the throbbing pain in his head. A hand on his shoulder steadied him, and another handed him a familiar pair of glasses.

"I'm fine, Stanley," he said, with far more certainty than he actually felt. The cool stale air and the unyielding chillness of the metal underneath his fingers meant he was in his basement laboratory, but not much else about his current circumstances were obvious.

Ford's glasses creaked alarmingly as he unfolded them open but did not break, which, he thought distantly and somewhat ridiculously, meant the reinforcements he had had done several months back
in Astucía V had been a good call after all. He fumbled them on, opened his eyes -

He hissed and slapped a six-fingered hand over his eyes, uncomfortably aware that the noise he had just made was more likely to have come from a startled alleycat than a grown man.

Just a bit too much of Stanley.

"I gotta say," his brother said hesitantly, an expression of careful concern on his craggy face. "You… don't look anything close to fine right now. Heck." Stan let out a shaky breath of laughter, and gave Ford an unreadable look that he almost didn't catch through his fingers. ".Just the fact that we're having this talk right now makes me think that you're still bit scrambled up over what just happened, and -." 

"Your pants," Ford blurted.

There was a brief, shocked silence. Stan opened his mouth, closed it again. ".Uh. What about my pants?"

"Your pants," he repeated, suddenly unsure of how and why he had ended up in this specific, current conversation, "are not on you."

In fact, there was not much of anything on his brother at all. Not the cheap suit he had been wearing like a uniform for the past several weeks, not the musty old fez usually perched on his gray hair.

(though of course Stan wouldn't be wearing that fez, he didn't have it anymore, which Ford knew because -

because - ?)

Which begged a question. Many questions really.

Starting with what happened in the past week why can't I remember any of it to why do I feel like someone just tried to force their way into my head with a wooden spoon, and most likely ending with why are you sitting naked on the floor of my private lab.

Typical concerns.

His brother opened his mouth slowly, as if he had only just realized the fact himself. Judging by how Stan glanced down at his own nude form with a look of dawning comprehension and inexplicable relief, was probably more or less accurate.

"Oh," Stan said blankly. "Well. I mean, yeah. It sure does looks like it."

He snorted, a sudden chuff of air through his nostrils. "Geez, Ford. That's it? That's all you're going to say to me, after everything that's happened?"

"Is…" Ford paused, reconsidering. He put his hand back down, suddenly feeling very foolish for his earlier dramatic reaction. He had grown up with his brother, after all. Why, had he been expecting to see something more when he opened his eyes than a gut and a truly frightening amount of body hair?

"Is there something that I should be asking you about?"

Stan's immediate, stunned silence was reply enough. Then, Ford realized unhappily, there was just one possibility, really. The only thing in the world they still both cared deeply about.

"Did - did Dipper and Mabel call? Are they facing some kind of trouble?"
"T-the kids?" Stanley repeated, utterly bewildered. "Oy, shouldn't I be the one askin' you that? They called you. Not - not me."

"They - did?" He replied weakly. "I can't... recall."

His brother looked at him for a long moment. Somewhere along the way, his shocked stare had evolved into a hard look of leaden understanding.

"...Y'know what, don't worry 'bout it," Stan said finally, voice hollow. He suddenly looked very drained and small, huddled without clothing in the dim light of the laboratory. "It doesn't matter."

There was something unsaid, something Ford was missing without knowing what. "What - what were we doing down here?" He asked hesitantly.

"...Dunno," Stan said blandly, not meeting his eyes. "Maybe we sleepwalked."

It was a clear lie, even by his brother's bottom standards. Ford bristled. "This isn't the time for jokes, Stan. If you're attempting to lie, at least put even a smidgen of effort into it!" He paused, tried to figure out a way to ask his question without sounding like a confused old man, and failed.

"...Stanley, what's going on?"

"I'm. I'm not sure how ta explain." His brother grimaced. "And maybe... maybe you don't remember it for good reason."

There was much unsaid, but Ford got the sense that the conversation had hit its last wall, at least where Stan was concerned. Still, he wasn't quite yet willing to let go of the mystery in front of him.

"While I was unconscious," he said haltingly, blinking through the clouded thoughts and muddled memories that haunted his every attempt to remember, "I thought, maybe, that I saw - some type of, creature, entity, a green light -"


His brother took a deep breath, let it back out. "Let's just let them go."

"Them -?"

The dead serious look in his brother's eye killed any questions Ford had felt compelled to ask.

"Alright," he said carefully instead, mentally filing the topic away for a less... volatile time. "I... shall."

His brother nodded, then drew himself up with a grim look, slow and hesitant, movements carefully deliberate other than his subtle shivering from the cold.

But then, just as it seemed he had made it, his knee (distorted) bent the wrong way. Stan crumpled to the ground almost immediately with a grunt of pain, large frame folding like a house of cards. Ford jolted at the familiar sound.

Familiar?

"New knees," Stan hissed inexplicably. He pushed flat against the ground, hefting himself up in slow, careful jerks. "Hell. New _everything_. Ford, can ya give me a hand? Just for this one bit."
He wasn't listening. There had been something there, then in that split-second of pain and dropped guard. As if a glint of residue light from the machinery had came and caught a moment too long in his brother's eye -

*Oh*, Ford thought stupidly, and it dawned on him like sun through the clouds.

The rest was autopilot. He moved forwards the final few steps and knelt down to catch Stan's look of pure confusion, saw his brother's mouth open in confused, kneejerk protest, and thought, with the most adamant certainty he had felt for a very long time, Stanley must be so, so cold -

Ford shrugged off his worn coat in one fluid motion and pulled the weathered warm cloth around his brother like a shield. There was a kind of reassuring certainty in the way it settled and pooled around him, as if it was tethering him to the ground with its comforting weight.

In ways his coat frankly shouldn't, logically. It had been a close fit on Ford himself, and despite the muscles gained from decades of space travel and the differences that came with the many years passed, he was still obviously of a smaller built than his barrel-chested, big-gutted brother. The old coat should not have covered Stan completely, let alone have practically enveloped him in the way that it did.

But then again, logic and logistics rarely had a place in the old tales. Ford should've known they wouldn't have much weight here.

He clung onto his brother in an embrace that was not returned, partly because Stan hadn't been given much time to react, mostly because Ford was near certain that he had inadvertently trapped his brother's arms against his body in that initial covering of not-quite-mantle. He had no complaints nonetheless.

The warm weight of his brother under his arms felt like an ending.

Stan shifted against him. "Ford?" His voice came in barely a whisper.

"*Stanley,*" Ford said wetly, partly as an address, partly as a confirmation. "If you *ever* attempt another ridiculous, utterly *pointless* sacrifice in our lifetime, I will singlehandedly paint that Stanmobile of yours the brightest yellow I can find."

His brother jerked in his grasp in any unholy mixture of a twitch and a shudder. "You wouldn't *dare.*"

"I would. And you know what else?" He continued, relishing every word. "I will sell it at a quarter of the market value. To a *teenager.*"

"*Over my dead bo - urk!*" Stan wheezed as Ford tightened his grip even more. "...Huh. Too soon?"

He almost did not dignify the question with a response. "*Yes.*"

His brother said nothing for a long moment. "I… I guess this means you do remember, after all," he said finally, hesitantly. "For a moment there, I thought ya wouldn't. I figured that -"

Stan broke off with a deathly wheeze. "Sixer, if you don't let me take a breath in the next five seconds -"

Ford let go immediately, even took a step back from the realization that he *had* been holding on just - a little bit *too* forcefully. "I didn't realize," he tried, watching his brother gulp in air as if his life had depended on it. "I was just -"
"Don't worry 'bout it. I'm fine," his brother interrupted, putting a hand up to halt Ford from babbling further. He thumped himself on the back and winced, sounding just like the old man he was supposed to be. "Whew. My nerd brother got strong. You spend a year in the cow throwing dimension or somethin'?"

That gave Ford pause. "There's - a cow throwing dimension?"

"Yeah. 'Course. There's some real weird places out there, deep in the multiverse. Even before they got there." His brother scratched his nose thoughtfully. "Don't get me started on the one without depth perception. Though, that was funny in a 'Three Dupes' kinda way, sure. Would make a great TV channel. Just wouldn't wanna live there."

"...No," Ford said slowly, "I don't imagine I would either."

They stood there for a long and awkward moment, perched over the smoldering remnants of a conversation that had only ever been a distraction from much harder topics lurking under the surface. Stan shuffled a bit and clung onto his brother's coat as if it was tethering him to reality, sneaking wary glances at his brother whenever he thought he wasn't looking.

Ford, on the other hand, stood silent and hesitant, unsure of how to broach a subject. The subject, as it was.

"You were going to let me forget," he said instead.

That, at least was somewhat familiar ground - accusations, arguments. Anger. But despite himself, he couldn't muster up the usual fire. It was as if he was reading off lines off a sheet, fully aware how they should sound but utterly unable to put himself into a mindset that now felt so utterly alien to his own.

"...Yeah," Stan admitted, voice carefully neutral. He avoided his gaze adamantly. "I would have."

Words swirled around in his mind, questions and demands, but none of them felt real or right for the moment. There was only one thing he could ask - "Why?"

Because so much had happened since the moment Dipper and Mabel had left town. Because he had learned and experienced things that had forced him to reconsider the views and beliefs he had clung onto throughout his life, because he himself had changed so greatly that he could barely recognize his past self.

Because if Stan had just let him forget, because if he hadn't seen the green glint in his brother's eye and the pieces hadn't all came back together, he would've just -

"Wasn't worth it." Stan looked up at him, gaze level. "Normal human isn't made to look into certain parts of the universe and come out with all their mental bits intact. And - " He grimaced. "Ya already know what happened to the last guy who saw me like that. So, I figured ya couldn't remember for a reason."

He let out a breath. "And I… just decided to take the hint."

"It wasn't just your choice to make," Ford said quietly. "I didn't -"

"Well, it wasn't all yours either, alright?" Stan snapped, a surprising explosion of sound that made Ford flinch. "And it wasn't like I could just ask you then for permission to drive you insane -"

"Stan, that's not what I meant."
Stan stopped at that, and sucked in a deep breath, clearly surprised by his own vehemence. "...I know it wasn't a great choice, Sixer," he admitted. "But as far as I could tell then, that was the only one I had." Until you just - came around. ...Just typical, y'know? How you end up side-stepping my entire moral conundrum just like that."

Stan paused, grimaced, clearly attempting to phrase a difficult question. "...What was it, in the end?"

He asked at last. "That made you remember?"

"I saw your eyes," Ford said without thinking.

Immediately, an expression of pure horror burst into existence on his brother's face as his hands flew up to scrabble at the soft skin of his face.

"Stan, Stanley!" He exclaimed, grabbing his brother's hands to keep them still, to stop him from hurting himself. "That's not what I meant, your eyes are perfectly normal! They just - caught in the light, I suppose, and I was reminded of -"

"Oh," Stan said blankly. His fingers unclenched. He pulled his hands carefully out of Ford's slackened grip and lowered them slowly, awkwardly tangled with each other, to chest level. "Yeah. I, uh. I knew that."

Another silence fell on the two of them. And - wasn't that just perfectly ironic, that the two of them finally escaped the constant arguments and bickering by just not talking at all?

"Stan," Ford said at last, as steadily as he could. He needed to know, nearly as much as he didn't want to. "Are you alright? Honestly alright?"

"Sure I am," his brother replied with exaggerated nonchalance. "Look, you might be a sci-fi adventure hero or whatever, but all things considered, you're not that strong -"

"You know perfectly well that I'm not talking about that," Ford said, cutting despite himself. He put his hands behind his back to hide the way they were trembling. He had quite enough of diversions. "There were -" he paused, trying to find words that would not come to describe the things he had seen in and around his brother. "...You were coming apart in front of me. Before."

Stan winced and pulled Ford's coat tighter around himself. "It's fine, Sixer."

"No," he said frostily. "No, it really isn't. I saw you disintegrating, crumbling away -"

"...Don't ya think that's a little bit too dramatic - ?" Stan tried.

" - and all I knew," Ford continued, tone biting, "as I saw my own brother disappear into Gods knew where, was that there was nothing I could do but watch."

Stan shut up, clearly realizing correctly that his brother had no patience left for self-deprecating jokes and digressions from the topic at hand.

He took full advantage of the silence. "I was out of my depth," Ford admitted. "Every resource I had at my disposal, every bit of knowledge I had collected in years and decades traversing the multiverse, and yet I was utterly useless to help my own twin. I didn't - I didn't know what to do."

Ford paused, unsure how to explain how devastating of a fact that was to him. Him, Stanford Pines, the man who had the facts and a dozen university degrees under his belt, at a complete loss. He... might not have made the best choices in his own life, but knowledge was something he prided himself on possessing. It was how he defined himself. He - he had needed it.
And without that...

"I - still don't know," Ford said at last. "I don't understand how we're both alive. I don't know why you're corporeal again." He paused. "...Why you lost all your clothing. I can't be sure that this isn't some kind of - complex hallucination, and that I'll be waking up to actual reality in a few minutes. I..."

He trailed off. Had to swallow down something leaden to continue.

"I don't even know if you can stay."

Stan jerked at that. "Of fucking course I'm here to stay!" He exclaimed, his eyes wide. "Moses, Ford, I wouldn't just be sitting around here wasting time if - alright, look at this," he said, brandishing a single hairy arm in front of Ford's eyes. "This is one hundred percent human here, yeah? Nothing else. No more - green eyes, no weird cosmic… stuff. What you see is what you get."

He glanced down and grimaced. "...Ugh. Just wish I coulda thought myself up a smaller gut."

"But how do you know that, Stanley?" Ford demanded, tamping down on the smallest flutterings of hope in his chest. These were not answers, not yet. Just - blind reassurances, vague promises, and he had quite enough of those over the past few days. "How is this - even possible? Just before this, you told me your - your original body was gone, that all you had was -"

The wriggling star stuff, the gaping rip in reality, how his brother's skin had ripped to show empty space underneath.

"- that. How can you be back, how can you be human, if -"

"The deal, Sixer."

The words were said simply and matter-of-fact, but it cut through Ford's protests like a hot knife through warm butter. "What?" He said at last, after a moment of confused silence.

Stan gave him a pained smile. "Yeah. Just typical, huh? It's... always about the deal, in the end."

"I don't understand," Ford said slowly. "Your deal was to bring me back to this dimension, and you fulfilled that weeks ago. My presence here should be proof enough of that. What does that have to do with any of our present concerns?"

"Well, it was to get my brother back, to be specific. But yeah. Simple. Straightforward. Least," Stan said with a shrug, "that's what I thought when I made it. And in my defense, I wasn't in the best state of mind at the time, what with crashing straight off the mortal coil and all, but."

He shook his head disbelievingly, a helpless grin on his face. "The wording. The wording."

"The… wording?"

"It was pretty damn vague, wasn't it?" Stanley exclaimed, and the glint of excitement in his eyes reminded Ford suddenly of how his brother had always loved playing with words and meanings. It… was a comfort, seeing how that hadn't changed. Even if he had ended up using the ability to scam summer tourists instead of becoming a truly fearsome lawyer.  

"Think 'bout it. Even after I fixed that portal, got it activated and brought you back home… I still didn't get my brother back, did I?"
"...Actually," Ford said slowly, "I would venture to say that that's exactly what it means."

"Aaaand that's why I'm the con artist and you're not, Sixer. See," Stan waved a hand wildly, as if gesturing to an invisible whiteboard with circled words and highlighted passages. "I brought Stanford Filbrick Pines back to this dimension. You. But getting my brother back - cuz in the way I really meant it, it wasn't just physically -"

He paused, as if genuinely waiting for the drama of it all - "That didn't happen 'til much later."

Stan gave Ford a meaningful look. "Couple weeks and about an hour or so later, if I had to really guess."

It took Stanford an embarrassingly long minute for the pieces to click. Remembering what exactly had happened a couple weeks and an hour or so after his return from the portal (which… was right now, wasn't it? Give or take a few hours. It had been a couple weeks and he had returned in the late afternoon and, oh) required substantial effort after the amount of rattling his brain had gone through.

But once he did -

i'm here. you did it. now fulfill your end of the bargain and

- the realization came quickly.

His eyes widened despite himself. "No. No."

"Hah." There was not much humor in that single bark of laughter. Stan looked away, an unreadable expression on his face. "...Yeah."

"That's - absolutely ridiculous!" Ford exclaimed, flabbergasted despite himself. "That's just semantics!"

"It always is with these things, Sixer."

But he was too caught up in the middle of an indignant rant to reply. "Not to mention, it's utterly pointless! I mean, surely, you must have already known that you had me back in every meaning of the word there is, the moment I stepped through that portal, you didn't need me to tell you that I -"

The uncomfortable look on Stan's face stopped him short.

"...You - didn't know," Ford finished lamely.

"What can I say, Sixer?" His brother sighed. "Punching me in the face didn't exactly - help with that.. Or tellin' me that you were kicking me out the moment summer was over. Those just… kind of gave out a certain impression, y'know what I mean?"

Ford opened his mouth, already preparing an indignant defense… and closed it.

If nothing else, he had learned in his time back on Earth not just when to admit that he was wrong, but how to do it. This was a conversation to be had somewhere other than the basement they had just almost died in, sometime when they weren't tired to the bone and struggling to keep themselves upright.

Perhaps it was a conversation never to be had at all in terms of words and arguments. One that would do, would've done, much better with actions and apologies.

Regardless, not here. Not now.
"I have to admit," Ford said evenly, "this all sounds very… sadistic. Like... some kind of cosmic joke. A poor one, at that. Didn't you make your deal with yourself?"

He paused, realizing he had no desire to delve into that specific tangle of identity issues and questions of existence now. "...Ah, more or less. Did - did neither of you know the rules behind the bargain?"

"Well," his brother said, scratching his head. "I get why you ask. But you hafta keep in mind that ol' Six-Sights wasn't exactly an experienced con-whatever back then either. Baby eldritch consciousness' first soul-stealin' deal. That kinda thing."

"What I'm saying is. They... didn't really know what they were getting into, I didn't really know what I was getting into, and... there we went." Stan helpfully illustrated the magnitude of the ensuing disaster by wiggling his fingers of both hands widely. "Complete and utter disaster, classic end of the world kind'f stuff. Though... it could've gone much worse than it did. Much, much worse."

Stan lowered his voice to an aside. "And, ta tell ya the truth, I'm pretty sure the rules existed a paygrade or a twenty above us. Both of us. Six-Sights and I - we were just hopping along to some cosmic playbook."

"But surely, there must be something out that decided how this all works?" Ford exclaimed, aghast. "Some kind of creature that created them in the first place?"

"Well, whatever it is, it strikes me as something that smiles a whole lot. Plays a lotta cards." His brother paused in deep thought. "....Amphibious."

"Amphibious," Ford repeated blankly, a tiny spark of memory from his multiversal adventures nagging at him briefly before dying without much fanfare. "Just a coincidence. "Amphibious"?"

Stan smiled ruefully. "...Whatever it is, at least its got a soft spot for the misfits. The universe isn't usually too kind to a force of nature with a conscience, or a useless knucklehead who can't even scrub barnacles off a ship bottom."

Ford twitched.

"'Specially when the two are the one and the -"

"Don't."

Stan turned his head slowly to stare at the hand gripping his shoulder, bloodlessly tight. It takes Ford a moment too long to realize it's his own, that he had moved without even realizing it himself. It's an immediate reaction, that's what he will explain it to himself afterwards. *Instinct.*

"...Don't say that about yourself," Ford said haltingly. "You're not useless. Not by any measure. And -"

He doesn’t know what to say for a long second, cursing his inability to speak even somewhat intelligently about his own thoughts and emotions. But what else was there to say? Just the idea of valuing his brother in those terms of worth and purpose felt unfamiliar and ridiculous.

*(But he had, hadn't he?)*

He dispelled those thoughts with a grimace. That had been… long, long ago. A lifetime, by any standard. He had all of this one to prove himself wrong.)
Stan looked to Ford's face, then to his hand, then back again, clearly at a bit of a loss for words.

"Y'know," his brother said conversationally, an extra slight roughness at the edge of his voice. "I feel like I should be lookin' for a hidden spy camera. 'S like… like I'm waiting for that mindless reality TV guy to jump out of the floor screaming at the top of his lungs."

"There's - really no need to worry?" Ford offered, slightly confused with the direction the conversation had gone. "There are no hidden spy cameras in my laboratory. I've checked quite thoroughly."

"I didn't mean it seriously, Sixer -"

"...Other than the set gifted to me from the shadow government, of course."

Stan gives him a Look. "Y'know what," he said finally. "I'm not even gonna ask."

"But," Ford tried again, honestly feeling just a bit put out. "You do understand what I just -"

"No. Yeah. I do. It's just…" Stan dragged a hand down his face, obscuring his suddenly quiet voice in a way that Ford could barely hear what he was saying. ":...Just, hard to believe. I mean I do," he added at the stricken look on Ford's face. "...Mostly. I need some… time, yeah. What can I say, a whole lot's happenin' and I'm just an old, old man -"

"We're the same age, Stanley."

"Well," his brother revised with a shrug, "then we're both old men, so I say we both need some sit-down time that isn't on a cold metal surface."

He paused, a faraway look in his eyes. "Y'know what sounds real good? That old armchair of mine, in front 'f the TV. Hugs my butt. Would hug yours too, I'm sure. Same butt."

"That's not how that works," Ford protested, before he could stop himself. "...Even if all of our physical features were identical at birth - which is already a false premise, considering we have a certain major difference - after my decades of running from the galactic police and your decades of…" He paused. "...Sitting on your couch watching melodramatic avian detective reruns -"

Stan scoffed. "Just cuz you don't appreciate a finely crafted children's show with multi-generational appeal -"

"My point is, Stanley. We do not have the same butt." Ford paused, then said with the straightest face he could muster, "Mine is clearly superior."

Stan gaped at him, and he really shouldn't feel as triumphant as he did about shocking his brother into speechlessness, not when he was fifty-eight years old.

That thought lasted for about two seconds before Ford decided that no, that was exactly why that had felt so good.

"You nerd," his brother said finally, disbelievingly. "Fine, y'know what? Great. Perfect. We'll go upstairs and you can plop your 'superior' wrinkly ass right in front of that TV. Watch all the ridiculous sci-fi series ya want. You've earned it."

Ford perked up at that. "Ridiculous sci-fi TV, you say?"

Stan rolled his eyes in familiar exasperation and reached up to peel Ford's hand from his shoulder.
The moment his hand took hold of his, he froze. His expression was unreadable as he felt across the palm of the glove, and when he turned his hand into visibility, Ford could see why.

The surface of his glove had been utterly destroyed, torn and melted in equal intervals, especially impressive considering Ford had gotten them tailored with both fire-proof and knife-proof material. Bubbles of congealed vlastik, supposedly indestructible by the vast majority of forces in the universe, lined the edges of his hand.

And yet, the exposed skin of his hand was untouched. Literally, it seemed, because it was the soft, raw pink of newly regrown flesh - uncallused, unscarred, unrecognizable.

It matched perfectly the shade and hue of Stan's own extended hand and wrist, which presumably continued to the rest of his body. It does not take long for Ford to understand.

"Stan," he started, and his brother flinched immediately.

"...This isn't a conversation I'm having right now," Stan said loudly, as if he could block out the possibility by sheer force of will. "Nope, nope, nope."

Ford looked again at the new, new skin on his hand. What existed before had been dead, destroyed beyond all recovery. It had become a blank slate now, missing decades worth of history written down in healed white scars and telltale calluses. They… hadn't been the best memories, but they had made him him.

"I never wanted you to give up so much for me," he said quietly.

"It doesn't matter what you wanted, alright?" Stan snapped, an outburst that seemed to surprise both of them. "...It was what I wanted. Isn't -"

He faltered. "Isn't that enough?"

There was nothing Ford could say to that. For a single moment that felt like years, they stood, eyes locked and bodies tensed, neither willing to take that final step and break their delicate silence.

Then his brother sagged. "My balls are gonna fall right off if I hafta stay down here for another minute," he muttered.

The unexpected vulgarity of the statement killed all tension in the room near immediately. Ford winced, aghast. "Stanley."

"Look. We'll talk." Stan looked at him, a pained expression on his face. "I just - I really need pants for this conversation, alright?"

Chapter End Notes

u thought u've seen the last of me >:0

(last chapter has been split into two, figured its better to publish one 6k chapter now than keep waiting on a 15k monster that may never get done)

finished off school for the term, found me a job for the summer, i have several weeks of free time!! and you bet i'm gonna WRITE!!
thank you to all for sticking around despite the insane hiatus and i really REALLY will get this done!
With each passing minute, Ford sunk further into the gaping maw of the beast.

It was entirely too late to escape, he realized with quiet resignation. There was simply no fight in him anymore. He had been foolish enough to lower his guard in the monster's presence, and now he was paying for it with his life.

That, and there was some deep, dark part of him that very much welcomed the knowledge that he had no options left - that, after everything, there was nothing he could do to save himself this time.

Ford closed his eyes, and waited for the end to come.

There was the heavy sound of approaching footsteps.

"Huh," he heard, and, "...*You* look comfy."

"Hrmg," Ford said eloquently, and pressed his face into the plush armrest. Even without the benefit of sight, he could feel the look his brother gave him like a physical thing.

Stanley leaned heavily on the back of the armchair, and the cushion sagged obligingly. "...Don't have a lot of chairs as nice as this out there in the multiverse, huh?" He asked casually.

Familiar, immature annoyance flickered back into life for a brief moment. "No, Stanley. In fact, I haven't had much comfort in *general* for the past thirty years," he said crossly.

...The effect of his words was somewhat undercut by how the majority of his lower body was currently propped up above his head and his voice was muffled behind his sweater neck, which was a full inch of unwashed alien wool.

His brother looked distinctly unimpressed.
"I suppose," Ford muttered after a moment, and slid down another humiliating inch.

And, alright. If he had to be honest, and he supposed he should be in the sanctity of his own thoughts, it really was a fine couch. Certainly not just because the only other in recent memory had been constructed by Bill Cipher from an unholy combination of human flesh and demonic magic.

In a moment of sudden clarity, he could understand perfectly why and how his brother could spend the majority of his free time reclining here, watching a nice, mindless cartoon duck series or two.

It was a tempting thought, and certainly, there were worse sins than sloth to add to his own budding collection.

...Ford wondered fleetingly if this truly was some kind of human flesh eating cryptid, ready to ensnare any victim foolish enough to take a seat. Stranger things had happened in this house, and it would explain a great deal indeed.

"Got it for ten bucks at a garage sale," Stan muttered nostalgically. "Well, I would've gotten it for ten bucks if I didn't steal it right out of the guy's house. Found a big ol' tomato sauce stain right under the cushion afterwards, though. Serves me right, I guess."

He paused thoughtfully. "...Least, I hope it was tomato sauce. I dunno. Guess that would explain why this thing was so cheap."

Ford winced, feeling a lot less comfortable pressing his face into the armrest than he did just thirty seconds earlier - but still not nearly enough to move. "That's horrifying," he muttered, voice muffled.

"Well I mean, not anymore. I've gotten much worse stains than that out of stuff with a whole lot less, y'know." Stan crossed his legs nonchalantly, and grimaced. "Paul Bunyan, these pants are tryin' to kill me," he announced. "Can you believe I used to fit in these, no problem?"

Ford... really, really could not believe they were having this conversation.

The universe had nearly ended. They had nearly died (or something very much worse that he really would like not to think about, thank you very much.) By any sensible standards, the past fifteen minutes of mindless chatter was entirely pointless and an obvious waste of time.

Surely, after everything they had gone through, with everything that still needed to be said, shouldn't he and his brother have more to say to each other than some truly ridiculous small-talk?

Stan poked him in the side. "...You fallin' asleep on me, Sixer?"

"It would be a miracle if I was," Ford retorted immediately, turning his face just enough to give his brother a well-deserved glare with one eye. "Considering those tights you're wearing must have the same blinding intensity of a supernova seen from its closest galaxy."

"Uh."

"Why do you even own those?"

"Yeah, well, Soos convinced me to do a special holiday version of the Mystery Shack tour awhiles back, before I got immunity to those puppy dog eyes of his. Long story."

Stan cleared his throat. "So, you done making fun of my fashion choices or what?"

It was nonsense, but the easy back-and-forth of conversation was familiar in a warm sort of way - the
kind that sapped the weary tension from his aching muscles and tugged at the edge of his lips until his expression softened.

Yes, Ford decided, allowing himself a particularly helpless smile. This was entirely ridiculous, illogical, and immature - and that was exactly why he would not trade it for anything.

"I can't say about the tights. Ma did always say you had chicken legs," he said lightly.

"Oh, fuck off," his brother replied with a roll of his eyes, but there was no real heat in his words. "Ma was just teasin', and you know it. I've got perfectly normal legs for my body type. And y'know, it's really all about the tailoring of the thing."

Ford raised an eyebrow. That... sounded suspiciously familiar.

"Ma told you that, didn't she?"

Stan's expression softened for just a moment in fond memory as he looked down in his lap, before settling down into a blank poker face. "Yeah, well. Ma did tell us a whole lot of stuff, Sixer."

He nodded slightly in agreement and had just opened his mouth, a particularly ridiculous anecdote already on his tongue, when Stan spoke again.

"Sometimes, I uh. Well. I still get myself thinking about what she'd say about things." His brother's words came halting at first and then all at once, as if Stan couldn't believe that he was saying them out loud either. "...Even if it's been thirty years since she -"

He went abruptly quiet, his expression stiffening in realization of what he had almost just said.

Ford blinked, a cold pit forming in his gut.

There it was.

"Stanley," he began, slowly and carefully, entirely aware of the stakes at hand.

It was something he didn't need to bring up, he tried to tell himself even as he dug his nails painfully into the new skin of his hands. A topic that was obviously impossibly difficult for both of them to talk about. He could forget about it, move on, enjoy the rest of his life in a dimension that wasn't (usually) actively attempting to kill him with his family.

(What was left of it.)

But despite himself, despite the fact that he had been waiting for decades and certainly could wait longer, despite his own pragmatic certainty that the answer would only come painfully -

- he had to know.

Because they couldn't move on without talking about this. Not really. Not in any way that mattered.

"...Yeah?" Stan muttered tensely.

"What happened with Ma?" The words flowed out all in a rush, coming much harsher than he wanted. Ford regrouped. "With... with the both of them," he finished his sentence awkwardly, words clumsy and inelegant around the one topic, one person he could not bring himself to mention out loud.

His brother wouldn't meet his eyes.
"Look, Stanley. It's - it's alright." There was a strange kind of desperation in Ford's voice, one that he didn't want to think about too hard. "I... It has been three long decades. I am fully aware of the most likely answer to my question. And to tell you the truth..."

He swallowed. "I haven't held any real hopes for any kind of reunion with them for years. I've always assumed that they had - already passed, but I would just like to -"

"They're gone," Stan said shortly, cutting off his ramblings like a knife through hot butter. Ford went abruptly silent, not necessarily out of surprise but... really, because of how bluntly his brother had put it.

Neither spoke for a long moment before Stan winced and said, "Sorry. I shouldn't have told you like that." He let out a ragged breath. "You were right. They... got old. Got sick."

Ford nodded slowly, with a touch of bewilderedness. Like a dog chasing after a car, now that he had gotten what he had wanted for so long, he wasn't quite sure what to do with it. He had not lying at all about the fact that this was the answer he had entirely expected. And yet, it still sent a familiar pang of loss through him.

Hearing it from his brother made it... real, concrete somehow. Concrete in a way it never felt when he was hundreds, thousands of light-years away from Earth.

"It was cancer with Ma," Stan continued, without any real prompting. He kept his eyes fixed on some distant thing, carefully not meeting Ford's gaze. "Years and years ago, at this point. But it - took its time with her. Turns out her pack a day habit was no good for anybody, but uh. You don't needa be a fake psychic to know that, do ya?"

"Stanley..."

"...Dad went a few days after," he said finally, his expression suddenly, carefully blank. "And who knows what it was with him?"

Ford went quiet, though not for lack of desire to speak. There was, well.

He had always wondered, in the way humans instinctively sought resolution, if their father had ever... well, change was a strong word, stronger than Filbrick Pines - for all his demeanor and his bluster - could ever be. But if he ever understood what he had done all those years ago. If he realized even a bit of what Ford had understood over all these years, if he had caught a glimpse of what Ford saw now in the brutal clarity of hindsight.

He knew better than to ask.

His brother grimaced. "Rabbi waxed poetic about broken hearts, but I've always figured that Pa's more - like a golem, or somethin'."" He spoke with a strange, uncertain softness in his eyes. Something that could be, in a far kinder world, be called fondness. "Like the stories Ma used to tell us. Keeps chugging as long as he's got that little scroll in his head, take that away and."

He cleared his throat. "Y'know."

"...Yes." Ford said roughly. He wasn't sure why it was so difficult to speak. "Yes, I remember those stories."

Stan let out a low chuckle, one without much humor. "Yeah, I know. You were there for them too, I know. It - was a weird thought. But somehow... I knew you were the one person I wouldn't hafta explain it to."
Ford didn't know how to reply to that. All he knew was that the warm rush that washed over him upon hearing those words and left him breathless... that was a feeling he wanted to keep forever.

"...Did you - did you go?" he asked hesitantly. "To their funerals, I mean."

Stanley looked at him for a moment, as if in surprise.

"I - yeah," he said haltingly. "Actually, I - I was still decidin' whether I could risk goin' to Ma's funeral when I got the second call from Shermie about Dad. Tellin' me to get my ass over there in the next twenty-four hours if I wanted to keep it."

"That sounds like her," Ford noted, smiling despite himself at the thought of the little girl he had last saw decades ago yelling into a phone with Ma's Jersey accent. "Maybe not the - profanity - but -"

His brother lets out a bark of laughter. "Sixer, you have no idea."

They're both quiet for a companionable moment, and oh, oh, Ford had missed this. He had missed this more than words could say.

There was something - had always been something deeply heartening about being able to talk to someone who could understand. Especially given Ford's own experiences with fitting in, or rather, the lack thereof.

Relaxing in this way, soaking in the easy silence that only came from the knowledge that he did not need to speak to be understood... it was something he had not felt for a long, long time.

Maybe, time had not changed them as much as Ford had feared.

"...Ma had called a coupla times before," Stanley said slowly, clearly reluctant to break the moment of calm. "She sent me some money before when things were really down, but… first time I had actually seen either of 'em for a decade was at - well, my own burial."

He winced. "And that had been risky enough already, even with my corpse lying there in a box several yards away. Guess that was for the best. With Shermie the only one hanging around, I didn't have much of an excuse not to go and ah, see 'em off."

"I wish..." Ford said slowly, without knowing exactly how to end the sentence. I wish I had been there. I wish I had seen them one last time. I wish, I wish, I wish.

Judging from the look his brother gave him, he didn't need to.

"I'm sorry," Stan said roughly, a new tenseness in his body language that made his movements frantic, jerky. "I'm sorry ya couldn't be there."

Ford didn't reply for a long minute. This was one of those points, he knew, that the two of them could never completely forgive and get over. It had to be - doing otherwise would be a lie, a disservice for both of them. It hurt beyond words that he had lost everything he could call his own for thirty long years, that he had missed the funeral of his parents, that he did not get to watch his younger sister growing up.

But it had not been a one-sided hurt. It had never been a one-sided hurt when the two of them were involved, not even at the very beginning.

Blind forgiveness had never been the answer, Ford thought to himself with a strange calm. The problems that had stolen most of their lives from both of them would have lingered on, simmering
until the moment they could not be ignored again.

He didn't know if it was possible to move on and forwards without forgetting the past. Ford certainly had not succeeded before.

But then, he had never really wanted to try, before.

"I am sorry as well," Ford said quietly. "I am sorry that you could not attend as yourself. That you - lost them so early."

They both knew well that he wasn't talking about their parents' passings.

"...Don't apologize for that, Sixer," Stan muttered. "It was my own stupid mistakes."

"I could have said something."

"No, ya couldn't." His brother said flatly. "...You saw the look on Pa's face. It wasn't some... spur of the moment kinda thing. I'd been packin' my bags for weeks up till that point, just waitin' for the last straw or until I turned eighteen, whichever came first. Nothin' you coulda said woulda changed his mind."

He grimaced. "He already knew I was a loser, Sixer."

"Then he should have learned that he was wrong!" Ford exclaimed, a familiar indignant anger rising in him - the same kind he felt at Crampelter and the bully's ugly laughter, at the recruiters from West Coast Tech and their cruel, calm rationality, at Bill grinning and cackling in laughter and saying, *Fordsy, did you really think I would have chosen you if I wanted someone significant?*

Stan winced. "Be honest with yourself, Sixer. Was he really? Just - *look* at what I ended up doin' after that. I just - I just kept runnin' cons. Sold cheap shit to people who were too dumb to know any better. Made deals with some - some real horrible people to keep myself going."

He sighed. "...Tell ya the truth - if you hadn't called me up here, I would've ended up dead young."

"You still did," Ford said steadily.

His brother refused to look him in the eyes. "You know what I mean. Worse than what happened here. I'd be in some - some shallow grave that no one would've even tried to look for. Moses knows I had gotten close to it before."

"Stanley..."

"You don't get it, do ya? Only good I've ever done in my life has been right here." Stan hesitated, as if he was gearing himself to say something he had wanted to say for a very long time. "...Only good I've ever done in my life wasn't even as myself."

*Don't say that,* Ford retorted immediately, with an urgency that surprised even himself.

"Dunno, Sixer," Stan shrugged, not meeting his eyes. "Figured I should tell the truth. For once in my life."

Ford opened his mouth, then shut it. Took a long, slow breath, and let it all out.

He said, his voice only slightly wavering, "When I told Shermaine the truth about what had happened between the two of us, she told me how you died."
His brother went still. Clearly, this was not what Stan expected to hear. "I, uh," he mumbled, eyes wide. "I... still really wish you hadn't done that."

"Apparently," Ford continued vehemently, "I had been instrumental in the destruction of some cross-border drug operation that had orchestrated your -" He hesitated. It was real. It was exactly what happened. Why was it so hard to say? "Your murder," he said at last, mouth uncomfortably dry. "Shermaine had an idea or two on how you had gotten - involved in it."

He swallowed. "Is... is that where your scars came from?"

His brother's silence was particularly telling. "Some of them," Stan said at last, voice gruff.

They eyed each other, quietly willing the other to speak first.

Ford relented. "...I haven't said much to you and the twins about my years on the other side of the portal," he said haltingly, unsure of what he was getting at himself but hoping with everything he had that he would figure it out along the way. "They were not - the best."

"Well, yeah," Stan said, matter-of-fact. He flushed at the look Ford gave him. "Not like that. I meant... You startle easily."

"I what," Ford said flatly.

He had heard many descriptors applied to him in his life, everything from 'eccentric' and 'brilliant' to 'neurotic' and - in one not particularly fond memory - 'batshit insane.' 'Easily startled' was not one of them. Perhaps at the very beginning of his career in studying the paranormal, but even that was a stretch, considering that getting one of Mothman's composite moths in his mouth was obviously enough reason to -

"Fucking - not like that, sorry. Look, I just meant -" Stan took a deep breath. "Whenever I get up close to you without warning, you tense up. Hands twitch a bit, like you want to make a grab for something. It's not that hard to tell if you know what you're lookin' for, and I - uh."

He grimaced. "I knew what to look for. I dunno. I just - kinda always figured you weren't havin' the time of your life out there."

Ford... didn't know how to feel about that, that his trauma had become something entirely readable from the way he moved and lived.

"It wasn't the individual incidents that got to me, Stanley," he said instead, refusing to let the topic change. "Certainly there were many of them, over my three long decades of living life on the run. But no. It... was the constancy of it all."

He wasn't in danger all the time, of course. A month or two holed up in a safe haven, his time recovering and learning from Jheselbraum, the very few times he had genuinely thought his journey may have come to an end - that he had come to a place in which he could live instead of just survive, at least up until he had prepared enough to face Bill for the last time.

And that was it, wasn't it? "I realized eventually that there were two ways my journey would end," Ford said flatly. "Either I would die taking Bill with me, or I would die having failed in my mission. There were no other options to speak of. I... had no hope for myself in regards to that."

"Ford," Stan said, and there was something stunned, something entirely horrified in the blankness of his expression. "How could you just - decide that for yourself?"
That made him stop in his tracks, just a bit. "I didn't decide that for myself," Ford said, almost annoyed, because how was it that his brother didn't understand? Because it wasn't a decision, not in any way that mattered.

"Really, Stanley. It wasn't as if I had simply - sat down one day and decided that I had no direction in life other than one that culminated in death."

Stan flinched. "But -"

"There was never a choice," he said matter-of-fact. "All I was doing was to accept the cards already dealt to me. It was all I... was..."

Worth.

Ford trailed off, the ending of the thought making him stop in his mental tracks. It was - a familiar thought, that there was no doubt about.

already knew I was a loser, sixer.

But now it was familiar in an entirely different kind of way.

His brother was looking at him, he realized, in concern. There was something suddenly, inexplicably hilarious about that, considering the entire unspoken conversation of worth and sacrifice and unnecessary martyrdom that had led up to this moment.

The smallest hint of a hysterical laugh bubbled up within him.

"...Sixer?"

"But I was wrong." Ford said breathlessly. He knew what he wanted to say now. What he had to say. To his brother - and to himself. "I'm alive, and I was wrong."

Stan grinned uneasily, unsurely. "That's - great, Sixer, don't get me wrong. But uh, I'm honestly kinda lost abo -"

"And so are you."

His brother stared at him like he had gone off the deep end.

"I had been wandering the dimensions for three decades by the time you fixed the portal," Ford said, buoyed by a heady combination of adrenaline and certainty, and it felt like shrugging off weights, opening the curtains, seeing and feeling something that had been there all along. "I had been hungry, I had been cold, and I was always afraid. By that time, I... had done many things I regret."

He hesitated. "But I won't say anymore on that because I don't need to explain all of that to you. Our circumstances were different, certainly. And any comparison of suffering is inherently wrongheaded. But... something tells me that you understand my experience more so than anyone else on this planet."

"Well, perfect," Stan said after a moment of stunned silence, his voice dull. "What I've always wanted. My brother to live like a criminal on-the-run for three decades."

"But it goes both ways, don't you see?" Ford interrupted, eyes wide. "I don't know everything that happened to you, that you went through, but trust me when I say that I understand much more than you might realize."
"I'm not sayin' you don't, but -"

"The reason I was so _determined_ to sacrifice myself for the sake of the universe," he said, voice clear, "was because I believed that my greatest worth was to others, and not to myself. I had made so many mistakes and let so many people down in my life, that this was the only way I could make up for them."

His brother looked deeply uncomfortable. "Ford..."

"I thought that because I had already given up all hope for myself," Ford said steadily. "But Stanley, you believed I was worth more than that. And you gave - so, so much of your life to give me another chance."

He hesitated. "I suppose... I just wish I could have done the same, when it was you who needed me."

It was all too easy to think back to a much younger Stanley, newly homeless, newly brother-less, and see their parallels. Even easier to put himself into the shoes of the familiar-unfamiliar man who had showed up at his door all those years ago, stinking of exhaustion and defeat, a strange desperation in his eyes when he asked Ford why he had finally asked him to come back. What he could do so he didn't have to go away again.

And instead...

take this book, get on a boat, and sail as far away as you can!

Ford's expression tightened. "I _should_ have," he said, voice rough, "and I am sorry I didn't."

"You couldn't have known," his brother said automatically.

"I _shouldn't_ have needed to," he snapped with a ferocity that surprised even himself. "I - _Listen_ to me,. You might have never wanted me to give up so much for you, but - I never wanted you to give up so much for me either."

Stan sucked in a breath. "But - Ford -"

"Stanley," Ford said, slowly, steadily, "if we want to make this work, we have to be worth just as much to ourselves as we do to each other."

His brother stared at him for a long, frozen moment.

Then, as if waking from a dream, Stan opened his mouth. Maybe to protest, maybe to agree, maybe to throw out some terrible unfitting joke that only related tangentially to the situation like he always did whenever the circumstances became emotionally dire.

Ford didn't know, but what he could be certain about was that this time, he would not let his brother shrug off his words with false nonchalance, that this time they could finally -

And, of course, it was at that very moment that the doorbell rang.

Both brothers froze at the sound, faces gone slack in the exact same blank expression of disbelief and confusion.

As if in reply to their unvoiced question, the bell rang yet again, almost plaintively.

It felt as if a spell had been broken. "Who the hell...?" Stan trailed off, patting at his wrists as if looking for a watch that was no longer there. "It's dark outside, but - shit, what time is it?"
"It's - late," Ford replied blankly, mind too fuzzy to be at all helpful. There was something nagging at the edge of his consciousness, something important that he had forgotten. What was it?

"...Y'know what," his brother said decisively, and stood straight. "I'll go and tell 'em to fuck off. How do I look, Sixer? Decent?"

He looked at Stanley's wildly mismatching, garishly colored outfit cobbled together from the tourist shop lost and found and Ford's wardrobe from when he was 28, which could only be described as "hopelessly tweed." Certain pieces somehow, against all laws of physics, managed to be at once too tight and too loose.

"You look absolutely terrible," Ford said bluntly.

"Perfect." Stan adjusted his three overlapping collars. "Then maybe I don't even have to say anythin’ for them to run."

Ford bit back an exasperated sigh. "Stan, would you just wait a moment? There's something about this that's -"

The doorbell rang again. It was clear that their visitor had no intentions of leaving without an answer.

Stan gave him a Look. Ford relented, an entirely terrible decision he would later chalk up to a combination of sleep deprivation and the multiversal destabilization all the molecules in his body had gone through not even an hour before.

Decision made, his brother limped over to the door and fumbled momentarily with the inner locks. There was a satisfying click as the door unlatched and he turned the handle.

And, of course, it was at that very moment that Stanford remembered exactly what was so significant about having a stubborn visitor to the Mystery Shack so late at night.

"Stanley, wait!" He exclaimed, jumping to his feet, watching the door open in slow-motion. "It's Sher -"

"MISTER PINES!"

Ford blinked. The voice was - a familiar one, undoubtedly. Just... not even remotely close to what he was expecting to hear.

A quick, stunned glance confirmed his initial suspicions. The late night visitor to the Mystery Shack was Soos the handyman, the rather gopher-ish man who had become close friends with the niblings over the summer. And, he remembered with a twinge of sheepishness, the same person who had accompanied him on his trip into the woods and experienced with him the aftermath of his brother's ridiculous plan.

Without warning, the handyman in the doorway rushed forwards to enclose Stan tightly with two pudgy arms.

"I'm so glad you're okay, Mr. Pines!" He wailed, eyes moist. "After everythin' that was going on and all the stuff that other Mr. Pines told me, I was so worried that somethin' had -"

"...Soos?" Stan said slowly, clearly lost. Just slightly more so than Ford felt, a fact that gave him some reluctant pleasure. "Uh, Soos, what the heck are you doing here?" A moment passed, and then he added, completely unconvincingly, "Oi, leggo of me, ya big lug. Yer getting sweat all over me. And - " He squinted. "Is that my fez?"
Soos loosened his grip reluctantly and wiped at his gushing tears - not an exaggeration, Ford watched on with awe, despite possibly being not humanly possible. "I just wanted to see if you were alright, sir. And, oh yeah! Your fez!" His eyes widened. "I was gonna return it, Mr. Pines, I swear!"

"Yeah, I don't doubt that," Stan muttered, and squinted. "Uh, what are ya doing here anyways?" His eyes widened as the realization hit. "Wait, Soos, how did ya even know I was here?"

Soos paused, a sheepish expression on his face. "Oh, uh, about that, Mr. Pines -"

A familiar-unfamiliar figure stepped into view in the doorway. "Ford," it said dangerously, eyes glinting behind thick glasses, "you scared the shit outta me."

Stan blinked, entirely bewildered. "...Shermy? What the hell are you doin' here?"

She punched him directly in the jaw.

The next few seconds of movement passed too quickly for Ford to intervene.

His brother staggered backwards with (no, not a squeak, because Ford will give his brother that little bit of dignity even in the sanctity of his mental narration) an 'oof' of some pain and mostly surprise. "What the fu - hot Belgian Waffles was that?" He groaned, raising one hand to rub at his sore cheek.

"What the hell do you think I'm doing here, Ford?" Shermaine demanded, her left fist still clenched pale and bloodless against her side.

"I... don't know?"

She faltered. Her anger seemed to dissipate, replaced by something much more real.

"Why did you call me?" She asked, voice ragged. "What were you - what have you been thinking?"

Stan took a step backwards, confusion written clearly across his face. He glanced quickly at where Ford was standing, just slightly out of sight, in an obvious plea for help. "I... don't remember calling you? I mean," he added, in what seemed like a futile attempt to hold up his false identity, "not saying I didn't call you, but uh -"

For just a moment, her face fell - no masks, no guards, no performative fury to cover up the raw grief in her expression. "...What happened to you?"

Ford took in a deep breath and takes a - the single step forward.

"He didn't call you up here, Shermaine," he said, speaking to his younger sister face-to-face for the first time in three decades. It took every bit of self-control he had just to stop his voice from shaking.

"I did."

Shermy turned around slowly, face pale.

She looked at him like she had just seen a ghost, a dead man risen, like if she blinked even once he would disappear back into the realm of her imagination. Which, if she was anything like the rest of her family, were all entirely accurate descriptors of what she must have immediately - and understandably, he supposed, given the circumstances - concluded.

A long moment passed and gone. Ford just stood there, a small, sad smile on his face. He said, as gently as he could, "It's really me, Shermaine."
She looked at Stan, then back at him, then back at his - at their brother again.

"The two of you," Shermaine said thickly, a single hand held shakily to her mouth.

"You're both - both -"

To Ford's confusion, she fumbled in her purse for what he only barely recognizes from Dipper and Mabel's brief show-and-tell as a modern phone. Shermaine held it up, her arm visibly shaking, and looked at him through its screen.

"Um," he said.

"You can't take a picture of a hallucination, Sixer," Stan explained quietly. He looked on calmly, like he had seen the process many times before. More likely than not, he had, Ford realized, reminding himself of the many years of shared life between the two that he had missed out on.

Shermaine made a small, broken sound. The phone slipped from her slack grip and smacked loudly on the ground.

The handyman reached out a hand as if in pain.

"Don't worry 'bout it, Jesús," she said distantly, slowly putting her arm down to dangle limply at her side. "I got an Otterbox. That thing can survive a nuclear meltdown."

There was a brief moment of silence as the three Pines siblings stared at each other, none of them particularly willing to be the first one to speak. Just when it got to the point of becoming truly uncomfortable, Shermaine sighed.

"Do me a favor, will ya, sweetheart?" She said to the handyman with easy familiarity. "I'm gonna have a talk with my idiot brother." A hesitation. "Brothers. Fuck. ... You might want to come back in a bit."

The handyman fidgeted, sneaking a look at Stanley. "Well -"

"Probably a good idea," his brother sighed. "Sorry about gettin' you involved in all of this, kid. We'll talk later, yeah?"

That got Soos in motion. "Sure thing, Mr. Pines!" He saluted. "By the way, Mrs. Pines! Abuelita told me to tell you, uh, felicidades!"

"On winning the 9th annual Pines-Ramirez pickle-eating contest, or on the Pulitzer?" Shermaine asked after a moment of thought. Ford gave Stan an incredulous look.

The handyman paused in contemplation. "Sorry Mrs. Pines," he said apologetically. "I think Abuelita only follows the pickles."

Then he was gone, and it was just the three of them. The silence in the house felt suddenly, uncomfortably oppressive.

"So," Shermaine said. She looked between the two of them like she wasn't sure whether she wanted to hug them or kill them.

Ford tried his best not to seem apprehensive. "Yes?"

"You're both alive." She hesitated. "You're both - here."
"Yeah," Stan said awkwardly. "Well. We've got a, uh, whole lot of explaining to do, I know, and we can definitely -" 

"Are you kidding me?" Shermaine exclaimed, clearly caught between exasperation and astonishment. "Do - do I look like that's what I want from you two right now?"

"Er -" Stan said, but whatever he wanted to say after that was forgotten as he was promptly yanked into a bone-crushing embrace.

"Thank God I didn't lose you too," she muttered, voice muffled against the scratchy cloth of his shirt. Stan let out a pained wheeze when she squeezed.

After a long moment, Shermaine loosened her grip. She turned and shot Ford a look of pure disbelief. "What are ya doing still standin' there?"

"Er," Ford said unsurely, "I -"

She groaned. "Get over here and let me hug you, ya dingus."

He approached them slowly, carefully. But really, it was all over the moment he got into grabbing range.

Ford and Stan stood tense and breathless for a long moment as Shermaine held them tight and pressed her face into both of their shoulders, at the space where the two met.

After a long, frozen moment, she let out a long, ragged breath. Her grip slackened, and let go. "You assholes," Shermaine announced, voice low. If there was a moistness in her eyes, no one was idiotic enough to mention it. "I can't believe you two. Fuck."

"Shermaine -"

"You - absolute - fucking - assholes."

Stan winced. "Fair enough."

All three of them were quiet for a long moment.

"How long?" Shermaine asked finally, voice choked.

"Just a couple weeks, Sherm." Stan said tentatively. "Ford hasn't been back for long at all."

Shermaine blinked slowly. "'Ford,' you said," she intoned flatly.

He coughed, alarm written bright and clear across his face as Stan realized the mistake of what he had said. "Um, yeah, about that -"

"Either you've picked up the habit of referrin' to yourself in third person in the past week, or -" Her eyes glinted. "I've been missing the wrong brother for the past thirty years."

Stan hung his head.

"I'm Stanford," Ford said, cutting in hurriedly because clearly Stan needed some help sorting out the hurt his - at the time - convenient lies had dished out to everyone involved. "He's Stanley. I was the one who called you, but..." He hesitated. "He was the one you've known for all of these years."

Shermaine stared at him for a long moment, as if she hadn't been expecting him to talk at all.
Considering he - or at least, 'Stanley' - had been some sort of cautionary tale for their family for decades, he supposed that was more or less understandable.


There was a beat. "No, actually, that's not okay. Ford - Stanley - whoever you are," Shermaine brandished a finger furiously at Stanley, who winced at the sudden attention. "You've had thirty years to tell me all of this. Any of this. And now it turns out you're our long-dead brother that you've been - pretending to grieve for all this time and -"

Her voice cracked.

"Sherm," Stan said slowly, "I can explain."

"Can you explain why you lied to me for all these years?" Shermaine snapped immediately. Then she paused, her eyes widening in slow, horrified realization. "...No, not just to me. Our whole family." Her expression hardened. "Our parents died thinking you were gone."

"I know. I know, Sherm." He took a long, ragged breath. "There's nothin' I can say that can fix things, but I... gotta explain. Maybe it won't make up for any of what happened, but just - gimme a chance, alright? To tell ya everything I couldn't during all these years."

Shermaine looked at him quietly for a long moment. "...This is a lot," she said, voice low. "You know that. This is a fucking lot."

"Yeah, Sherm," Stan said hollowly. "It - really is."

She sighed and massaged the bridge of her nose with two fingers.

"I need a fucking drink."

"So," Shermaine said, an hour and an impromptu scavenger hunt in the Mystery Shack later. She nursed a small but very dangerous amount of whiskey from Ford's - or possibly Fiddleford's, which was even more alarming - thirty-year-old stash. "Armageddon."

"We've been referring to it as Weirdmageddon, actually," Ford ventured. "But in hindsight, 'Oddcapalypse' certainly has a ring to it -"

"Ford, shut up." He flinched. She went quiet. "...Sorry. I didn't mean that. I just. God."

"I know it's a lot to take in," Ford said tentatively. "And certainly very difficult to believe. But I swear to you, this is the truth."

"Demons, dimensional portals and coming back from the fucking dead," Shermaine said dully. "No, actually, I got that part just fine. Honestly, Ford - fuck, it feels weird to even call you that - I've seen enough weird shit in my life and especially as part of this family that I really have no place to say what's make-believe in this world and what's not."

"Oh."

He... had no idea what to say to that. There should be some sort of relief, shouldn't there? Ford knew
better than most how entirely unwilling to believe people could be when it came to the strange and abnormal. "That's - wonderful, Shermaine, I'm glad you're taking this so well -." 

He realized almost immediately that that was the wrong thing to say.

"The only reason I seem to be taking this so well," Shermaine said calmly, dangerously, as she set down her cup, "is because seein' the two of ya here, even if I don't have a goddamn clue how this is happenin', is infinitely better than what I was afraid I was gonna find once I made it up here. Which, just so you know, is that the only brother I've got left had lost his goddamn mind on me - and had brought my grandkids along for the ride."

"That's -"

"Here's a secret, Stanford. I'm not takin' this well at all. Because what I don't get," she continued, a promise in her words as she turned to stare down Stanley, "is exactly what part of that was stopping me from getting told the truth for thirty goddamn years?"

Stan had been quiet for awhile now - a particularly guilty silence, Ford saw with the clarity of hindsight. "I was gonna tell you all of this once I got Ford back, Sherm," he said gruffly, not meeting Shermaine's angry look.

(No, he wasn't, Ford realized with a burst of horrified understanding. Because he had never expected to survive long enough to tell the truth, and he had thought Ford would have been perfectly fine with stepping into the hole he left behind.

...After this, after all of this, he was going to give his brother a good talking-to.)

"So in the meantime, you decided to impersonate him and let us all go on believin' you were dead?" She asked disbelievingly.

"Sherm, I wasn't even sure if I was myself -"

"I coulda told you that, you knucklehead!"

Stan stared at her with wide eyes. "Uh -"

"We both remember what you did for me, Fo - Stan," Shermaine said through gritted teeth. Ford watched on in confusion.

He winced. "That doesn't have anythin' to do with this, Sherm -"

"Yes it does," she bit out. "Because decades ago I was a scared kid because I was gonna have a kid, and I didn't think there was a single person in the whole world who wouldn't flip their lid on me if they knew. You were holed up north so you didn't have to risk giving yourself away, but you still picked up when I called. And you said yes and cleared out the spare room in the Shack, and -"

"What the hell are you talkin' about, Sherm?" Stan exclaimed, disbelief written large across his face. "Of course I did, what kind of brother would've left you hanging? Hot Belgian waffles, what kind of monster would've..."

He trailed off in slow realization.

"Exactly!" Shermaine shouted, eyes wild. He stared at her as if she had yanked a rabbit out of a hat and promptly threw it at his face. "So Stan, how the fuck did it take you three whole decades and the almost end of the world to figure this out yourself?"
Ford looked between the two of them in a strange mixture of morbid curiosity and a sensation of inexplicable loss. Inexplicable, because it was entirely illogical to expect to understand, to feel as if he had lost something he had never had, to -

To feel like an outsider looking in.

(Thirty years was a very long time, he felt - really felt - for the first time since returning to this dimension.)

"I - look. Stan. I get why you didn't want to tell Dad. Even Ma." Shermaine took a long, deep breath, her grip tightening on the glass in her hand. "But, at the very least... why couldn't you tell me?"

Stan flinched, and looked away.

"Did ya really think I would've ratted you out if you told me what really happened between you an' Ford?" She demanded thickly. "Or did ya think I wouldn't believe you? Because I would've believed you, seeing how for some reason, I trust you!"

"I know, Sherm," he said roughly.

"So why?"

They looked at each other for a long moment. "I dunno," Stan said at last, each individual word coming out slow and reluctant. "I was stupid, I dunno. I don't have a real good answer for you."

"Well, ya better think of one, or -"

"I guess." He swallowed. "I guess, I just didn't wanna disappoint you."

Shermaine stared at him. "No," she said tonelessly. "No."

Stan's expression didn't change.

She exploded. "You knucklehead, what the hell made you think I would be disappointed if I knew you were actually you?"

He didn't meet her eyes, and that was answer enough.

Shermaine let out a long, deep breath. "Do I - do I look like Dad to you?" She demanded, eyes wild and just slightly moist. "Because I'm not him. Lord knows I've tried my best not to be, all of these years. You know that."

"I'm sorry, Sherm," Stan said roughly.

The silence hovered around them for a long moment.

"I still can't believe you're him," she said at last, voice blank. "That - you're you. Everything I heard growing up, all those files I searched up, those fucking pictures - that was you. This whole fucking time."

"That - doesn't change anything, Sherm," he tried.

"No, Stanley. It changes everything." Shermaine sighed. "I - can't talk about this anymore. I need time," she said roughly. "Enough time to sort out this clusterfuck that's in my head right now."

She glanced over at Ford, who had been sitting rather stiffly to the side during the whole exchange,
unsure of how - or even if he *should* - add anything to the conversation.

"Hi, Stanford," Shermaine said slowly, deliberately.

He fidgeted slightly under the weight of her gaze. "Hello, Shermaine," Ford replied rather awkwardly.

"I wanna apologize to you right now," she said, matter-of-fact. "Because now that I think about it, I don't remember much about you at all, and you deserve a whole lot more than that. Just that...

Shermaine trailed off in thought. "That your hands always smelled like chemicals, and you dropped an apple on my head once, so you could tell me about Newton."

He remembered that too, in some distant part of his brain he had thought lost to time and hurt. It suddenly became very difficult to speak. "You don't need to apologize to me, Shermaine," Ford said gently.

"Yep, I do," she said, just as calmly. "*Someone* does, because you've missed out on a whole lot all these years, Ford. You've missed out on meeting two whole generations of Pineses because you had to go all - Stargate-y."

Ford's expression tightened at the reminder of what he had lost. "I'm well aware," he said stiffly.

"Might not be anyone's fault," Shermaine said contemplatively. "But as far as I'm concerned, someone's gotta fix it."

She paused. "And that someone's me."

Ford blinked. Shermaine downed the rest of her drink in one go, and began to get up shakily.

"Sherm -" Stan - *tried* - to interrupt, a look of concern on his face.

"Stanford," she announced, voice rising in volume as she stood, "consider yourself back in school. You are officially enrolled in a little crash course I like to call, 'Pines Family 101: A Drunk History,' starting..."

Shermaine checked her watch, only swaying slightly. "Right fucking now. Who's gonna help me grab my bags from the trunk?"

"Hell, Sherm, you brought the family photo albums?" Stan asked, pained.

"Every volume," she said cheerfully, and Ford could not miss the resemblance to a certain glitter-loving nibling. "And we're going through all of them. *Together.*"

Life moved very quickly after that.

Maybe it was making up for lost time. There had been, after all, many, many photos to be seen. It was a pleasant surprise to realize that blood relation was quite possibly the least important factor of what it meant to be part of the Pines family as it existed now. Ford blinked blearily as he was introduced to second cousins and adopted aunts and more in-laws than he could count on both hands.
At one point, he thought he had seen a man with his siblings' wide grin, his arms around a woman with their curious eyes.

By the time he had 'graduated' from Shermaine's crash course, dazed and overwhelmed but full with emotion in a way he could not put into coherent words, Ford had been told the date of the next big family reunion and been made very aware of the fact that a great number of people attending would Very Much like to meet Great-Uncle Ford-But-Not-The-Other-Great-Uncle-Ford-Who-Was-Actually-Great-Uncle-Stanley-This-Whole-Time.

("But you should definitely ease yourself into it," Shermaine had said sheepishly, upon catching the expression of pure panic on Ford's face. "We're a bunch of weirdos and I love them to pieces, but I'd be the first to admit that we are a whole lot. So take your time, y'know? They'll understand.")

And then Shermaine was gone, because apparently - to his entire lack of surprise - she hadn't said much at all to anyone else when she started on her cross-country drive over to Gravity Falls. Now that she was satisfied that neither of her brothers was dead or dying or would be in the foreseeable future, she had a great deal of explanations to give herself, back home in California.

The Shack was very quiet after that.

But even so, between giving more-or-less adequate explanations to everyone who had a right to know (which was quite a bit more than Ford had expected, even knowing how deep his brother's connections ran in this town) and dealing with the constant crowd of townspeople clamoring for a reopening of the Mystery Shack, a few long days had passed before Stan and Ford got a moment to themselves to just... pick up their pieces.

It finally happened on a particularly nice summer evening, the kind with just enough of the occasional breeze to have a comfortable chill to it. The two of them sat perched on the back porch of the Shack, looking up at the many brilliant stars that hung distantly in the sky.

Ford could never say what triggered the thought in his mind, or if there even was a trigger at all. Maybe it had been there all along, just waiting to be spoken into existence.

There was something about the heavy darkness of the sky that made him contemplative and thoughtful. After that, it was just a matter of time before it slipped out.

"Stanley?" He spoke, his voice uncomfortably loud in the ambient noise of the Pacific Northwest woods.

His brother shifted next to him. "Yeah?"

"What happened to Six-Sights, in the end?"

Ford's words came out all in a rush, and he wanted to take them back the moment he realized he had spoken them out loud.

Stan was still, and for a long moment, it felt as if the entire world was holding its breath.

"I figured this was coming," his brother said finally, but there was no fear in his voice, no surprise. He leaned back, propped himself up with his own arms. "So. There's a long answer, and there's a short answer. Which one you wanna hear first?"

"...Maybe for once the universe will allow me to take the simpler path," Ford mused to himself, and found it entirely impossible to believe. Still... "The short answer, if you would?"
"They're still here."

Ford blinked. Opened his mouth, closed it again. "...I see," he said at long last, mind racing through more doomsday scenarios than he wanted to count. "Stanley, I mean this in the best possible way, but that particular answer brings me a great deal of fear and anxiety for the immediate future of the world."

"Not like that, geez." His brother rolled his eyes. "I meant, still here." He patted himself on the chest.

For a moment, it felt as if there was no more breath in his lungs. "But you're - you're human now," Ford said faintly, and it sounded more like a question than a statement.

"Course I am, Sixer. I wouldn't have lied to you about that, geez. I'm just sayin'..." Stan was quiet for a moment. "The deal that we had going on. You remember that it goes both ways, right?"

"Yes," he said slowly, unsure of what his brother was getting at.

"So I get what I want. And they get what they want. You already know what I wanted, and it was easy enough when all they wanted was whatever Cipher told them to want." Stan hesitated. "Things... got a lot more complicated once they got a taste for what consciousness was like."

"They began to want something different," Ford said with no small amount of trepidation. He had trusted an eldritch being knowing that it was mostly his brother holding the reigns, but the thought of an existence beyond all human comprehension given access to whatever they wanted was entirely - and understandably - terrifying.

A particularly upsetting question popped into his head. "But - what could something like them want?"

Stan snorted in laughter. "Sorry," he muttered when Ford turned to stare, a strange smile still on his face. "It's just. I remember asking that too, way back when. Exact same question. Fiddleford had been giving me the whole spiel about eldritch whatchamacallits, and this was the only one he didn't want to answer. Didn't want to answer, more like."

He grinned to himself. "But I figured it out, in the end. Figured it out before you two, even."

"I believe you've had," Ford said delicately, "what most would call an unfair advantage."

Stan shrugged. "Point taken. But just think about it, Ford. People can't make sense of them, but... we couldn't make sense of people either, y'know? Humanity was a whole - way of existing we'd never even considered. It was ridiculous, it was overwhelming, and y'know what?" He grinned, only slightly maniacally. "It was addicting."

He blinked, unsure if he had heard wrong. "I'm not quite sure what you're -"

"See, you've got some - ageless, all-knowing fact of the universe, and they've got everything that anyone could possible want." A strange, distant expression passed over his brother's face. "But what the hell is any of that good for if you're not living?"

For a moment, it felt as if the night got just that much darker.

"Of course we wanted more," Stanley said, voice rough. "After the deal, we never could've gone back to the way we were before."

"Um," said Ford.
His brother blinked, and grinned a bit sheepishly. When he spoke again, the strange tone in his voice was gone. "Sorry. It's, uh, a bit... hard to separate things out nice and clean after all of that, y'know?"

"But what you are now is human," he said searchingly. "Entirely, completely, human."

"That was the deal, wasn't it?" Stan said, matter-of-fact. "I get my brother back. And we get to be human."

...Ford could not help but notice that he hadn't actually answered the question. Somehow, he couldn't bring himself to be concerned.

They sat in companionable silence for a while, occasionally slapping at the mosquitos that had begun to emerge from the nearby lake.

"So you're okay with that?" Stan asked suddenly.

The question was so ridiculous Ford had to fight the urge to laugh out loud. "I - Stanley, did you forget every single word I said to you while you were having your world-ending identity crisis?"

"No! I just - this is different, Ford." He fidgeted. "And it was the end of the world back then, I figure maybe you had -"

"Yes, Stanley, I'm okay with that," Ford said, and could not keep the exasperation from his voice. "It really isn't as entirely offputting as you seem to think. It's not as if you're not you." He paused. "They're just - you, too."

A thought popped into his head at that, and he found himself looking up at the dark sky. The entirety of the existence that Bill called 'Six-Sights' must have spanned - planets, galaxies, even, perhaps even outside of the human perception of physical size.

"...But you're not all of them, are you?"

"Yeah, I mean," his brother shrugged. "We never were. There was a lot of - us. The bit of us that got let onto Earth by Cipher was, uh, just one part in a billion billions. Maybe more."

"And the rest of them is - still out there, in whatever corner of the universe they existed in before Bill prodded them awake," Ford muttered out loud. "Doing whatever they've always done."

It was a strange thought. He had been vaguely aware of the entity's existence in his years traveling across the multiverse, but with the revelations of the past few days, he could not help but - perhaps wrongly - think of them with some degree of sympathy.

A strange expression flickered over Stan's face. "...Yeah."

Ford blinked. For a moment, he could have sworn - "You know something," he accused.

"What? No!" His brother hesitated. "...Maybe. It's nothin', honestly."

"Then it shouldn't be any issue for you to catch me on what exactly it is that I don't know. Right, Stanley?"

"Alright, alright. Just, uh." Stan paused, cleared his throat. "We were part of the same them for thirty years. Everything we saw, and felt, and got... they did too."

Ford didn't get the significance of that for a long moment. When the realization finally hit, it hit like a battering ram.
"What you're saying," he said slowly, "is that there is - at least some part of them remembers being you. Being my brother."

Ford tensed, his thoughts barreling towards a conclusion he did not want to accept. "And... it knows full well that they can never come home."

His brother's silence spoke volumes.

Cold horror flashed through him. "That's -"

"Ford, we don't know that," Stan said quickly. "You're overthinking it, honestly. This is thirty years of living compared to what, eternity?" He sighed. "See, what I think is, all of that was probably just one long blink for Six-Sights. Then it's all back to status quo."

"You don't actually think that," Ford accused.

"Sure I do," his brother lied, and let out a sigh. "C'mon, Sixer. Don't do this. Even if you're right about that, what can ya do about it?"

He didn't know, and that was bothered him the most. Ford felt a chill that did not come from the summer breeze.

A hand landed heavily on his shoulder and almost sheepishly, patted him sympathetically.

"Hey," Stanley said awkwardly. "Don't worry about them, alright? If they're anything like me, they'll figure something out. They'll - make it work for them."

Ford swallowed, hard. "...I suppose," he allowed.

They sat in silence together for a moment. When Ford looked at the night sky again, the darkness was almost solid.

For a long moment, he felt surrounded, from every side, every angle. He was within, somewhere deep inside the innards of some colossal existence, part of the bigger whole, and -

...There was something deeply familiar about the blackness of the night, the faint glint of stars that he could have sworn he had seen somewhere before, in a memory of green so deep in his mind that he could not be sure if it existed.

For a reason that he could never put into words or explain, not even to himself, he knew he was protected here.

...Maybe his brother was right, after all.

Ford thought about how Stanley had managed to repair the portal with a few dozen textbooks and pure tenacity, had subsumed an eternity-old fact of the universe out of sheer willpower, had outmanuevered a demonic con-man purely on the basis of his love for his family.

If there was anyone who could make the most out of being an age-old eldritch abomination suddenly given human consciousness, it was him.

"Ford," Stan said suddenly, his voice crashing through Ford's thoughts like a bull in a china shop. "I've been thinking about what you said."

"Hmrg?" He managed.
"Y'know. Before Shermy knocked on the door."

Oh. His mouth suddenly felt very, very dry. "Have you."

Stan didn't speak for a moment. Then, with no small amount of panic, blurted, "We need to make it work, don't we?"

"Er."

"Shermy knows there's two of us now. So does the rest of - well, everyone else." His brother fidgeted. "And they're not gonna settle down for any less than that, huh?"

With a burst of clarity, Ford saw exactly where this was going, and almost couldn't keep the relief off his face. "No, I daresay they won't," he said lightly.

They sat there, a silence stretching out into eternity.

"I can't promise anything," Stan said suddenly. "I just - can't, Sixer. I care about you and the kids too much to put myself above you all, and it ever comes down to it, then -"

"I'm not asking you to do that, Ley," he said gently. "Just to not put yourself below us."

A moment passed and gone. "I'll try," Stan said, voice hoarse.

Ford let out a breath, long and slow.

"That's enough for me," he said, and meant it.

And, despite himself, his thoughts began to drift, far, far away from the little town of Gravity Falls and the patch of Oregon forest that surrounded it.

Shermaine must have made it home by now, to Dipper and Mabel, and to a Pines family that Ford - should - have found strange and terrifying, because there was no one left that he knew.

And no one left that knew him.

But... what had surprised him was that when he had looked through those albums, learning a history he had thought lost to him with Stan and Shermaine throwing out embarrassing stories over his shoulder, he had not seen strangers. Ford had seen people he knew in parts, again and again - in bright grins and expressions of wonderment, to - a distinctive raised arch of an eyebrow that was all Ma.

...All the parts that made a family when shared.

Ford did some calculations in his head.

If this year's reunion was in Piedmont, Northern California, then - that was near the ocean, wasn't it?

And that really wasn't too far from Gravity Falls, geographically speaking, though one should - theoretically, completely theoretically - have some degree of nautical experience before attempting the journey.

Which, as far as he was concerned, just meant that they needed to get right on it.

"Stanley," Ford said, "how do you feel about buying a boat?"
This was the fic that got me into the Gravity Falls fandom, and I feel all kinds of weird finishing it.

I started this in high school (so if you're new and had to experience the writing of the first few chapters recently... phew, sorry about that!) and now I'm working at my first internship as a software engineer, so that breaks my brain a bit to think about. I started this before the finale was even announced, and it's been all sorts of weird to incorporate new canon in until there suddenly was none. I started this fic inspired by art and comics for an AU that ended up taking a whole different direction than what I did, and what I ended up with was this entirely original, massive 70k word story I thought up over the course of many, many daydreams and long car rides and 4 AM bleary writing sessions.

I guess this is where I start thanking people, and I have plenty of people to thank. There's been so many of you that have come since I started writing this, way back when - and many who have gone as well, so this is also to the people who might never ever read this note.

Thank you to the authors who inspired me when I just started as a writer, who allowed me to use their original characters and gave me encouragement when writer's block seemed insurmountable, who sent me an extra copy of the Blacklight journal when I couldn't manage to get my hands on one because I was in another country at the time, who kept reminding me that people wanted an Ending while I was entirely distracted by Life and School and Everything In Between.

Thank you to the readers who left so many kind comments that I've reread again and again over these three years and especially during the times when everything else in my life got me down, who sent in so many kind asks on Tumblr and reminded me that people were still very much interested, who introduced me to the lobster roll and showed me their sword collection in person when I was in town for a conference.

Thank you to the artists who drew SO MUCH BEAUTIFUL FAN ART for this fic over the years and really brought this story to life in a way that I still find it hard to wrap my brain around, who sent me originals of their art that I have stuck onto my wall so I get a glimpse of it pretty much every day, that brought their own creative talents and made a small world into a very big one.

And, most of all, thank you to all the friends I've made along the way, who belong to all of those categories and more. For hosting me for a week in Canada to sending me weird memes at 2 AM to giving me characterization help at midnight to binging a whole series of dick-drawing true-crime parody with me at 4 AM (alright, so I'm nocturnal) to sending me pictures of delicious food they've cooked, and for much much more than that.

Wait, one last thank you - to you, for reading until the end of this entirely Too Long author's notes.

...
stay tuned)
surprise binc h i bet you thought you'd seen the last of me
(you don't want to know how long i've struggled over writing single lines of this.)
thank u pterry for those italicized quotes ('thief of time' was such an inspiration for
important narrative themes in this)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

One said, Tell us…what is it like?

“What is what like?”

One said, Being insane. Being human.

September 20, 2012

from the Journal of Stanford F. Pines

It has been some time since my last entry. I suppose that is to be expected, given all that has occurred
in the past several weeks.

I am writing from Northern California, with the sound of my brother's loud snores rumbling faintly
through the wall that separates our rooms. We are well on our way to Piedmont, but with our age and
the single valid driver's license between the two of us (one that matches neither of our features
exactly) it seemed prudent to rest before continuing onto the last leg of our journey.

...Preferably to do so without ear plugs, hence my rare moment of privacy.

Lately, I have had no real opportunity to seek out new creatures to fill my notebooks with. Nor, if I
must tell the truth, has there been much desire.

Instead, I have taken the time simply to think. Making up in some way for the many years for which
contemplation was a privilege I did not hold.

I have been considering the anomalies in the world that Weirdmageddon might have woken from
their long sleep. I have been pondering on the nature of family, and whether I will find it in the
familiar strangers I shall meet for the first time tomorrow.
Mostly, however, I find myself thinking over what I now remember seeing in that strange space between consciousness and the lack thereof.

The green glint of eyes. The unspoken promise of safety. There is no doubt in my mind that they knew me. And, even in my indisposed state, I had known them.

'Stanley,' I said then. And they had answered.

That should surprise me far more than it does.

I tell myself that I must think about this logically. Instead, I feel myself considering the impossible.

I realize better than most just how finicky the concept of time can be in the context of the multiverse. Jheselbraum had once spent hours trying to explain how impossible it was to define a beginning or an end when speaking of creatures that transcended linear realities, that for them once something had occurred, there is a version of them for which it had always occurred.

However the entity has been changed by their deal with Stanley, the effects have extended as much into the past as they have into the future. They have become entirely independent from the single, fragile timeline of our individual dimension.

That is a powerful position to hold. But it is also a deeply lonely way to exist.

Stanley had once told me to trust in his ability to figure things out, to make things work. I do. But I am also deeply aware of how important family is to my brother, how important it is to him that he can protect those he considers his - the kids, Soos, Shermy. Me.

The entity has no family.

Yet I am hopeful, perhaps illogically so. As I think back to my time wandering the multiverse, I cannot help but remember the times I should not have survived. And there were many, more so than I can recall coherently. A blaster jammed at the nick of time, back-up guards that were called but never came... occurrences that had always seemed too contrived to be pure coincidence, especially in conjunction with one another. What if they were?

What if they had been helping, in whatever way they could?

...I would be the first to admit that these are fanciful thoughts, but I refuse to consider them impossible. After all, true family is not inherited - it is found. If nothing else, the entity has time.

And the multiverse is a very large place indeed.

---

*It's in the darkness where your eyes can't see. The universe becomes two halves, and you live in the half behind the eyes.*
An eldritch abomination walks into a multiversal bar, orders a Manhattan, and gets it.

"Huh," they said, or the nearest approximation of it. They prodded at the borough uneasily with a carefully corporeal tentacle.

The screams of approximately 1.7 million residents increased briefly in volume.

"...Y'know, I really don't know what I expected."

A bit more whiskey, perhaps?

A large amphibious creature perched casually on the bright red bar stool across from them, pink frills draping over the vaguely sticky countertop. It nursed a glass of murky liquid between two delicate paws, beady eyes unblinking as it looked directly at them.

"...I know ya, don't I?" They said after a long moment.

Yes. A long, transparent blink. No.

"Oookay." They fidgeted, as much as a mostly incorporeal mass of cosmic star-stuff could fidget. "So. You uh... come here often?"

I come when I am needed.

"...Right."

The frills twitched. And what brings you here?

"Um."

The Axolotl waited patiently.

"Got bored, I guess."

Boredom. The expression on its face never changed, but somehow the stretch of its smile became more noticeable. How entirely unlike us.

They went still at that, stiff with realization.

"You."

There was a silence that stretches for millennia and milliseconds, and for no time at all.

"...Why did you do this to me?"

I was under the impression you did this to yourself, said the Axolotl.

They made a face. "But ya came up with the rules for all of this, yeah? Things didn't have to turn out this way."

They never do.

The Axolotl hummed.

Are you angry?

"Hell, why wouldn't I be? I would sure love to still be out there eating planets and universes instead
of...

They trailed off, glanced around them as if to reiterate their current situation.

"Moping over shitty cocktails with a giant lizard that's drinkin' swamp water out of a wine glass."

The Axolotl blinked slowly, its smile unchanging.

*No,* it disagreed politely, *you would not.*

Their silence was answer enough.

"...What the hell am I, now?"

*You will never be human,* the Axolotl said. *But you hold symptoms of humanity.*

"Symptoms?" They repeated disbelievingly. "You make humanity sound like... like getting head lice, or something."

*Is it not?* It chirped.

"Er."

**Humanity is imagination, is belief, is hope. It is not given or bestowed, it is caught.** The Axolotl blinked. *What is it then, if not a very contagious disease?*

"...I would be lyin' if I said that metaphor doesn't make me incredibly uncomfortable," they said slowly. "But I get what you're saying. Kinda."

*Your drink remains untouched.*

They blinked, six eyes shuttering and opening at once, as if just then remembering the screaming mass of human civilization sitting right in front of them.

"Look, I know I'm from Jersey and all," the entity said defensively, "and sure, I hate shoobies as much as anyone out there. But I'm not *actually* gonna eat all of New York."

*You are not from New Jersey,* the Axolotl reminded gently. *You exist without precedent. You are not 'from' anywhere.*

There was a moment of silence.

"...I need a drink," they said blankly.

*You have one.*

*A drink without a million screaming people in it, alright?"

*Would you like to have a sip of mine?* The Axolotl offered generously.

The entity stared. "Buddy," they said slowly, "the day I willingly drink swamp water is gonna have to be a hell of a worse day than today."

*No, it will not. For you, there are no days.*

It blinked, long and slow. *No weeks, no months, no lifetimes.*
You have 'now', and you will have it forever.

They twitched at that, component parts squirming.

"...Great. So, uh, is this all there is?"

This?

"You know." Something like a grimace flashed momentarily across their form. "Floating around in the multiverse, messing around with planets and galaxies, playing all these giant - cosmic games that don't mean anything to anyone."

For us, yes.

The entity hesitated. "Then what - what do I do now?"

What would you want to do?

"Well, I wanna catch the latest episode of Ducktective, for one," they said, a tad bit wistfully. "Munch my way through a coupla bags of toffee peanuts. Work on a new exhibit for the Shack. ...Hell, maybe I'll even drag Ford up from his lab one of these days. Drive down to visit the kids. Just to see how they're doing."

The Axolotl said nothing.

"...You don't hafta to tell me. I get it, alright?" The entity said quietly. "I'm not stupid, I know I can't do any of that stuff. Not without bringing the whole damn universe down on our heads."

They hesitated. "Again."

You are not incorrect.

"Besides, Ford and the kids..."

There was a long, long pause.

"They've got a Stan already. I'm just - leftovers."

The Axolotl said nothing.

And then, slow and measured, it says, Not all of them.

There are many universes like the one you are familiar with. Certainly, they have their differences.

But where there is a portal, there is someone who went though it.

"Ford?" They said hopefully.

Someone.

"And then, they're here," they said, an odd note in their voice. "Here. Where I am."

Yes. At some point in time, at every point in time. Working through their own personal timelines.

The entity was quiet. "Are any of them, y'know .."
There is no version of Stanford Filbrick Pines wandering the multiverse that is fully the brother you remember. There was only one, and he has returned home long ago.

"Right," they said, an odd tone in their voice. "Right, of course. We knew that."

The Axolotl inclined its head. Does that matter?

"No," the entity said immediately and stilled, surprised at themselves.

Then, with a second wind of confidence, "No, it doesn't. Because - then that just means every version of Ford out there in the multiverse is just as much my brother, yeah?"

The Axolotl paused. Then it smiled, and that was that.

And the multiverse is a very large place indeed,

It finished its drink in the stillness that followed.

"Hey. Hang on."

There's another long silence.

"...You know what I'm thinking about," says the entity softly. "What we're gonna try to do. You're not gonna tell me it's a crazy idea? That I'm gonna rip open the fabric of the universe, or something?"

The Axolotl blinked ponderously.

They hesitated. "Then, you got - advice for this, or something? Anything?"

Advice?

The Axolotl smiled, pale pink fronds waving gently around its face.

Yes. Perhaps. Just the one.

"Alright, good, because I'm -"

Choose life.

The entity reared up.

"What the hell is that supposed to -"

But the Axolotl was already gone, as if it had never been there at all.

A single glass of untouched swamp water sat on the varnished countertop.

They sighed.

"...Whelp, that's one extradimensional entity I'm never playing cards against."

I have seen galaxies die. I have watched atoms dance.
But until I had the dark behind the eyes, I didn’t know the death from the dance.

Ford was fairly certain that when one looked into the abyss, it was not supposed to wave back.

He blinked blearily, trying to make sense of his swimming vision. The dull ringing in his ears did not help with that endeavor, and neither did his budding concussion. Still, he could not rid himself of the peculiar certainty that there had been something out there in the darkness of space, something friendly enough to say hello.

How many times did he hit his head? How many times did his alien captors hit his head? ...Were those different ways of phrasing the same question? Between the head injury and general exhaustion, he couldn’t even begin to make sense of it.

Distantly, he could hear the click-clack sound of arthropod feet on the steel flooring and angry chittering he could only assume - with the context of a lifetime consuming ridiculous sci-fi media - translated to, "Re-capture the prisoner!"

He pulled himself away wearily from the window and the void beyond. He had made a good attempt, but there was nowhere else to run.

Ford swayed, and fell.

- and then it started, as it always did, with a dream.

He had all but forgotten the possibility. Ford had not dreamed since he had fallen through the gap between worlds, that uncertain number of decades ago. Maybe Bill had taken the capability to do so from him as retribution, perhaps he had been cut off from the Dreamscape as sharply as he had been
from his own home dimension.

There was no way to know for sure. All that was certain was that he did not dream, until he did.

Stanford Pines dreamed he was in a house, one that once upon a time was his. It was as familiar to him as it was strange. There was a sense of the worn and the lived-in here, one had never developed in his own years of living between these walls. He saw it in the sloppy pile of dog-eared magazines on the counter, in the photo frames scattered all around, filled with faces he can't quite make out.

There was something here with him, sitting legs crossed on the armchair.

Something wearing Stanley's face, young and unlined and exactly as Ford remembered.

It even had the mullet.

"It's been a long time, Sixer," it said conversationally, green eyes glinting, with a familiar conspiratorial grin that sent his heart into his throat.

Impossibly enough, he hoped.

"We heard you needed a hand?"

Chapter End Notes

thoughts:

- there are many fords out there in the multiverse destined to never make it back to their own worlds. maybe their own stans gave up, or never came to help in the first place, and/or died.

entity!stan adopts them all. all the fords. entity!stan and his 409380938092830328403 brothers

- i struggled with how long to make the end portion lmao and decided it would be best if i left more up to interpretation. but if you're curious, i wrote a whole bit where it turns out this particular ford is older than the average because his stan died before he could finish the portal. and also entity!stan makes ford listen to all his terrible jokes (except even more terrible now that they've got all existing knowledge in their brain as fodder)

(there was also an alternative way the bit could have gone, which got a bit too self-indulgent was ford about to get sacrificed and his captors summon entity!stan -> a lot of implied violence to cultists. see? i told you it was self-indulgent)

- completely up for interpretation how normal the stan and ford we followed in this story end up becoming. i personally like the thought that they're both human, but also a bit more. not enough to make them something else, but just... more. they're just very healthy and age well and then one day they just go away somewhere and don't come back

End Notes
Tumblr: dubsdeedubs

WRITTEN BEFORE THE FINALE. As a result, this fic kinda takes bits and pieces from canon when convenient, completely ignores it when not.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!