Versability

by MeowZee

Summary

AU. After getting kicked out of his home, Stanley manages to strike it rich. But not in the most conventional of ways. Still estranged from his family, he seemingly turns into a worse person over the years. None of which would have been a problem for Ford. At least until a mix-up between their identities ends up with Shermy's grandkids in the hands of Stanley.

Notes

I thought I'd do something a little different. A short four to ten chapter story with an AU idea, which I like to call, the Bill-Is-Awful-At-Fucking-Up-Shit-up-for-the-Pines AU. So awful, that he isn't technically in the story. I mean, I guess you could call that a universe without Bill, but who knows what he influenced before the Pines? I'm still thinking of a better AU name. A shorter one... With less swear words... Something to do with money I suppose... Any suggestions for a name are very welcomed!

The important part of the AU has nothing to do with that though! The important bit is a simple what-if question: What if Stan had made it rich in New Jersey?

As this is just the introduction chapter, it's shorter than the rest will be. I'm thinking 3000 words per chapter at this point.

Read, review, and enjoy!

Disclaimer: I don't own Gravity Falls.
Ford unwound the electrical cable with him as he traveled deeper into the cave. If his estimates were correct (Who was he kidding? Of course they were correct!) he would have just enough to reach the end. Ford ran out of extension cords trying to get electricity all the way from his house. He had been exploring the network of cave systems in Gravity Falls for almost a year. He had been mapping them out, and trying to understand their origins. Some appeared to be man-made, while others were inexplicable crevices inside the ground.

This cave seemed especially ominous. In fact, the abandoned one filled with vampires had been more welcoming than this! At least they were good for conversation. Here, there was nothing but the sound of his footsteps. The feeble strains of daylight could barely filter through the first ten feet, leaving him in a pool of darkness. He tried to bring along a torch at first, but that proved to be much too risky for his hands. He had to work his way through several very narrow caverns. Ford couldn't keep the flames in check, and avoid falling at the same time.

Unlike most of the caves, this one was not dripping with water. He had yet to encounter any kind of underground spring. There was no sign of any sort of wildlife either. The variants of mushrooms that grew in the darkness, bats, even small insects, all seemed to be non-existent in this place. There weren't any signs of supernatural creatures either. Not even a measly ghost could bother with the place.

However, it hadn't taken him long to find the end of the cave. There were no twists and turns throughout the place. Some caves were confusing labyrinths that were easy to get lost in. This one however, seemed much more linear. It was smaller than the others he had been through, leading him to believe that it had been dug by someone or something. He couldn't see much in the cavern with only his flashlight, so Ford had come back with a floodlight. He assembled it at the end of the cavern. Then, taking a deep breath, he plugged it in.

The area was instantly illuminated with light. Ford had to shield his eyes as they adjusted to the sudden brightness that surrounded him. He gradually lowered his arm, and found himself starting at a crude cave-painting. It was not very large, or very well-done from what he could tell. It's colours were only a little faded, and the lines did not look to be smeared in any places. He grabbed his voice recorder from his jacket pocket. Holding it near his chin, Ford switched it on and started to speak.

"June the twentieth, two-thousand-twelve, fourteen hundred hours. In my investigation of Gravity Falls' cave systems, I have stumbled across an outlier in the pattern. At the end of this cave, marked six-eighteen on the map, I have found a crude painting. It appears to be some sort of demonic triangle-monster with a poor taste in fashion. There is an inscription written underneath. It says-"

Before Ford could finish reading the words, his phone rang. He winced. In the small cave, the ringtone bounced off the walls and quickly turned deafening. He only owned a cellphone because the government would become suspicious if all their ways of monitoring him were shut off. He couldn't let them wise up, not after that incident with the metal plate and all of those angry ranchers... He shuddered. That had been a close call. Speaking of calls, he needed to pick this one up.

Ford wondered how it was possible for him to get reception in a cave devoted to worshiping sentient geometry. However, that thought did not last for long, as he saw the name on the phone screen. He debated dismissing the call. No matter what Stanley said, he would still regret talking to him. It would just be better to ignore the ringing. Ford knew that in the long run, the choice might cause him problems, but he was willing to take that risk. It had already stopped by the time he decided not to pick up. A clearly irate Stanley was now leaving a message for him.
"Stanford, it looks like there’s been a little mix-up between our identities... This line isn't secure. Call me b-"

He accepted the call before Stanley could even try to hang up.

"Mix-up?! What does that mean?! Did you use my name for something again?!

"It isn't even my fault this time," he snapped back. "Probably."

"What isn't?"

"Have you checked your calendar lately?"

"Well I know the date-"

"What's today?"

"June the twentieth."

"And what happens today?"

"It's the first day of summer according to the-"

Ford stopped talking. Not because Stanley could interrupt him again, but because the feeling of dread that hit him knocked Ford into a state of silence. He had been so wrapped up in his work that he forgot to check the time. They should have arrived around twelve. It was two in the afternoon now. He had his assistant back at the house waiting for their bus to come. But if no one had come looking for him, that meant the twins had not shown up in Gravity Falls. If they were not in Gravity Falls yet, then where could they possibly be?

Then, the denial hit. No, this could not be happening. The bus must be running late, maybe they got caught in the rush hour! Perhaps they had missed the bus and had yet to tell him so! Yes, that made sense, they were just a little delayed by something. Because Stanley was just pulling his leg. This was just some sick joke of his! He didn't know how the man had found out, but he had the resources to do so. It was exactly the kind of joke that he could expect from him, especially after the one he had pulled that past April Fool's day! This was some stupid practical joke from Stanley. It had to be.

He might have been too stunned by his revelations to speak, but it did nothing to stop Stanley from continuing;

"I can't believe you'd actually forget something this important. You're supposed to be the brainiac after all."

"Stanley-"

"Watch out for that-!"

From the other end of the line, there came the noise of squealing tires. He heard two other petrified voices scream in the background. Then, he heard the man's laughter, a chilling, degrading sound. It was a dead ringer for their Pop's laugh. It had never been that pretty of a sound to begin with. Hearing it now just made things worse. Their father had been capable of doing a lot of bad things to kids. But it was nothing in comparison to what Stanley could and would do if he was given the incentive.

How had this happened? Who made this big of a goof-up? It wasn't like he hadn't told them he lived
in Oregon, and not New Jersey! New Jersey was on the other side of the country! Could Stanley have something to do with this? It must have been so. He had done this deliberately to get at him! He had found a way to kidnap the kids, and their parents would never realize what had happened to them! But what did Stanley want with them? It couldn't be money. Money had not been an issue with him since he was kicked out of the house. Ford knew that he didn't own anything that Stanley wanted...

Ford felt slightly nauseous. He tried to speak, but his voice barely came out as a squeak. His throat tightened, and he had to take a deep breath. It did nothing to calm himself down. He was already starting to sweat, and his heart felt like it was ready to leap out of his chest. He had messed up. Somehow, he had messed up. He had always known that Stanley was out to get their family, but Ford had never thought he would go this far. At least not with kids who had no idea that Stanley existed to begin with.

"Stanley, what happened?! Are they alright?"

"I have no idea who you're talking about. After all, I don't ever remember being put in charge of-"

"Damn it Stanley! Just-"

"This line isn't secure," he reminded. "I'll have to call you back."

"Don't you hang up on me! Stanley! STANLEY!"

"Sorry, we're going through a tunnel!"

"No! Don't-!"

Click!

It was too late. He had already hung up the line. Ford pressed a hand to his forehead, and gradually started to rub his temples. When he looked back up, the cave walls suddenly seemed too close, almost claustrophobic. And not only that, he couldn't help but feel vulnerable in such a dark place with no visible signs of life. Something about the cavern made him feel almost like he was being watched. Ford would have chalked it up to basic paranoia if not for the fact that the cave painting of a triangle was staring directly at him. Ford quickly backed out of the cave. He left his lights and twenty extension cords behind. He could always come back and investigate the demonic shape painting later.
The twins in the backseat were still recovering from their near-death at the hands of Grunkle Not-Stanford-Pines. Dipper more so than Mabel. He clung on to the seat cushion with all his strength, terrified of sliding out of his place. Or through the window. Mabel had come to enjoy the ride after the first few red-light runs and illegal U-turns. She was smiling brightly as she rifled through the things in the backseat of the car. The maniac at the wheel, Grunkle Not-Stanford-Pines, was smirking slightly as he hung up the phone. At least he had the sanity to turn it on speaker phone while driving.

From what they had heard of the conversation, it looked like things would be settled soon. Even if their real eccentric relative had forgotten that he was supposed to be taking care of them for the summer. Of course, New Jersey was an entire country away from Oregon, the place where their parents should have sent them. Somehow, their bus tickets wound up with them half-way across the country.

It was only a coincidence that the people at the bus terminal knew who they were looking for, and had called him. Of course this, second relative, was the twin brother of a man they had rarely even heard of. Dipper hadn't known the man existed until he explained things to them! How could their parents do this to them?! What kind of people even made that big of a goof-up?

They raced over a speed-bump, and were sent flying through the air. From beneath the car, there was a pained, metallic scraping noise. The man adjusted his mirrors so he could see what part had flown off of his bloody-red El Diablo. He didn't seem to mind that the vehicle was now missing a part. He didn't seem to mind the pedestrians crossing either. The crossing guard screamed, running out of the way before she could be hit.

Others for that matter, were all scattering out of the way as well. There were many signs marking the area as a school-zone, and a neighborhood filled with children. Even people walking on the sidewalk stopped, and stared at them as they drove by. It was a miracle that the police had not yet caught up with them. This guy was out to kill them.

Dipper pulled on the door handle, hoping that it might be unlocked. He and his sister could jump out of the car before it was too late. But the child lock had been switched on. Since his focus wasn't on the road to begin with, the driver saw this. His eyes narrowed, and he started to glare at him. He stopped trying to get out of the car, not wanting to make the man more annoyed than he already was.

"Mabel, we need to get out of here!" he whispered to her. "This guy's crazy!"

"Hey! Just because I'm old, it doesn't mean I can't hear you!"

"Maybe we should wait until he stops driving," Mabel replied, ignoring the man's words. "I need some time to get un-stuck from the seat."
Dipper had to remind himself not to think too deeply about the many different coloured stains that soiled the car seats. It was bad enough that they were filled with crumbs and left-over meals. The entire car was in a rather rough shape on the inside and outside. What looked like a bullet hole was pierced through the back windshield, and there were different papers littered about the floor. Some of their luggage was packed in the front seat, while some was squishing them in the back. The rest was in the car trunk.

"No one's escaping anywhere," Grunkle Not-Stanford-Pines said. "Well, so long as the cops don’t catch up."

They had passed through the neighborhood now. The road conditions started to become more rough. Clearly these streets were older than the housing district they had torn through. There were fewer intersections and potential targets to hit, the farther down the road they drove. There were less buildings as well. It seemed that they had already driven through the downtown of the area.

There was a grassy field growing on either side of the road. It looked like no one owned it, as it was overgrown with wildflowers and weeds. On Dipper's side of the car, he could occasionally see the ocean. There was a sandy stretch that continued on for a while, but it was not very wide. There were only a few people resting on the skinny expanse of beach. It grew steadily more rocky as they drove onwards. Eventually, there were no other people or cars in sight.

The meadow stopped abruptly. Bright green grass that was neatly trimmed replaced the tall, weedy plants from before. Then, the wall became visible. It was made out of a sandy-brown stone, that looked similar to the kind that was resting near the ocean. As they drove closer, he had to tilt his head upwards to see the top of it. There was no way anyone could hope to climb that without a ladder.

The car stopped when they came to a gate. The man got out of the car, taking the keys with him. He pressed the fob, effectively locking them inside of the car with no escape. Dipper tried to pull up the lock on the passenger side, but it stuck fast. Whether the car was simply old or a security feature was debatable. Mabel didn't mind that they were locked in though. She was too busy trying to see what was behind the wall.

"Do you think he's rich?" Mabel asked. "I always hoped we had a rich relative! Maybe he has horses! And I bet he throws fancy people parties!"

"Mabel, even if he is rich, he practically tried to kill us with his driving."

"Fancy parties Dipper!" she repeated, grabbing his shoulders. "With solid gold confetti and gift bags with money in them!"

"There's got to be a reason why no one ever brings him up," Dipper replied. "Mom and Dad hardly told us anything about Grunkle Ford! So why wouldn't they say anything about this guy?"

The man returned before Mabel could think of a decent argument. They knew better than to ask their new relative why no one ever brought up his existence. He drove past the now unlocked gate, stopped the car for a second time, and got out so he could lock it. While he was gone, Mabel squealed and shook her brother.

"He is rich! Just look at his house!"

A long drive way stretched in front of them. The front yard was incredibly plain. There was trim, green grass growing, and a few hedges and trees scattered around the yard. But nothing truly spectacular. Past that was what had Mabel so excited: An older-looking house that was on the larger side. It was the same colour as the stone wall, and it had a lot of windows. The walls they had passed
through surrounded most of the property. They only dropped off in the back, and near the side. At
that point, the ocean began to curve around the side, and became the edge of the backyard.

"Wow. It is pretty nice-looking," he admitted. "It's not a mansion though."

"It's still way bigger than our house! I bet he has a room for everything! And a TV in every room!"

"A secret, rich, relative..."

They drove up to the house. Luckily, they had not built up enough speed to stop too suddenly. They
parked right at the end of the driveway. The man had to open the car door from the outside for the
twins to get out. With the child-lock in place, they couldn't get too far. They stretched, and then
started to grab their luggage. The man popped open the trunk. In a surprising feat of strength, the
grabbed the remaining bags on his own, and managed to open the front door.

With his hands full, the man did not bother to wait around for long. The twins still lagged behind,
trying to take in their surroundings. The inside was as bright as the outside. The entire house smelled
a little salty, from the ocean no doubt. A mixture of something musty was mingled with it. Old
people probably.

The walls had a tan, stripped-pattern wallpaper on them. It was peeling slightly. The floors looked
worn and scuffed too, after years of use. The entire house had an older look to it. The floor boards
creaked noisily underneath their feet, and the glass in the windows was faded and warped.

They passed through the foyer (Mabel nudged Dipper and wriggled her eyebrows when they saw
the chandelier.) and took a staircase leading upwards. The hall upstairs was a simple straight line,
with three doors on either side to the left of the staircase. To the right, there was a wall, and a large,
rectangular window. It gave a view of the side of the property. The side with the ocean did not have
that much going for it. There was the same boring grass, and a few trees growing in no set pattern.

The man dropped their bags in the middle of the hall.

"You two can pick whatever rooms you want later," he informed them. "But first, we need to call
Poindexter back before he has a cardiac arrest."

He started to walk back downstairs. The twins looked at each other, and then shrugged before
following him once again. Now that there was no chance of setting off any air bags, Mabel started to
try to take in their surroundings. The inside was as bright as the outside. The entire house smelled
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people probably.

"So, what do you do for a living?" Mabel asked.

"I'm a master criminal," he gruffly responded. "Not that you or anyone can prove it. Especially since
I didn't outright admit to committing any specific crimes. Thus rendering any hypothetical voice
recordings invalid in court!"

"Ha! You kidder!" she laughed. "But really, what do you do?"

He stared at the girl, waiting for it to sink in.

As her smile faded, his grew larger.

He lead them to an office on the first floor. The blinds were drawn over the window. It made the
room seem much smaller than it really was. But there was room for not only a desk, but two
matching chairs in front of it. There was a bookshelf against one wall. Many of the books on it didn't
have names. There was also a filing cabinet against the other wall. The man took the few papers that were on his desk and stuffed them in the cabinet.

The man sat down in his spot behind the desk. He gestured to the seats in front of him as he picked up the phone. Twirling the cord around his fingers, he started to dial a number. Then he set it on speaker phone. The twins anxiously fidgeted in their seats. The cushions were much too hard. Besides, if their relative really was a master criminal (And not just senile.) they didn't want to get on his bad side. Who knew what he could possibly happen to them? The man was already not that nice to begin with. They would rather be in the hands of the relative who was supposed to be caring for them.

After a single ring, Ford picked up the phone.

"STANLEY WHAT'S GOING ON?! ARE THEY SAFE?!

Even if it hadn't been set on speaker mode, Stan would have pushed the phone away from himself. Ford still had a set of lungs on him, and he sounded ready to use every bit of his strength to yell at him. Not that this was very surprising. He had sort of half-kidnapped his little relatives. That didn't mean he was going to make things any easier for him.

"Yeesh, relax. Don't you recognize my home phone number?"

"WHERE ARE THEY?!

"Their parents just made a mistake," he responded. "They got my address instead of yours for some reason."

"WHAT HAVE YOU DONE WITH THEM?"

"I'll just keep them for the night. Tomorrow I can head to the airport and pull a few strings. They'll be on the next flight to Oregon by-"

"NO! THERE IS NO WAY YOU ARE USING THAT MONEY TO DO ANYTHING WITH THEM! DO YOU HEAR ME STANLEY?! KEEP YOUR-"

"Oh, so you're driving out to pick them up then?" he asked. "That's a forty-hour commute you know."

"Well it's better than having you-"

"I'll give ya' two days to get your sorry butt over here."

The anger from the man's voice was starting to fade. A tinge of nervousness now coloured his words. He seemed to have suddenly developed trouble yelling at Stanley.

"Stanley, I need to sleep. That's a three-day drive at the least."

"Well, it's not my problem. My problem happens to be that I've suddenly been entrusted with two kids!"

As the conversation went on, Mabel could hear the fear growing stronger in Grunkle Ford's voice. Stanley remained calm and collected though. He was unfazed by the fact that his brother was yelling at him. If anything, he was enjoying how much pain he was causing for the man.

He wasn't answering any of his questions, and he was starting to make impossible demands out of
him. It made the Mabel feel uncomfortable. Dipper opened his mouth to speak, wanting to reassure Ford that they were safe. Stanley shook his head at him. It seemed dangerous to push his luck. He kept quiet.

"So, how exactly am I related to these little brats anyways?"

"Look Stanley, that's not important."

He gave the twins a chilling smile. They worriedly glanced at each other once more. They didn't like the way the conversation was going. Why couldn't their great-uncles just talk to each other nicely? Why did they have to sit here and listen to everything that they were saying? Mabel knew that she would rather listen to something else. Even one of her brother's Baba CDs.

"They're obviously not yours. And I know they're not my grandkids. Which can only leave Shermy. Shermy the Square, the youngest child. Apple of Ma's eye! Pop's too, after you never gave them grandkids. Perfect, normal Shermy Pines. Five fingers, clear criminal record-"

"Get to the point Stanley."

"I was just curious!" he defended. "For some reason I'm always left out on this kind of thing."

"I can't imagine why."

"Well, I'll make sure to take care of the Favourite's kidlets."

"Stanley, I know you don't like him-"

"I don't like any of you," he corrected.

"I know that you're not close to the family, but they're just kids. They're barely related to you! I'll be there soon and until then-"

"You'll be here soon won't you?"

"Of course! I'll leave in ten minutes! Five minutes!"

"Then there's nothing to worry about."

"Can I at least talk to them?"

"You've been on speaker phone the entire time," Stanley replied. "Now shouldn't you be leaving?"

"Yes but-"

"Then I'm hanging up."

"DON'T TRUST HIM KIDS! STANLEY'S A SELFISH, CHEATING, LIAR, NO MATTER WHAT HE SAYS OR DOES! AND WHATEVER YOU DO, DON'T-"

Ford's warning was drowned out by Stan saying;

"I'm hanging up now."

"HE'S A-"

"Two days Stanford."
The man dropped the phone with a little more force than was necessary. He turned away from the twins, his triumphant smile fading. He let out a long sigh of exasperation. Then, Stan took off his glasses so that he could rub his temples. He let the silence linger in the room for a moment.

"God I hate that basket-case! I was going to say basket-case!"

What kind of criminal mastermind didn't swear around kids? Stan had to snort at the thought. He didn't apparently. What were they like, ten? He knew most of his swear words by that point. There was no real harm in broadening their horizons. Ford always had been obsessed with learning. No doubt Ford Jr would be the same. Maple seemed a little more like himself.

"Well, that's over with, and I don't have to explain anything," he continued. "Go... Wander around the house or something. Shoo."

Waving a hand at the kids was enough to send them running out of the room. Stan briefly wondered if letting them have free range of the place was a good idea. He might have a weapon or twelve stashed at different points in the house. Also some of his magazines might be laying out... Even he didn't want to subject Maple and Ford Jr to something like that.

The creaking sound of the railing told Stan that they had gone upstairs again. They were probably sorting out their rooms. Now would be the best time to pick up any items that should be kept far away from any child's grasp. He'd just stash things in his office and bedroom until they were taken off his hands.

Locking the door behind him, the elderly man went on his new-found mission. He started with the den, as it was in the worst condition out of all the rooms. With a swipe of his arm, he grabbed all the piled the items on the coffee table into the other arm. Stan picked up a mismatched pair of socks as he went. After that, he stuffed the TV remote in between the couch cushions. He didn't want anyone interfering with his shows.

The den was connected to the kitchen, so he went there next. There were still dirty dishes in the sink and piled on the counter. He should probably clean those up too. As he stared at the cupboards, Stan remembered that he would have to go buy food the next day. Apparently kids needed to eat three meals a day or something ridiculous like that.

There wasn't much to clean up in the kitchen however. It was probably in the best condition out of most places in the house. That was mainly because he needed to eat there, and tried to keep it clean. Well, the kitchen table was a mess. He had a few stools set up by the counter so he could eat there. This was because the kitchen table had all sorts of headache-inducing papers still resting on it. He would need to move those to his office before the kids tried to mess them up. He would also have to take the batteries out of the paper shredder in case they got any funny ideas.

Stan had only been with the twins for less than an hour, and already he was thinking of all the potential problems they could cause him. Luckily, Ford was still the stupidest scientific genius ever. He wouldn't know manipulation if it wore a black bow tie and offered him a cup of tea. Not only would Ford hurry to rescue Sherm's grand kids from him, he didn't have to waste money on two plane tickets to Oregon. It was practically a win-win situation for himself! So long as the little gremlins stayed out of his way, there wouldn't be a problem.

Besides, it had been fun to hear him beg not to hurt the twins. It was a nice change of pace. Usually their conversations involved mainly yelling at each other. Even then, the times they talked were few and in between. It was usually done more out of necessity, or when Stan needed to remind himself
why he would forever hold a grudge against the rest of his family. Revenge against his pop had felt great, but he never had the chance to give Ford the hell that he truly deserved.

Of course, a plan for revenge had literally called him that evening. It had taken the four-day bus ride to Glass Shard Beach, only to realize that he was the worst possible Stan Pines they could live with. It was surprising that Ford already cared so strongly for kids he hardly even knew. But his reactions over the phone proved it was more than the bad blood between them that had him so angry. Stan grimaced a little at the thought. Ford was not going to get off easy for that one. It probably wouldn’t impact his plans too badly though.

Stan briefly wondered if he should put the knife block out of the kid’s reach, but decided against it. They’d know better than to try chopping up their fingers. The blender he never used was a different story. He put it in one of the higher cupboards. It was a recipe for disaster. And not the funny kind.

Just then, Stan heard a large crash, followed by the tinkling of broken glass.

"Oops!"

"Mabel!"

Stan shook his head, and dropped the things he had been collecting. This was going to be a very long two days.
The next morning, Mabel woke up bright and early. She hadn't had that comfortable of a sleep. It turned out that rich people beds were too squishy for her liking. All the pillows that had been piled on the bed were nowhere near as soft as they looked. In fact, they were really itchy. She ended up sleeping with no pillow for her head, as the material they were made of just seemed too scratchy. It almost felt like she was suffocating in all the pillows and blankets. She had tossed and turned until all of her stuffed animals had been knocked over. The bed was not the only thing that had given her trouble though.

She was worried about her brother and herself. Grunkle Not-Stanford-Pines (Well, she was supposed to call him Grunkle Stan now.) was a bit scary. She wanted to chalk it up to bad first impressions, but the way he had talked to Grunkle Ford on the phone made her think otherwise. Grunkle Ford had two days to drive here and pick them up. But if he didn't show up in that time, what would happen to her and Dipper? Stan wouldn't hurt his family, would he? Ford was his twin brother though. And they hated each other! Hating was hurting! Was Stan going to hurt them if Ford didn't come in two days? But Ford had said that was almost impossible!

The thoughts kept circulating in her mind as she lay in bed. By the time the sun started to rise, she was more than ready to get out of bed. She donned a new sweater, made the bed, and left the room. Dipper's was across the hall. Another reason why she had trouble sleeping. She wasn't used to not hearing her brother's incoherent sleep talk. It made her room feel even larger and more uncomfortable than it already was. They had left the bedroom doors open so they might be able to hear each other, but it wasn't the same. A glance into his room showed that he was still sleeping. A lot more soundly than she had been too!

"Dipper."

He stirred a little when he heard his name.

"Dipper!"

He opened his eyes, but quickly shut them once again.

"Huh? What?"

"Get up!"

"Mabel, it's early o'clock in the morning, and I'm still getting used to the time-zone change," he yawned. "Go back to bed."

Dipper went back to sleeping right afterwards. Mabel decided that she would not bother with him. She would just find breakfast herself! The girl went downstairs, and made her way towards the kitchen. The sun was still beginning to rise, further confirming her brother's words. It was very early in the morning. There was a sliding door, leading to the back of the house. There was also another window by the counter. The ocean looked calm, rippling ever so slightly. The sky was still a pink-orange tone, with small streaks of scarlet mixed in. There were no clouds. It looked as clear as the water did.

Right away, Mabel began to forage through the kitchen, looking for food. She found the drawer where the cutlery was kept, and uncovered a bowl as well. Now all she needed was some cereal to put in it. She checked through the bottom cupboards, but only found different pots and pans. Some
of the higher cupboards had glasses. The highest cupboards, which were above the stovetop, had different coloured bottles of alcohol in them. She wrinkled her nose at this, and closed the cupboard.

Opening the pantry door, she found what she was looking for. Well, sort of. There were several different varieties of boring old people cereal. There was some kind of bran cereal, another prune-flavoured one, and the same bran cereal but with dried grapes added to the mix as well. Mabel decided that she could eat all of the dried raisins if she pretended they were sugar-coated marshmallows instead of horrible and disgusting. Grabbing the box, she closed the pantry door. Right where the door had been, a larger man now stood. Mabel screamed and dropped the box of cereal. The man screamed and threw his hands in the air.

"MISTER PINES! THE NINJAS ARE BACK TO KILL YOU! AND THEY’RE STEALING YOUR CEREAL!"

The girl backed away, confused at the man's words.

"I'm not a ninja!"

"That's exactly what a ninja would say!" he retorted.

"Really. I'm Stan's great-niece. Mabel! Nice to meet you!"

She offered the man her hand. He instantly relaxed.

"Oh. Well that's a relief! And here I thought- GOTTCHA'!"

Suddenly, the man grabbed Mabel by the shoulders. In a miraculous feat of strength, he lifted her above his head. Mabel yelled and tried to struggle away from him.

"Hey! Let go of me!"

"Never!"

"Mabel can you keep it down? I was trying to sleep."

Just then, Dipper walked into the room. He was rubbing his eyes, still waking up. The man's eyes widened when he saw Dipper. Almost instantly, he stopped holding Mabel. He let go of the girl, practically dropping her on the ground. She got up and dusted herself off, glaring at him. Who just accused someone of being a ninja, only to completely ignore them when someone else entered the room?

The man ran towards Dipper and grabbed him by the shoulders instead. Mabel bristled, not wanting the crazy guy in their grunkle's house to hurt her brother. Dipper blearily blinked, and then rubbed his eyes, trying to see what was going on. He looked up at the man in confusion, not quite understanding what the man wanted with him.

"Why are you young again?! What did those ninjas do to you?!"

"Soos, for the last time: Those ninjas were just a nightmare!"

"The real Stan entered the kitchen. The man, whose name was apparently Soos, let go of Dipper in surprise. Dipper ran over to his sister before he could try do make any other weird accusations. The group then looked at Stan. He knew what was going on the most out of everyone there. Silently, Stan wondered how he had forgotten that something like this would happen if he didn't introduce Soos to the kids earlier. But outwardly, he just rolled his eyes. Then Stan gave Soos a reassuring pat
on the back, trying to calm down the man-child before anyone else was attacked.


"Actually, our names are-"

"Yeah, whatever." Stan dismissed. "There was a bit of a mix up with my identity, but Ford'll be here tomorrow to pick them up."

The man-child smiled at hearing this. His large front teeth made his grin look rather beaverish. Almost like a kid that had grown in their first few adult teeth. It only added to the image of a child trapped in a man's body.

"You mean we're taking care of them?!"

"That depends. Are you willing to work for below minimum wage?"

Ever the dramatic, Soos took off his hat so he could hold it against his heart. He had to wipe away the bright tears that had suddenly sprung up in his eyes. The twins wondered how someone could swing from so many emotions within a matter of seconds. Wasn't he still afraid of them being ninjas that had arrived to kill Stan?

"I will proudly do anything to help you raise these kids."

"It's just for two days," Stan huffed. "Don't get too attached."

"Thank-you Mister Pines! Thankyou thankyouthankyou!"

Stan rolled his eyes again, not surprised by the man-child's excitement. This was exactly the kind of thing that Soos would love to do. Luckily, he was pretty good with kids. It must have to do with how much of a child he still was. Either way, it would help keep the twins out of his hair. Which was the most important reason to have Soos watch them. He picked up the box of cereal on the ground. He wasn't going to let the kids get their hands on his food either. The man put it back in the pantry. This time on a shelf beyond any of the kid's reach.

"Anyways, there's practically nothing to eat in the house. We'll go buy some food."

"At seven in the morning?" Dipper yawned.

"Are you interested in starving?"

"What? No!"

"Then we're leaving now."

Both twins were a little hesitant to get in the car with Stan after the ride before. Luckily, his employee seemed to be focused on the road for Stan. Of course, he was still excitedly talking to him about their visit. Even as he grabbed the steering wheel from Stan so he could swerve around the trailer tractor heading straight towards them, Soos still managed to keep a happy up-beat conversation. He did not seem started by their near death in the slightest, as if it was a regular occurrence. It seemed like nothing could halt the non-stop flow of words coming from his mouth.

"And we can get pizza! For dinner! You guys like pizza? Who am I kidding? Everyone likes pizza! You do like pizza, right?"
Mabel quickly found herself warming up to the man-child, despite being called a ninja assassin earlier. It was an honest mistake that anyone could make after all! She was sitting on the passenger side of the car so she could talk to Soos more easily. It was hard over the sound of all the car horns blaring at them as they drove down the road. The squealing of tires as they changed direction also added to the din.

"The only things I don't like on pizza are pineapple!" she announced. "Dipper said the acid in it is what makes it burn when you eat it!"

"Dude!" he laughed. "You don't eat the pineapple, the pineapple eats you!"

"Crazy right? Right Dipper?"

"What exactly is your job?" Dipper asked.

"I'm an all-purpose handy-man!" Soos proudly announced, stepping on the brakes for Stan. "Also I mow the lawn, because there's no way Mister Pines could do that on his own!"

"So you don't do anything... Related to Stan's job?" Dipper suspiciously asked.

The car took a large swerve to the left. Dipper's face was pressed against the car window before he could catch himself.

"That's classified information," Stan said, before Soos could spill secrets. "Especially since anyone could be listening right now."

Mabel decided that her great-uncle was incredibly paranoid, just like her brother. Then again, if he really was some kind of criminal master-mind, then he wouldn't want to end up in jail. But what kind of crimes could Stan be involved with? He just seemed kind of old. He didn't look like he could run very easily, or fight back in some kind of mafia shoot-out. Did New Jersey even have a mafia? Or was that just Brooklyn? Maybe they had a secret one, which was no one ever brought it up! The more she thought about it, the more curious Mabel got.

"So, do you sell things to people?"

"Kid, I can't answer that."

"Do you plan robberies?! You do don't you?! I'll bet you were the guy that stole all those diamonds from that place!"

"That could be at least twelve different heists," Stan said, unable to stop himself. "Not that I was involved in any of those twelve. Especially not that huge robbery from last year!"

She grinned, knowing that she was getting somewhere with the conversation. Before she could ask how many different banks he had robbed in his life, the wailing of sirens began. From behind them, red, white, and blue lights began to flash. Stan's frown turned in to a grimace. Soos, who had been talking to Dipper about pizza flavours still, stopped. He grabbed Stan's shoulders and started to shake them.

"It's the cops! They're coming!"

"What do we do?!" Mabel asked. "I'm too stylish to go to jail!"

"And I'm too young!" Soos added, shaking Stan again. "Don't let them take me Mister Pines!"
Swatting Soos’ hands away, Stan snapped;

"Relax. I deal with this on a regular basis. I know exactly what we need to do."

"Floor it?" Soos said, sniffling slightly.

"No. They'll just try to take my license number again."

Slowly, he started to pull over to the curb. The officer stopped driving and pulled up behind them. The second the police officer got out of the cruiser, Stan revved the car engine. Knowing what to anticipate, Dipper held on to the car seat. Mabel sunk deeper into her sweater

"Now we floor it!"

Stan pushed the gas, and they left the police officer in a cloud of dust. Mabel got out of her seat so she could look out the back windshield. The officer was dumbstruck, and coughing as he tried to wave away the dirt. The sound of police sirens did not follow behind them this time. She sat back down in her seat, realizing that they had lost the officer. Dipper was holding on to his hat, still trying to recover from the sudden stop and escape from the police. Soos had calmed down as well, and had gone back to ensuring that Stan did not run anyone over.

"Remember kids," Stan said, letting go of the steering wheel and turning to look at them. "If you ever get pulled over by the cops, just drive off while they're walking towards you."

"Won't they be looking for your car now?" Dipper asked, looking behind them.

"Nope!"

The car took another sudden swerve. In one single movement, Stan pulled in to the grocery store parking lot and found a spot for the car in the maternity space. Two of them, as he was parked on the line. Stan opened the glove box, and rummaged through it. In his hands, there was a long, brown wig. He handed it to Soos. The man took his hat off and replaced it with the wig. Then, he gave the man-child a fake plastic wedding band, completing the pregnant woman costume. They got out of the car, with Soos making a big fuss about how "pregnant" he was. Stan opened up Mabel's side of the car, and Soos (Who was now clutching his stomach and talking about baby names.) did the same for Dipper.

Before they entered the store, Stan stopped them.

"Soos, I'm trusting you to keep these two out of trouble and visa-versa," He said. "I'm going off to buy my own food. We'll meet at the check-out in thirty minutes."

Giving a mock-salute, Soos said, "Yes Sir!"

"Right. Anyways, here's two fifties."

Stan hesitated when handing the money to Soos.

"Actually, Ford Jr. can hold on to it."

"Grunkle Stan, my name is-"

Stan handed the bills to Dipper.

"Don't let Soos eat them."
"It was an accident! I got ketchup on them!"

"Just... stay out of trouble."

The moment they entered the store, Stan grabbed basked and left them behind. Soos went to the cart storage and grabbed one. Mabel hopped into the cart, and Dipper hung on to the side of it. With a single push from Soos, they were sent spiraling down the aisles. Mabel stuck out an arm and knocked everything she wanted into the cart as they went. Dipper replaced any doubles of things that she grabbed. They did have a spending limit to follow. However, that didn't stop either of the twins from grabbing all of the junk food they could possibly get their hands on.

They accidentally crashed into a soup display when they underestimated how sticky the cart's wheels were. Soos' wig was sent flying. He followed not far after it, falling into a box filled with watermelons. The cardboard box broke under the weight of the man, sending the fruits rolling everywhere across the floor. From behind them, they could hear the man repeating "sorry dude" to the irate employees. The twins were already flying through the store, so Dipper took the wheel before they could loose any speed. He began steering them through the dairy aisle, where they picked up a carton of chocolate milk, and three different flavours of ice cream. Mabel also grabbed frozen waffles from the open freezer as they twisted past it.

By the time they reached the end of the aisle, their cart was already filled to the top with food. They agreed that they might have to reevaluate the number of things that were in the cart. They settled with only five bags of chips, one bag of popcorn, and one bag of cheese puffs. They had to deal with a single case of Pitt Cola, because they could only fit one case on the underside of the cart. After they had agreed on that, there were still two boxes of cookies and twelve packages of mini-cupcakes in the cart.

"Do you think we should buy you something healthy as well?" Dipper asked.

"We're only here for two days Dipper!" Mabel dismissed. "We can afford to eat a ton of junk food until then."

"Huh, good point. Wanna' switch places?"

Even though the cart was still sliding down the aisles, Dipper leaped into the shopping cart. Mabel got out, and climbed around the side until she had reached the front. Then, she started to push them back the way they had come. There was a silent agreement between them that they needed to find Soos before their great-uncle found out he had been left behind in a box of watermelons.

Soos was still where he had fallen off. He was frantically trying to clean up the fallen fruits. Even as he attempted to pile the watermelons into a neat pyramid, they collapsed on him. They grabbed on to the man-child's shirt. The weight of the cart was enough to drag him along without slowing them down too much. Soos started to jog next to the cart, realizing that he had been rescued.

"Oh! There you dudes are! We need to find Mister Pines and get out of here before they make me replace the display again!"

Soos and Mabel started to push the shopping cart. Their light-up sneakers became a blur of rainbow light. Their speed tripled, and they were barely able to move out of the way for other people. They nearly ran over one woman, and flattened a second display of cereal boxes as they went.

Having already combed through the aisles with junk food, they knew that Stan would probably be somewhere in the fresh produce area. They took a detour, only to find themselves right by the cash register. There, Stan was arguing with one of the employees about something. In the cashier's hands
was a fake six-hundred eighteen dollar bill. Dipper looked at the fifties he had been holding on to. He quickly realized that Ulysses S. Grant was replaced with a grinning portrait of Stan.

"Heads up!" Mabel yelled.

"Huh, what?" Stan asked, looking around. Then, he saw them. "Hot Belgian waffles!"

They breezed through the check-out, crashing straight in to their grunkle. The man managed to pull himself up on to the back end of the cart as it went. Dipper slapped the two fifty-dollar bills on the counter as they rolled by the started employee. The cart went through the doors, down the parking lot ramp, and came to a stop right in front of Stan's car.

Immediately, they all let go of the cart. Soos stumbled off, shaking his head. Then he started to load the groceries in to the car. Stan had to hold on to the door handle of the car until the world stopped spinning around him. The twins got out of the shopping cart as well, and tried to muster up any semblance of innocence they could manage.

Grunkle Stan stared at them as he recovered his balance. The light reflecting off of his glasses made it hard to tell if he was glaring at them or not. They shrunk back slightly, prepared to be scolded or worse for causing so much mayhem throughout the store. They had no idea what to expect from Stan when he was angry at them, because they hadn't gotten in trouble yet. But if Ford's words had been true, and he really was dangerous...

"Did Soos eat the money?" Stan finally asked.

"N-no. We put it on the counter."

"Did you get in trouble?"

"Well-

"We didn't get caught," Mabel defended, giving a winning smile and fluttering her eyelashes. "So we technically couldn't get in trouble."

Her guilty charming helped relieve the tension. Stan smiled, and the twins relaxed slightly.

"Hah! This kid! A true Pines!" he laughed, slapping her on the back. "Ford Jr. go help Soos load the groceries."

Mabel sat in the front with Stan on the drive back. By the time they reached the house (A miracle in of itself with Soos not preventing disaster at the wheel.) they were getting along like a house on fire. Dipper sat in the backseat with Soos, occasionally trying to warn his sister and Stan of the dangers ahead.

They ignored him of course, too busy talking to pay that much attention to the road. When they reached the house, he was forced to help carry in the many, many items they had... Gotten, from the grocery store. The task was a lot more difficult with none of the food being bagged.

Deep within, a small spark of resentment flickered to life. He did his best to squash the feeling. He had always expected Mabel to get along better than him with their great-uncle. Yet it didn't make the reality of it any better. Mabel had saved them from getting in trouble. There was no reason for him to be jealous...

The old man's good mood did not last for too long though. He remembered that he still had work that
needed to be done. Whatever that "work" might possibly be. Soos had to leave as well, off to do some odd job around the house for Stan. There were quite a few places in the house that looked like they could use a new coat of paint, or an up-to-code remodeling. Dipper was certain that some of the floor boards upstairs were rotten, and ready to fall away if anyone stepped on them. There were also nails sticking out in the most inconvenient of places.

The twins decided to investigate the property. Well, Dipper did. Mabel stuck around the sand, and built things out of it. Unfortunately, the yard was no less interesting than when they had first passed by it. There were trees, there was grass, and there was one very large wall surrounding everything. Dipper wondered what the point in having such a large property was if all the man did was have a house on it. There was nothing to do with the grass and the trees beyond climb them.

He ended up returning to the backyard, where his sister was putting the finishing touches on yet another sandcastle. The grass started to stop growing here, replaced with slightly rocky sand. Dipper assumed it was natural, as it was much too gritty to be imported from somewhere. There were many shells in the sand too, and they only grew more numerous in the water. There were a few boulders to the edge of the property, extending out in to the water. He started to climb along the rocks, wondering if there was anything interesting to see around there at all.

The water pushed its way through the large boulders, forming small tide pools. He could see minnows and crayfish trapped in some of the deeper pools of water. He walked all the way out to the edge of the rocks, making sure to hold on to the sides as he did so. Some of them were loose, or slippery. More than a few had algae growing on them, making the surface slick and slimy. The ocean floor took a steep drop by the end of the rocks. He had been able to see the bottom of it before, but now, there was nothing but murky darkness. Staring it at made Dipper feel oddly small and vulnerable.

In the distance, he could hear someone's voice. He turned to look back at the house. Stan was on the porch, waving over at him. Mabel saw this too, and she yelled, "Stan says to get off the rocks! They're dangerous!"

With a shrug, he did as he was told. Stan went back inside once he saw that he was no longer near the rocks. Dipper joined his sister on the sand, making sure not to get in the way of the small city of castles she was building.

"There's not much to do around here," Dipper said, crouching next to her.

Mabel stuck a piece of driftwood into the tower of one building.

"Yeah, Soos told me he doesn't even have internet!" she replied. "At least Stan's nice!"

"Mabel, what are you talking about? He's a criminal!"

"Just because he's a criminal, it doesn't mean he's a mean person."

"Don't you remember what Grunkle Ford told us? Stan's good at lying! He's pretending to be nice!"

"Why would he want to do that?"

"Maybe he doesn't want us to turn him in to the cops," Dipper said. "Or maybe he's going to sell us to the black market and doesn't want us to suspect anything!"

"Dipper, I think we'd realize if Stan was going to sell our organs."

"KIDS! Could you come inside for a minute?"
The twins practically jumped out of their skin. Stan was standing all the way on the deck, but the twins still felt like he had heard every word of their conversation. They both hesitated, not sure if they wanted to talk to Stan, just after their speculations on what he could be hiding. But they didn't have much of a choice. What if he got mad, and tried to kill them? Or what if he suspected they knew something, and tried to kill them because of that?!

"What was it you needed?" Dipper nervously asked.

"I need to go do... some... work..." Stan said. "I probably won't be back until late. Soos'll be around if you need anything."

"Oh, ok!"

"And if you're going to get in trouble, make sure you get out of it before I get back."

"S-sure thing! Will do! No trouble at all!"

Stan gave him a strange look. He ruffled Mabel's hair, and then turned to leave. Both twins sighed in relief as he went inside.

True to his word, it was late when Stan finally got back. Dipper and Mabel did not realize how much time had passed until they heard the front door open, and a pair of footsteps follow. They had gotten through a large portion of the junk food they had bought that day, and had a movie marathon in the meantime.

When they heard Stan return, the twins quickly cleaned up the mess of crumbs and cheesy fingers they had made in the den. They turned off the TV before Stan could hear the sound. The lights in the room were already turned off, the blinds drawn. Stan walked right past the den, dragging a lumpy, human-sized bag of something with him. The man turned on a light in the kitchen, cheerfully humming to himself.

Curious, the twins peeked around the hall, wondering why he was in such a good mood. Their eyes both rested upon the bag that Stan had dragged by himself into the house. There were several red streaks across the floor, from where Stan had dragged it. The glistened eerily in the yellow light of the kitchen. Stan rested a gloved hand against the cupboard. When he moved it, there was a scarlet mark staining the wood. Stan noticed the spot he had left against the surface. He carefully pulled the glove off with his teeth, and then spat the blood in to the sink.

Wrinkling his nose, he took off the gloves, and threw them in to the garbage. After that, he washed the blood off his fingers. He left the sink running, clearly trying to wash all the blood out of the pipes. In the meantime, he grabbed the garbage bag, and left the room, clearly intending to dispose of the evidence.

Dipper and Mabel did not want to wait around much longer after that.

When Stan returned, he noticed that the den looked like someone had hastily cleaned it up. Flicking on the lights, he saw that there were still a few crumbs on the couch. The small indents on the couch were still warm. Apparently the kidlets had been up until recently. At least they had done a decent job of cleaning up the area. He wouldn't bother to bring it up with them. They were still learning how to get away with things it seemed. He was a good teacher if he did say so himself. After his inspection of the den, Stan returned to the kitchen. He still had all this meat to put away. The heist had been pretty successful. That would show that stupid butcher! Insulting his looks and sanity! Stupid, meat-cleaving jerk.
Although, in hindsight, Stan had no idea what he was going to do with ten pounds of still-fresh sausage. He couldn't very well return it to the butcher's. He'd just have to eat it all. Yet, this was still enough meat to keep him stocked for the apocalypse. He'd have to give some to Soos, he would appreciate the gesture. Maybe he could get the kids to eat some of it tomorrow. Sausages with breakfast, sausage sandwiches for lunch, and then just plain sausages with a side of sausage for dinner! And didn't raw meat go good with ice cream? Stan knew the kids had bought some. They could have that for dessert!

After he had managed to stuff most of the meat in the freezer (The rest he left to unthaw in the fridge), Stan turned off the lights once again. He headed off to bed, completely unaware of what was now going on in the twins' heads.
Eighty Nickles

*Ding Dong.*

The Pines family was sleeping, so it was up to Soos to open the door. The man-child didn't know what to expect when he did so, but it was definitely stranger than he had thought. There, on the doorstep, was a man dressed in a red bathrobe. Complete with a hood and drawstrings. He was holding a maroon book in hand. It had a gold, six-fingered hand on the front of it.

"Excuse me, *sir.* Do you have time to talk about our lord and savior Bi-

"Wait a minute," Soos interrupted. "Who are you exactly?"

"My name is Hugh. Hugh Mann. And another someone you should be introduced to is-"

"How did you get past the gate?"

The man's strange yellow eyes hardened for a moment.

"That's not important. Now like I was saying-"

"Actually it kinda' is," Soos continued. "Mister Pines doesn't take security lightly."

"We can talk about security right after you let me talk about-"

"Look dude. I'm gonna' have to ask you to leave the premises until I can figure out how you got through here."

"But our lord and savior-"

"Nope!"

Soos quickly slammed the door in the man's face. He let out a sigh or relief, glad that he had dealt with that cultist.

"What a weirdo!" Soos exclaimed. "At least *he* won't be coming back anytime soon!"

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Stan got up at the usual time. He made himself a coffee, grabbed the newspaper, and sat down at the kitchen counter. Beyond figuring out how to play off the sudden appearance of ten pounds of sausage in the freezer, he did not have much planned for the day. He did not have any jobs ready, and the kids would be leaving later that night.

Maybe he could pawn off some of that stolen meat, and pass some to Ford. He instantly shot down the idea. Of course, Ford would probably assume it was poisoned with salmonella or made from human flesh. Sure the fact that it was only stolen made it a lesser evil, but Ford and his goody-goody complex would ensure that he would never take any.

At least it looked like another nice day would be ahead of them. He could see that there was a thin line of darker clouds in the distance, but it would probably pass. So long as the weather was nice, he could keep the kids out of the house, and thus, out of his hair. He was a busy guy after all, and he couldn't afford that many distractions. Just because he didn't have any jobs planned, it didn't mean
that he had other tasks that had to be done. There were taxes to be doges, bills to fake, and books to
cook.

The quiet sound of feet alerted Stan to the fact that he was not alone. Glancing over his shoulder, he
saw that the twins were there. Maple- Mabel, her name was Mabel, she was staring at one of the
cupboards. Then, she glanced back down at the cracking floor tiles, as if she were looking for
something. Ford Jr was behind him, shyly shuffling in his place. The kitchen table was crowded with
things, so Stan just figured that he was silently asking if he could sit next to him. He pushed out the
other stool with his foot

"What time did you two go to bed at?" he asked, turning his focus back to the paper.

From the corner of his eye, Stan could see the twins glance at each other.

"Uh..."

"Well, so long as you're not sleeping in until twelve, I don't need to know."

Ford Jr got a bowl and spoons for himself and Mabel. The girl poured them both equal amounts of
one of their obscenely sugary cereals, and then went to the fridge to get them milk. The second she
opened the door, she screamed, and closed it again. Stan nearly dropped his coffee, not expecting the
sudden high-pitched yelp.

"What are you trying to do kid? Give me a heart attack?!"

The girl's face flushed in embarrassment.

"It's just uh, I thought it was something else."

"Like what? A dead body?" he snorted. "I'm not running a morgue here!"

Neither twin laughed at his joke.

"W-why is there so much raw meat in the fridge?"

"Midnight clearance sale," Stan lied. "I'm set for life when it comes to sausage."

"Right," she huffed, pushing the hair out of her eyes. "I just wasn't expecting to see that there."

"Fair enough. Do you want the comics?"

She nodded, and sat down next to him. Her brother followed suit, sitting on his other side. He
handed her the comics, while the boy took the puzzle section. He pulled out a pen from his vest (Stan
briefly wondered what kind of a kid kept a pen on them at all times.) and started to work on the
cross-word puzzle.

Not long after, he began to click on the end of pen repeatedly. After that, he moved on to chewing
on the edge of it. After a few minutes of chewing, the boy realized that he was not eating his
breakfast. He took a spoonful of cereal, and started to eat. But not a second later, he was clicking the
pen once more.

It reminded Stan of his own brother. Ever-obsessed with his precious research, completely unaware
of all the other things that were going on around him. Ford had always been somewhat lost in his
own world of science and strangeness. As the years went on, it got harder and harder to draw him
out of it. And after his good-for-nothing pop had kicked him out of the house, it became impossible.
He had never been given the chance to mend fences. When he had gotten over his anger, and tried to talk to Ford, his parents naturally refused to tell him where he was. It had taken several illegal means and a lot of money to track him down to Oregon. By the time he had finally struck it rich, it was too late to fix things with Ford. Even with all his money, he couldn't buy back the good times of the past. It had all brought him nothing but ulcers and bullet wounds...

At least finally getting his revenge would be nice. His family left him on the streets, and he returned a monster. Stan knew they weren't at fault for the life of crime he had voluntarily chosen. He could not place the blame any of the larceny, violence, and lying on anyone but himself. But he could blame them for kicking him out, and never giving him a chance for redemption.

Fate, a demon, neglectful parents, something had given him a chance now though. A chance for revenge. Two days wasn't enough time to get as far as he wanted, but it was still worth a shot. He just needed the little gremlins to let their guard down more, and trust him. Difficult to say the least. But the only way to make it painful for that jerk was if they liked him.

"Stop doing that," he finally snapped, glaring at Dipper's pen.

The boy didn't seem to hear him, too focused on the cross-word. Mabel gave a shrug. She looked over his shoulder to see what her brother was staring at. The pen tip was resting on one of the hints.

"He needs a six-letter word for annoying," she explained.


This caught the boy's attention. Clearly he had struck a nerve with the name.

"Grunkle Stan, my name is Dipper."

"That's got six letters too."

The kid rolled his eyes.

"Anyways, the next hint is an eight-letter word for a specific type of criminal."

"Pffft! What is this, amateur hour?" he snorted. "Murderer!"

For some reason, the twins froze in place. They stared at him with wide eyes, and their mouths slightly open. Stan decided they were awed by his sudden burst of genius. He could come up with smart things to say from time to time. And no doubt he had years of great-uncle wisdom stored somewhere, just waiting to be passed on in the form of bad habits and kleptomania. He grinned proudly, and the twins hesitantly seemed to join in. Ford Jr laughed, and Mabel slapped him on the back.

"Good one Grunkle Stan!"

The boy wrote his answer in the boxes. It lined up perfectly with the other answers that he had written so far.

"Oh! Would you look at that! It fits!"

"Heh, yay!"

Stan drained the rest of his coffee. He grabbed the other dishes on the counter and piled them into the sink. They could get washed later. Pushed to the side like most of the responsibilities he had with the
house. While he did have Soos working for him, he wasn't a slave. Well, sure Soos worked for below minimum wage and in potentially dangerous conditions for his financial gain, but there was still a line. So long as he didn't lose his hands, he was capable of doing his own dishes.

"So, what are you two planning for today?"

The twins looked at each other again.

"Oh, just hang around," Ford Jr shrugged, attempting to seem nonchalant. "Maybe go swimming."

"The water isn't good for swimming," Stan quickly said. "Keep out of it."

"What? Why?"

"There's uh, well, piranhas, and a lot of glass shards in the sand!"

"Stan, piranhas aren't even native to New Jersey!"

"They are when your uh, fish-mongering business gets shut down."

Even Stan knew that the deception was clear in his voice. The twins however seemed like they would accept the explanation for now, even if it clearly was a lie. They probably wouldn't want to be incorporated into any more of his crimes as it was. Telling them the details of anything would just make them targets for the many enemies he had managed to make over the years. It was for the best that they didn't know the truth of what was kept buried near the end of the rocks.

Somewhat inevitably, the twins wound up suspiciously close to the beach. Mabel had sat down to resume building her sandcastles, but it was more of an act just in case Stan showed up. Dipper had said that he would join in and help her continue to build an empire out of sand. However, he was too busy thinking about what their great-uncle had said from before.

He was standing just by the edge of the water, dodging the waves as they washed up on the shore. He was pacing back and forth, deep in thought as he did so. Mabel couldn't help but roll her eyes. There were so many other things they could do, and he was more focused on whatever Stan was hiding from them.

"I wonder what he's hiding in the water."

"Dipper, we were told not to go near it."

"But he's hiding something!"

"Well of course he's hiding something, he's a criminal!" Mabel replied.

"There's a reason why we've never heard about him before Mabel! He could be a murderer! Maybe that's how he makes all his money! By killing people! Don't you remember when he came home last night? He must've had a body, and he dumped it in the water!"

"Or maybe he fed it to the piranhas!" Mabel suggested.

"Mabel, there are no piranhas in the water. Stan was lying!"

Mabel wondered if she should point out that she had been joking. Seeing all the still red meat in the
fridge cleared up the events from last night. At least to her. Stan wouldn't actually bring a dead body in to the house! She decided against it, knowing that her brother was just going to keep getting worked up, no matter what she said to him.

"I think the bag was just filled with all that sausage! And there wasn't enough of it to be human meat!"

"We can't just let him get away with committing crimes! What if he really had killed someone last night?"

There was no doubt in her mind that Dipper had a point. Shouldn't they do something to stop Stan from committing all sorts of crimes? They had stolen from a grocery store, and endangered people with his driving. If they didn't do anything to report him, then they would be just as big criminals as Stan. Mabel didn't really like the thought of it.

She was a good person! Wasn't she? Stan... He made fake money, and he was always calling her brother Ford Jr. He couldn't be bothered with his name, and readily switched back and forth between calling her Maple and Mabel. He just wasn't trustworthy, and he didn't worry about their safety at all.

"Do you really think he'd really kill someone?" Mabel asked, no longer focused on her castles.

"He's already broken like, five laws just to buy groceries! Dangerous driving, resisting arrest, parking in a maternity spot, forgery, stealing! And he got away with all of it!"

"Stan wouldn't kill us though!" She insisted.

"What about that phone call he had with Grunkle Ford?" Dipper asked. "Two days. He was telling Ford that we only had two days left to live!"

Mabel paled, as she remembered the conversation for the umpteenth time. Normally she would have figured that Dipper was just being paranoid. But things were different this time. There wasn't just articles from sketchy websites on the internet supporting his claims. They had heard the conversation themselves. Everything about it had been unsettling! But after she had talked with Stan a little more, she hadn't given it a second thought. As she remembered it now, the girl knew that something was majorly wrong. When Ford had asked to talk to them...

"He tried to warn us about something," she whispered. "Whatever you do, don't! And then Stan interrupted him!"

"Exactly! And he then he said that he hated Grandpa Shermy! That he hates all of our family!"

"But we're Stan's family!"

"He must be trying to get revenge against everyone! And he's going to use us!"

"What do we do?!" Mabel asked. "Should we call mom and dad?"

"I think the best thing we can do for now is act natural," he answered. "We can't let him know that we suspect anything."

Dipper wanted to do anything but act natural. Their great-uncle could be out to kill them. He didn't want to think that Stan could actually murder them, but they hardly knew anything about the guy! Besides, their Grunkle Ford, who happened to be an adult that was actually responsible, told them that Stan was dangerous. They should trust his advice, not the actions of a total stranger.
The safety of his sister came first. She was his twin, the other half of the set! It didn't matter if Stan seemed like a nice guy on the surface. It didn't matter that his employee was a loveable man-child. (Although, even then he wondered how well they could trust the handy-man.) If there was a chance they would be in danger, he was not going to let them put up with the risk.

"Look, we can't know for sure if Stan wants to use us for some kind of crazy revenge plot." Dipper said, trying to calm down his sister. "But what we do know is that he might be dangerous to us."

"T-then what do we do?" Mabel repeated, fingers digging into her sweater sleeves.

"If Grunkle Ford doesn't show before his time limit's up, we'll just have to run away."

"Where? How? Stan's got that huge wall surrounding the place!"

"Mabel, we can fit through the bars of the gate. It's evil villain logic one-oh-one."

"Right."

Even as he came up with a plan for escape, his sister continued to seem sad and worried. She looked like she would enjoy nothing more than sinking deep inside of her bright blue sweater and never coming back. He felt the same. This whole situation was crazy. It was not how he had envisioned his summer.

"Hey, it'll be alright."

"What if something goes wrong?"

"I'd beat him to a pulp before I let anything happen to you."

She reached out, and squeezed his noodle-thin arm.

"Oh yeah? You and what muscles?"

"Mabel please! Stan's like, a million years old. I could probably break all of his bones by knocking him over!"

She giggled slightly.

"He is pretty old."

The back door opened. Stan stepped on to the porch and yelled at them, "Kids! Lunch!"

The twins looked at each other.

"Didn't we just have breakfast?" Dipper asked.

"Yeah well I need to get rid of all this sausage somehow!"

The twins left the beach behind, at least feeling a little more safe, if not nervous about what was to come in the future. Stan was still in the kitchen, making a mess as he went. First, he opened the fridge. From it, he grabbed a long, endless link of sausage from the fridge. Then, he proceeded to pull it out towards the opposite counter. From there, he got a frying pan. Stan continued to drag it across the floor to where the knife block was. He chopped off the part of the link that had not touched the floor. The rest was thrown in to the fridge once again.

He placed the pan on the stovetop and piled the long link of sausages into it. Within a matter of
minutes, the meat was sizzling and oil was popping in the pan. The smell of it made Stan hungry. Even with his ever-aging stomach growing smaller, he was not ready to give up on eating quite yet. Ulcers be damned, he was going to eat ten pounds of stolen meat and enjoy doing it.

It must have been residual instincts from his early days on the streets. Sometimes he was still surprised by the appearance of regular meals and food in the fridge. Heck, food to eat had not even been a perfect guarantee when he had been a kid. At least money had given him that much in life.

He turned off the burner, and slid the sausages on to a plate. They landed into a haphazard stack, leftover grease pooling at the bottom of the dish. From there, he grabbed himself a fork and a knife. After a brief moment of thought, he asked, "You kids want any?"

Mabel shook her head. She went to one of the cupboards and grabbed herself a bowl of chips. Then, she picked up the sheet of comics that she had left on the counter from breakfast. She seemed less interested in talking to him for some strange reason. Meanwhile her brother nodded. He seemed to get sick of the sugary foods he and his sister had bought sooner than her. Stan grabbed a second plate and divided the sausages between them.

"Thanks."

Taking his knife, the boy cut open one of the sausages. He suspiciously picked it up with his fork and inspected the insides, as if he were searching for something specific. Stan knew that the butcher had the sausages especially made for some fancy event, so he assumed that they were the good kind, and probably safe to eat. Unlike him, they were not implicated in any crime schemes. They were pure pork and sausage casing.

"They're safe. Probably."

"Are you sure?"

"Well I st- purchased them lawfully from that butcher on main street. A man with a clean, upstanding reputation whose store is in no way a front for a criminal organization I may have crossed. Twelve times."

He took a bite, and carefully chewed the meat. When no razor blades or poison seemed to take effect, he took another bite. Stan resumed eating his own helping as well, while Mabel just wrinkled her nose. She went back to reading the comics, not wanting anything to do with the meat.

"She vegetarian or something?" Stan asked, pointing his fork at the girl.

"Only when you remind her where meat comes from."

"Well you're missing out," Stan replied.

"Yeah, these are actually pretty good."

Mabel didn't say anything. She raised the newspaper over her eyes so she didn't have to see them eating.

"Don't you get worried?" Dipper asked.

"About what? Eating animals?"

"No. Crime and stuff. What if someone tries to kill you one day?"
"Hah! Kid, why do you think there's a twenty-foot wall topped with live wires around the house?"

"What about the water? Someone could boat over!"

"They couldn't even swim over unless they had a tool box with them."

Dipper mentally filed away that bit of information. Whatever was in the water might be a security measure. Maybe Stan had somehow purchased underwater mines? As strange as it sounded, Dipper wouldn't be surprised if that was the case. He had learned a lot about crime from his great-uncle the past few days.

"What about the police?"

Stan looked at Mabel, and then at the outcrop of rocks by the ocean. Then, he whispered, 'I'm gonna' let you in on something. The police in this county, they can't touch me. They can't do anything about complaints from townspeople, and everyone knows it. I own three-quarters of Glass Shard Beach, and at least half of the region. The mayor's office, the judges, state prosecutors, everything. The average Shmoe can't do a single darn thing about me. Heck, chances are the average Shmoe relies on one of the grocery stores that I own for their food. Nothing short of a swat team's gonna' cause me any problems.'

"Grunkle Stan..."

"What?"

"If you own grocery stores, then why bother stealing?"

"It's the principal of the thing Dipper! Why should I waste money buying food from my own store when I could steal from the competition and make them look bad in the process?"

"Well, it's kinda', wrong. Don't you ever feel bad about stuff like that?"

"Nope!"

"But what if it happened to you instead?"

The man finished off the last of his lunch. He placed his fork and knife on the plate, which he shoved away from his space. Dipper copied the action as he finished, wiping his mouth with his wrist.

"Revenge kid. They say there are only two animals on Earth that believe in revenge: Tigers and humans. Now, the worst thing an oversized cat can do is tear you to pieces. People however, can be hurt in a lot of different ways. If stealing their stuff doesn't work, you can drive them in to financial ruin. If they file for bankruptcy and end up scot-free, you break their legs in a way that their insurance won't cover."

"That's awful!"

"That's the business of doing crime."

"It's just..."

"What?"

"I don't like it."

"You don't have to like it."
The kid didn't say anything back to this. He bowed his head, fixated on the greasy stains the sausages had made on his plate. Stan looked back at Mabel, who seemed to be trying to melt the comics with her eyes. This was obviously an issue with her as well, even though she had tried not to bring it up. Stan supposed this was expected, given they weren't used to someone who had a life centered around their various criminal schemes.

Gaining their trust might become a little more troublesome than he thought. Asking them to overlook all the things he had done was more than a lot to want of them. They didn't know a fraction of what he had done during his lifetime! Yet of course, they were still startled and made uncomfortable by what little they had seen.

Their two days was almost up. Ford was going to arrive soon, probably a day later than he demanded. Stan knew if he didn't get things to work, his plans for revenge would be completely swept down the drain. There had to be some way to win the kids over, while making them look past his sketchy dealings.

Stan had already tried food bribery, which seemed to work in his favor. His niblings had appreciated roaming free and choosing to buy as much junk food as they could carry. Heck, even Di-Ford Jr had liked the sausages! That didn't seem like enough though. Buying them over with presents wouldn't work. It could be unconditioned out of their heads with more gifts from someone else. Besides, the last thing he wanted to do was explain why he was purchasing a horse, and going to the black market to find some strong glue and a narwhal horn for his great-niece.

What did that leave him with? Stan didn't know anything about kids. Especially modern-day ones. All with their fancy technology and weird clothing. Granted, neither his niece nor nephew dressed like some of the other teenagers he had seen. Mabel wore sweaters and skirts, even though it was the start of summer. Her brother was always wearing a baseball cap and vest. Stan wondered if Ford Jr had merely chosen to stay in the same clothes the past two days instead of changing. Either way, they weren't like the average teenager. Were they even teenagers? It suddenly occurred to the man that he had never asked their age.

"How old are you two?"

"Twelve," said Mabel.

"But our birthday's the last day of summer," Dipper added. "So we're technically thirteen."

"It's been thirteen years since I last talked to Shermy..." Stan mumbled. "How am I still alive now?"

"Thirteen years? Really?" Mabel asked, setting down the paper.

"Yup! I don't think I've talked to him since your ma went into labor!"

"You were there?"

"I was arguing with Shermy and Ford when it happened!" Stan proudly declared. "Right up until the midwife remembered that the hospital had a restraining order filed against me! I'm not allowed to be within two hundred meters of the place after that incident with the coroner."

"Grunkle Stan are you always fighting with them?"

His smile wavered a bit, but he tried not to show it.

"Yup! Be glad that no one can mix up your identities like Ford and me. I mean, Stanley and Stanford! How can it get worse than that?"
Dipper hesitated a moment. Then, taking a deep breath, he took off his hat and pushed the hair away from his forehead. Right in the center of his forehead was a large strawberry birthmark. Stan had to stare at the arrangement of dots for a moment, trying to remember where he had seen such a formation.

"The Big Dipper! Ha! That name makes a lot more sense now! With parents like that, I'm surprised your sister isn't actually called Maple Pines!"

"Hey!"

"Yeah well..."

He blushed, and flattened the hair over his birthmark. Stan was reminded of Ford once again. Only this time, he was not trying to cover up his fingers, he was hiding a birthmark. Knowing how much his brother had been teased over it made Stan think twice before making any more jokes about his birthmark.

"They could've done a lot worse." Stan continued. "They could'a name you Bear or Spoon. Think of all the nicknames that would bring on!"

Glad to have gotten the inevitable out of the way, Dipper covered up his birthmark.

"Heh, yeah."

Suddenly, the nick-name Dipper didn't seem so bad...

His real name however, was an entirely different story.
The night was eerily still. The sound of crickets singing had quickly died down after the first few rumbles of thunder. From across the ocean, the storm clouds drew nearer, with a strange sort of silence. There was no wind, yet. But they encroached, and would no doubt reach the land within a matter of minutes. The sound of the TV had become a dull ringing sound in Stan's ears. His eyes were glued to the screen, even as they were focused elsewhere.

Mabel had fallen asleep, her head resting against his shoulders. When curled up on the couch, she seemed especially small to Stan. How could she possibly be more than twelve years old? Her too-big nightie made her seem even tinier. The girl was snoring quietly, she had given up her battle to stay awake.

Dipper was sitting on the other side of the couch, and was fighting to stay up. He continued to yawn, and shift in his spot to keep from falling asleep. Occasionally, he would nod off, lulled to sleep by the sound of the TV. But in an instant, his eyes would open again. He would look towards Stan, shake his head, and reposition himself on the couch. All before repeating the cycle, as he desperately struggled to remain awake.

Stan wasn't as tired as the niblings were, even though his eyes were starting to feel heavy. The bright images of the TV seemed to flash by in a blur, unable to form meaning before his eyes. They were watching some sickening, colourful rom-com that Mabel had chosen. The kid had not even lasted through the opening musical number before she fell asleep. But Stan was reluctant to get up and change the movie to something less terrible. At least it was able to keep him awake. Not that he was starting to fall asleep. Or genuinely enjoying sitting down with the little gremlins and watching TV.

The ringing of the phone disturbed the peace. It wasn't the land-line, but the phone in his office. This meant the call was important. Stan wished he could just reach for the phone on the table next to the couch, but nothing was ever that easy. The ringing woke Dipper for the umpteenth time, and his sister stirred slightly. Stan got up carefully, trying not to disturb his nibling too much. Grumbling to himself, he walked down the hall, and searched through his pockets as he searched for the key to his office. Stan unlocked the door, and fumbled with the phone.

"What?" He snarled.

There was no reply at first. There was a rustling sound, like someone was blowing on the phone receiver. Then, Stan became aware of the car alarm that was wailing in the background. There was coughing, a rough, gurgling cough. It became a horrible choking noise that sent shivers of disgust down his spine. And then it morphed into a sob. The pitiful wails became words.
"S-Stanley!"

"S-Stanford? What is it?"

"D-don't hurt them! P-please Stanley! I-i-it's-"

A coughing fit took over Ford's voice. Stan shuddered. It sounded almost like his brother was trying to hack up his lungs.

"Ford what's going on?"

"I-I won't be able to p-pick up the k-kids Stanley."

"What does that mean?"

Stan tried to fight back against the rising panic he was beginning to feel. Stanford sounded really bad. He was crying and blubbering, and he wasn't making any sense. Something had happened to his brother. Hearing the car alarm in the background made Stan realize that Ford had gotten out of his car, because something had happened to it. Had he crashed? Hit someone?

"J-just c-call their p-parents! T-this i-is my f-fault, I couldn't make it on t-time!"

"WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?!"

"My l-leg should be fine, but they got me in the s-sh-"

"Who got you where?! What are you talking about?!"

"D-downtown. They must've t-thought I was y-you. The ambulance will be here soon."

"What happened?"

"P-please! They haven't done a-anything!"

"Ford, stop-"

"T-the ambulance will be here soon," he repeated.

Click.

"Stanford?! STANFORD?!"

Stan was able to put two and two together, and he realized that someone must have attacked Ford. It was easy to make the mistake, especially in the darkness of a car. Stan knew that he had more than a few enemies out there, ready to kill him if they ever got the chance to do so. He needed to find Ford, right away.

When he heard the dial tone, Stan threw the phone against the wall. Instantly, he regretted doing so. Stan stormed out of the room and headed towards the den. There, he picked up the other phone, and quickly dialed Soos' number. Stan tapped his foot and looked at the clock as he heard the phone ring once, twice, three times... Soos picked up after the fifth ring.

"M-mister Pines?" Soos asked, stifling a yawn.

"Soos, I need you to come over and watch the kids for me. Right now."
"Sure thing. I'll be there in a-" the man-child yawned once again. "Couple a' minutes."

With nothing more to say, Stan hung up the phone. He returned back to his office, and grabbed a briefcase. He unlocked his filing cabinet, and removed the false bottom from the top drawer. Underneath it were several neat stacks of bills. Genuine legal tender, unlike the stuff he kept in his wallet. It was too risky to try faking anything here. He picked up as many fifties he could, and stuffed them into the case. He locked the briefcase, and attached the keys to his belt.

There was no way to tell if he might need money to get something, but it was best to be prepared for anything. The thermostat in his office also just so happened to serve as the access panel for "Absolutely One-Hundred Percent Super Safe from the Outside World" mode. Or as Soos like to call it, panic mode. All the windows in the house were instantly locked and barricaded. The defenses he had built into the lawn sprung to life. If this was any sort of assassination plan, no one would be breaking into his house while he was gone.

By the time he had finished preparing, Soos was standing in the foyer, with a confused Dipper and Mabel tucked under both of his arms. Mabel was too tired to try fighting back, but Dipper was still struggling, wanting to understand what was going on. Stan tossed Soos one of many guns laying around the house.

The man-child fumbled with it before he was able to catch it. Under normal circumstances, he wouldn't trust his employee with a loaded gun, but these were not normal circumstances. Soos at least knew how to fire a gun. Stan doubted the kids did, so the dubious safety was left to the man-child.

"Stan, what's going on?" Dipper asked.

"Yeah, I was in the middle of this weird dream," Soos chimed in. "There was this triangle-guy and he-"

"Ford's not going to be here tonight," he gruffly told them. "I have to go out and deal with some stuff in the meantime."

"You mean, his time's up?" said Dipper.

Stan was too busy to notice the nervousness in the boy's voice.

"He won't be able to pick you guys up. Anyway, I'm leaving now."

Stan dashed out of the house and into the torrent of rain that had begun. He yanked open the car door, shielding himself with the briefcase. Turning on the wipers at full speed and starting the high beams, he prepared for one of his more reckless rides. The tires of the car spun in the muddy patch that had once been a driveway. Then, he took off.

The road leading into town had never seemed longer as he drove. A wind was picking up, making the rain fly in every direction. It violently pelted down on the car, obscuring anything farther than five feet in front of him. It wasn't until he saw the faint, flashing red lights that Stan realized he was coming up to the first intersection. Stan had to take it easy, not wanting to risk the chance of getting t-boned.

He did not have to stop before the intersection. Because it was not the traffic lights that were red. There were police cars, and an ambulance. Stan felt his heart skip a beat when he recognized Ford's car. It was resting by the curb. Stan slowed down to a crawl so he could see what was going on. Ford's car looked intact, all except for the driver's window. It was shattered, small holes peppered
through it like swiss cheese.

Feeling his stomach lurch, Stan stopped the car. He averted his eyes from the sight. Someone really had thought Ford was him. This was all his fault. If he hadn't antagonized the butcher the night before, this wouldn't have happened. Stealing the sausages had been a bad idea... The ambulance took off. Stan forced himself to focus on following the vehicle from a safe distance. He wasn't going to risk getting in a wreck when his twin was filled with bullets.

The drive to the hospital was an agonizing one. His grip on the steering wheel grew impossibly tight, and his sweat-slicked palms only made him told on harder. His feet did not know the meaning of the brake pedal as he followed the ambulance. Stan lead-footed it the entire journey to the hospital, and parked next to a fire hydrant. He used his briefcase as a shield from the rain once again.

The paramedics pulled the stretcher out of the ambulance. Stan froze when he saw his brother laying on it. The chilling feeling of the rain knocked him out of his stupor. The man ran up alongside his twin. The paramedics had to do a double take, wondering how their patient was standing before them. But Ford's cries of pain were enough to remind them of their job.

"Stanford! What happened?"

The man weakly opened his eyes, only to close them again. Tears were streaming down his face, and he weakly attempted to feel his shoulder. Stan's eyes were drawn to the dark red stain that was slowly growing around his arm. There was a similar, even larger mark that had bloomed in his thigh.

"S- Stanley?"

He grabbed his brother's shaking hands, even as they continued to run down the hospital halls.

"I'm here."

"T-the niblings?"

"I've got an employee watching them right now."

"P-please Stanley-"

He tried to open his eyes, but they quickly fluttered shut again. Ford's glasses were missing, probably lost in the chaos. His face was damp with tears and rain. His clothes were soaked as well. Stan hadn't seen his brother look so vulnerable in his adult life before.

"Stop being dumb. No one's going to hurt them."

"S-Stanley-"

"I only said that so you wouldn't take your time getting here," Stan sighed. "I'm not going to hurt them."

"P-promise?"

The single word sounded so oddly childish coming from Ford. Even though they were old men now, he seemed so helpless laying in on the stretcher. Promises were something that little kids made. They could at least keep the agreements they made. Adults however, were different. He could make a million promises, but reality would always be there, gifted with the power to break them. Stan didn't know when the last time he had actually kept a promise was. Shady business dealings could do that to a person.
"They're family Poindexter. *My* family."

"But Pop, and Shermy, and me-"

"As far as I'm concerned, I don't *have* a brother!" Stan mimicked. "Remember when you said *that*?"

Ford swallowed hard.

"S-Stanley-"

"Save it. Because as far as I'm concerned-" Stan paused to sneer at him. "Those kids are the only family I have left."

Stan let go of Ford's hands, and he made a point of wiping them off on his pants. Ford closed his eyes again, more tears escaping him. He jogged ahead to where the paramedic pulling the stretcher was.

"We're the same blood type," he announced. "Where do I go?"

The worker pointed him down another hall. He strode up to the counter, ignoring the line of people filling in paperwork at the desk. Before anyone could protest, he slapped the briefcase of money on the desk and unlocked it. The nurse running the desk raised his eyebrows, utterly shocked to see so much money in one place.

"My brother's going to need some blood from me."

There was no way he was going to risk waiting for enough blood donners with the same type to come along. It was better if he just pulled some strings and got everything he needed, without harming too many people in the process. The easy way out was donating now. It might not be much, but it could still make a difference with Ford's life on the line.

Within a matter of minutes, Stan found himself sitting in a chair with a needle stuck deep in his arm. He had to look away from the device collecting his blood. Even now, he was not too fond of the sight of blood. Especially when he had to think about how much Ford could possibly be losing.

The nurse working with him offered him a cookie and juice. He scowled at him. He wasn't a kid, and he could care less about his blood sugar right now! The expression was enough to make him skip protocol. Especially since he had dumped nearly ten thousand dollars on them. It was amazing how easily money could make people forget laws existed.

"Where is he?"

"T-they'll have sedated him by now. Once they understand the extent of the damage, they'll begin operating."

"How long will that take?"

"Well-"

A very, very long time. Stan fell asleep in one of the emergency room's very uncomfortable chairs. He was shaken awake by a doctor hours later, and quietly informed of what had gone on. Ford was patched up, and bullet-free. The slug in his shoulder had lodged there, and not left any lasting damage, while the bones in his leg had been spared. This was a miracle in of itself, and Stan had trouble believing it at first.
Once he had been assured that Ford was stable, Stan drove back home. There was no signs of the rain clouds from the night before. The sky was a clear, clean blue with not a single cloud marring the landscape. The roads were still wet, and he could feel his car tires slipping and sliding under the mud as he drove back home. It was the afternoon when he got back in. Soaked to the bone, and dog-tired.

Naturally, Stan was not ready to deal with the problem that faced him at home. Soos was on the front lawn, which made putting the house in lockdown completely pointless. Stan felt ready to yell at the man-child, already irate and itching for an argument as it was. He approached Soos, paying no mind to the squelching of grass and mud beneath his feet. With each step he took, a pool of water filled within his shoes.

Soos was standing underneath a tree, and seemed to be talking, pleading with it. As Stan got closer, he realized it was because the kids were in the tree.

"Soos! What are you doing outside!"

"Sorry dude!" Soos apologized. "The second you left they went all bezerk! Just a couple a' minutes ago they broke out of the house and then ran to this tree!"

"Did you try using a ladder?" Stan hissed.

"Mister Pines, you got rid of all the ladders and replaced them with guns," Soos reminded.

"That's because they're dangerous! Taking you all high up, only to fall over when you least expect it!"

"Come on guys, just climb down!"

"NEVER!"

A barrage of pinecones were the twin's response to this. Soos yelped and ran out of the way. Stan, woozy from donating so much blood, was not quick enough to escape the first wave of projectiles. It didn't hurt that much, but it still was not a fun experience. When he moved away from the tree, the attack stopped.

"Why are you doing this?!" cried Soos. "I thought you dudes were cool!"

"You know why!" Dipper yelled.

"I really don't!" Soos insisted.

"Yeah! Take that!"

Mabel threw another pinecone at Stan.

"Soos, climb up there and get them."

"But the pinecones-"

"They'll have to run out eventually."

"You do it!"

Stan gave a sigh of disgust. He was really not in the mood to deal with this right now. But if he had to climb a tree to get the kids down, then he would do it. He rolled up his sleeves, and then reached for the nearest branch. Instantly, he was assaulted with more pinecones. Gritting his teeth and
keeping his head down, Stan pulled himself up the first branch. The arm that had been jabbed with a needle tingled in pain.

"Dipper! He's actually climbing the tree! What do we do?!!"

"I don't know! I never thought they'd get this far!"

"Throw more pinecones!"

"We're all out of pinecones!"

The twins looked at the ground, which was more pinecone than grass surrounding the tree.

"Soos, go find a ladder," Stan commanded.

"But you-"

"Just do it."

With the pinecones now finished, Stan could look upwards without the risk of being hit. Dipper and Mabel were climbing near the top of the tree, trying to escape his reach. The tree branches grew thinner as he climbed higher. Stan was glad that he didn't have to look down anymore, because he didn't know if he could handle thinking about the height he was at.

"Look, can we just talk this out?" Stan asked.

"Not in a million years!"

"Come on Mabel!" Stan said, trying to appeal to his other nibling. "What's going on here?"

He was getting closer to the top of the tree. Stan tried to reach out for his great-niece, but his fingers were stepped on. Stan let out a yelp of pain, and let go of the branch. A mistake, as he was only holding on with one hand now. He desperately kicked his feet, trying to find a safe place to rest them. He ended up with his legs and arm hugging around the tree.

"Why you little-"

The rest of what he was going to say was drowned out by a second howl of pain. Dipper was still stepping on his fingers.

"Stay away from my sister!"

"What are you two going on about?!!"

"Grunkle Ford!"

"What about him?"

"We heard what you said!" Mabel snapped.

"You went out to deal with him! And now you're going to do the same thing with us!"

Stan groaned. What was with his family and yelling things that made absolutely no sense?

"Why would I be doing that?"

"Because he didn't come in two days!"
If he had not been so tired and hungry (In hindsight, he should have eaten the cookie and juice.) he would have laughed at the kids. It was understandable that they could come to the wrong idea, what with how many crimes he was willing to commit. Heck, Ford had fallen for it perfectly, and he knew him better than anyone else. The twins would fall for it just as easily, if not more.

"I only said that because I wanted to scare him into hurrying up," Stan admitted. "Otherwise he'd be a pain just to tick me off."

"How do we know for sure?" Dipper asked. "You're a master criminal!"

"Yeah! Prove it!"

"I can't prove it!" Stan snarled. "You just have to trust me!"

"Trust you?!" Dipper yelled. "Two days ago, we listened to Grunkle Ford say we shouldn't trust you! Just yesterday, you told me about all the different ways you could get revenge against a person! And now you expect us to trust you?! We know you hate Grunkle Ford and Grandpa Shermy! What's stopping you from using us as revenge against them? Huh?!"

"What makes Ford so reliable anyways?" Stan asked. "How can you trust a guy you can't even remember meeting? Why don't you answer that smart guy?!"

"Ford doesn't have a criminal record! Ford doesn't brag about crimes he's committed! Unlike you, we actually knew Ford existed before this summer!"

"And you know what else he is?!" he retorted. "Ford is a promise-breaker! Ford can barely take care of himself because he's too busy being a nerd to develop basic common sense! Ford is in the hospital with two bullet wounds meant for me! That's what I've been dealing with for the past eight hours!"

"What?" Mabel said. "You mean, he's hurt?"

"Yes. And the thing I've been dealing with was him in the hospital! I donated some blood and calmed him down."

Stan rolled up his sleeve, so he could show them the bandage on his wrist. A purple-blue mark was starting to form on his skin from where the needle had been. Dipper stopped looking so angry, and Mabel was no longer trying to hide behind her brother. The twins glanced at each other, sharing a silent conversation with their eyes. Stan just hoped they were coming to realize the truth.

"What other proof do you have on you?" Mabel finally asked.

"Nothing unless you count the germs from the waiting room."

"We don't," Dipper sharply said.

"Is he ok?"

"He'll live."

"C-could we visit him?" Dipper asked.

Both of them stared at him with wide, hopeful eyes. Stan wondered if they had practiced to perfect such a look, or if it was natural. They looked tiny and helpless as they clung on to the tree. There were dark rings circled underneath their eyes. Evidently, the twins had not gotten any sleep since he
had left the house. Stan could now see they were shaking, and holding on to the tree branches for
dear life. They were sad, and afraid.

The situation lost what little humor it had when Stan realized that they were scared to death of him.
They genuinely thought they were going to die. He hadn't meant to scare them. All he had wanted
was to create a little grief for Ford! Why was it so hard to cause trouble for him? Getting the twins to
trust him now looked like it would be next to impossible now. How could they when until a minute
ago, they believed he was going to kill them?

Stan cursed Ford a million times over as he tried to salvage the situation. But deep down, a part of
him knew that Ford had been doing the right thing when warning the twins. He was a monster. He'd
already put them in danger, and just living in his house made them targets for his many enemies.
Heck, Ford was in the hospital because they looked alike! If Ford hadn't cared about the twins, he
wouldn't have bothered to warn them.

Knowing how to take care of kids was an impossible art in Stan's mind. He could barely take care of
himself some days. If the kids were told to blindly trust his judgement, they'd probably wind up dead
before the day was out. In some sick, twisted way, Ford had unintentionally done him a favour...

"Tell you what." Stan began. "We can go back after I've gotten some rest."

"Really?" Dipper inquired.

"Really."

"Prooomise?" Mabel slowly asked.

"Kid, I don't make promises."

The twins shied away from him.

"But I'll try my best to make sure you see Ford."

"This isn't one of those things where Ford is actually dead and you're going to kill us so we see him,
right?"

"Ugh. You see? This is why I call you Ford Jr! Paranoid theories for all!"

"Grunkle Stan."

"He's not dead. We can go visit him in the hospital just as soon as I rest up a bit."

The twins slowly started to climb down the tree. They got past Stan without any difficulties, and
safely reached the ground. The twins were still on edge, but nevertheless felt relieved. It felt like a
heavy burden had been lifted off of their backs. Stan didn't want to kill them. Or his acting was
strong enough to make them think that was the truth. But for now, they would be safe.

"Grunkle Stan are you coming down?"

While they may have reached the base of the tree, Stan had not. Stan turned his head over his
shoulder so he could look at them. The man promptly closed his eyes and turned his head elsewhere.

"Uh, of course! I'm not stuck or afraid of heights!"

"I think we might want to help Soos find that ladder."
Ford had quickly come to the conclusion that he hated hospitals. He had never stayed in one long enough before to make a solid judgement on what it was like. But now that he had woken up from surgery, it was safe to say that he absolutely loathed it. The doctors were constantly trying to keep him hopped up on painkillers and drowsy medicine, so he couldn't think clearly or fight back. He was certain that the IV contained trace amounts of government tracking device as well. But every time he ripped out the little needle, a nurse would come in and fix it for him.

The nurse was another problem he had with the hospital. The strange way of talking and bright yellow eyes had clued him in to the fact that the hospital was in fact run by reptilians. They must've had more control over the health of the general population than he had originally predicted. The reptilian nurse had the annoying habit of calling him a number of nick-names as well. Sixer and Poindexter, two of Stanley's favourites, were constantly used by the not-so human nurse.

One taste of the flavorless hospital food told Ford that there must be some kind of mind-control substance in it. There was no reason for it to be so bad otherwise. Clearly they were trying to stop him from asking too many questions. He had not touched his food or drink after that.

Ford didn't know how he could break out of the hospital in his current state. The doctors here wanted to keep him for nearly a month! A month! He'd dealt with worse wounds from gremgoblins and gnomes, while he had only been grazed by the bullets! Surely he could function normally after a few days!

Lying in bed at the tender mercies of the reptilians was agonizing. Especially since the nurse (A very unprofessional one at that.) was constantly reminding him of the fact. Ford would have gotten up just to spite him, but it wasn't that easy. It felt like there were a million stitches and twists keeping his shoulder and leg together. He had to hold his leg out straight so he would not mess up the work that had been done to seal the wounds. Trying to sleep on his side was impossible with the IV and searing pain in his limbs.

It felt like every time he moved, a red-hot poker was being pressed into his flesh. The incisions started to bleed when he struggled too much. The skin around his injuries was dark and bruised. He could feel his pulse throbbing around the new holes in his body, almost like they had a life of their own. The quiet thumping was eerily strange and foreign to him.

This, accompanied by the occasional beeping of the IV was irritating. It was keeping him awake. His inability to sleep had nothing to do with refusing to take the sleeping pills offered to him. For some reason, this was a source of annoyance for the nurse, who wanted him to "go to sleep already"
because he was "just trying to make my job a little easier here Sixer."

Speak of the devil, the nurse arrived. Luckily he was not holding any terrible hospital food or drugs.

"Stanford oh friend of mine-

"I don't even know your name!

"It's uh Norm. Norm Al."

Ford squinted at the nurse. He did not have his glasses, so it was harder for him to read things. Anything that wasn't on the bed looked like a blur before his eyes. The nurse was always leaning too close to him, so he could make out the letters of the name tag, even though they were a little soft.

"Your name tag says Bi-

"You've got visitors I'm leaving now bye!"

The nurse ran out of the room. Ford shook his head in disgust. Why was such an obvious reptilian assigned to him? One would think that the empire could afford better workers than that. The rest of the staff didn't act like this! Maybe the nurse was new to the hospital. That would explain his complete inability to mimic social human behavior and speech. Or maybe he was interested in mating? Ford had to shudder at the idea. Hopefully that was not the plan going on in the nurse's head.

Stanford did not dwell on it for long. He had visitors? Who could it be? No one in Gravity Falls knew that he was hospitalized. Not that anyone in Gravity Falls would care... Could the kids' parents have found out? Ford winced at the thought. He hadn't had the time to call them and explain they sent their children to Stanley's house. He seriously doubted that Stanley would call them either. He and Stanley were going to figure out a way to explain what happened to them.

"Great-uncle Ford!"

Two blurs ran towards his bed. One was blue. The other was pink and had light-up running shoes. As he started at the blue blur, Stanford realized that Stanley had been de-aged somehow. Probably by that horrible reptilian nurse. But when another, taller blur entered the room, Stanford realized that couldn't be the case.

"Kids? You're ok?"

"Yup!" said the pink one. "We're one hundred percent alive!"

"My how you've grown- no that's a lame one... Uh, you look just like your father! But you have your mother's eyes!"

"I figured you'd need these."

Stanley gave him a new pair of glasses. Stanford didn't know where his brother had found him a pair of glasses that fit his prescription, but he was thankful for it. Now he could see the room clearly. He put them on, and was surprised to see that the twins did not look like his nephew. Nor did they have his niece's eyes.


The boy rolled his eyes.
"I'm Dipper," he introduced, offering his hand.

"And I'm Mabel!" she said, shaking the man's other hand. "The older twin!"

"By five minutes!"

"Anyway, since you're not feeling well, I made you a card! Plus I forced Grunkle Stan to buy you a gift basket! Tada!"

She placed the basket on the table next to the bed. At least he wouldn't die of starvation in the hospital, now that he had a second source of (junk) food. The card was a nice touch as well. There were different coloured smiley faces and a drawing of the twins outside. Ford had to grin at the cute picture. It looked like he wasn't the only member in the family with art skills.

"It's wonderful."

The girl blushed and batted a hand at him.

"Aw, shucks!"

Just then, the dreaded nurse reentered the room. The name tag was fixed this time, and there was a small file-folder tucked underneath his arm.

"Heeey Stanford! I was just reading through your entire medical history, because I figured if we're going to be best human friends I should know more about you, when I noticed that someone else is here to see you! Also you should get your appendix taken out soon. There's no point in risking it exploding on you! I can arrange an appointment if you want!"

Stanford briefly wondered how the nurse was able to talk without taking any breaths in between his words.

"I'll pass," he firmly said. "Who's here now?"

"Well, I was looking through the window, when I saw a car pull up in the parking lot, and I recognized the guy leaving it, so-"

"What did this person look like?"

"His nose sort of looks like yours. At least before you had it broken back in eighty-nine. And-"

"That's... That's enough thank-you."

"Okay! Call me if you need anything! Friend!"

The nurse backed out of the room, terrifying smile on his face.

"What a friendly person!" Bagel said.

"Ugh. Creep is more like it," Stan muttered. "I think I need to go wash my ears after hearing that."

Ford pointed to the left.

"The washroom's that way."

Stan left the room, rubbing his ears. Stanford waited a few seconds, wanting to be sure that Stanley was out of hearing range before speaking to the twins. He sat up in bed, and tried his best to lean
closer to the twins.

"He didn't actually hurt you, right?"

"Not unless you count his driving," Pepper said.

"No threats or anything?"

"None."

"What about food? He didn't try to starve you at all did he?"

"Grunkle Ford, we're completely healthy," Bagel insisted.

"You know, he can't hear you now kids. It's alright to say the truth. Or just hambone it to me! Stanley doesn't know how to hambone, does he?"

Ford tapped out a quick rhythm on his legs. Dipper and Mabel had no idea what he could have possibly said through it. Now that they had met their great-uncle, they did not know what to do. He was in the hospital, and this was proof that Stan wasn't really out to kill them, like they had originally thought. Ford was even stranger than Stan was!

Mabel felt awful, knowing that their assumptions had been completely wrong. She had been terrible to Soos as well. She had clawed at him when he refused to let go of her. She had bitten him when he had held her brother instead. Plus there was the attack glitter she had gotten in his eyes... She really had to apologize to Soos for all the things she had done. Not only did she have to apologize to Soos, she had to find a way to do the same for Stan. They had really hurt his feelings. That was much worse than hitting him with pinecones...

"So... What's going to happen to us?" Dipper asked.

"Yeah, where are we staying over the summer?"

"The doctors want to keep me in the hospital for more than a month." Ford said. "Or at least until my wounds are all healed up."

From down the hall, the nurse yelled, "I want Stanford to stay forever!"

Ford shuddered. What a weirdo.

"I think we should call your parents and send you back home," he said. "We can just them I got injured, and can't take care of you right now."

"But what about Stan?" Mabel asked. "Aren't we going to mention that?"

"Kids... You shouldn't let anyone figure out that you know Stan. It's just too dangerous with all the enemies he's made over the years. Heck, look at me! I'm stuck in the hospital because of him!"

Mabel frowned. She didn't like where the conversation was going. Lying to her parents seemed like a bad idea. If they found out, she would be in so much trouble. That wasn't the real problem though. Lying was. She always did her best to tell the truth! Honesty was the best policy, and it helped for everyone involved! How could she not tell her parents about her adventures with Stan?

That was a problem, but so was not mentioning Stan. She still wanted to keep in touch with him after they went home. He just seemed so lonely with his giant house and only Soos for company! Mabel would feel awful if she left Glass Shard Beach and never talked to Stan again. How could she ever
agree to do something like that?

"But-"

"There are no buts about it young lady. If you care about your family, you won't say anything to your parents or anyone else who asks. Understand?"

"Well yeah, but-"

"Good."

There was an uncomfortable silence. The twins looked at each other. Then Dipper looked at Ford. Ford looked at Mabel. From behind Mabel, the nurse peeked around the threshold of the door, maniacal smile in place, and energetically waved at his "best human friend." Ford looked at the ceiling. He could actually see it now, thanks to his glasses. Finally, Dipper said, "So what do you do for a living?"

"I study the ecosystem of Gravity Falls."

"Do you have a specific research goal?" Dipper asked.

"Well I started building upon an old research project of mine from about thirty years ago. Based upon anomalies found in living creatures."

He looked at the six fingers on Ford's hands.

"Like polydactyls?"

"I'm surprised you know the word! How old did you say you were Pepper?"

Dipper did not seem bothered by the fact that Ford had completely botched his name.

"I'm twelve. But we'll be thirteen by the end of the summer. So, I'm pretty much a teenager!"

"Well that's quite impressive for a twelve-year-old."

"So are you?"

"Am I what?"

"Studying anomalies like that?"

"Yes. I'd been searching for the causes for these different organisms. Back when I was young and crazy, I thought it might be mathematically feasible to build a machine that could-"

Dipper and Ford started to go on a tangent about nerd things. Mabel couldn't believe it. No wonder why Stan was always calling Dipper Ford Jr! They were both giant nerds! She drowned out what they were saying, and instead looked around the hospital room.

"Did it work?"

"Of course not! It got nowhere and I ended up abandoning the project before I even got through the basic calculations!"

The other bed was unoccupied. Ford had the one by the window. His IV was placed next to the window. Across from the bed, there was a chair with some suspicious marks on them. The entire
room was a dreary neutral colour scheme of faded blue-grey and white. The only colourful things were the stains on the walls.

From the window, there was a view of the parking lot, framed by the decaying city skyline. Stan had slept until the evening before taking them to the hospital. It was dark outside now, but visiting hours were not quite over yet. The whole room was just gross! It made her sad to know that people could spend years in rooms like this one.

"I focused on regular research for a bit, living off of grants and such, but recently, I've felt something drawing me back to the project once again."

"Wow. And how many awards did you say that last thesis got you?"

"Oh, just five."

Luckily, Stan returned to save her from the mixture of worry and boredom that she was feeling. He took one glance at Dipper- who had grabbed the chair and pulled it over to the bed- and Ford- he was animatedly blathering about something scientific- and then cleared his throat. Stanford stopped talking, his excited grin quickly fading.

"You're back."

The two Stans awkwardly stared at each other.

"Well, we should probably get going."

"But Great-Uncle Ford never finished telling me about-"

"I said, we need to get going."

"Alright, alright."

The twins said their goodbyes and goodnights to Ford. Dipper was still lagging behind, trying to stretch out his conversation with Ford for as long as possible. Stan practically dragged Dipper towards the door. Mabel ran ahead, eager to get out of the room and away from the nerd talk. She ran straight in to the hall, and collided with someone's legs. Mabel fell backwards. The person fell too. Mabel was dizzy for a moment, not expecting the sudden fall. When her vision cleared, she saw someone offering a hand to her.

"Oh my I am so sorry!" a soft voice said. "I didn't see you there Missy!"

Mabel took the man's hand, and he helped her up. She looked up at the man in awe. He looked to be around the Stan's age. He had a full head of snowy white hair, and a short beard to match it. For a moment, she was stunned by the sparkling blue eyes behind his glasses. The girl felt her heart flutter, and her stomach twist in to knots. She tried to reply but her tongue suddenly felt too heavy for her to speak.

"I- uh..."

She was too stunned to feel embarrassment over her stuttering. He looked like a living Santa Claus! Well, one that had lost a lot of weight. He was so polite too! There was also that dreamy southern accent. And last but not least, the clearly home-knit sweater he was wearing. Mabel didn't know who the man was, but she instantly decided that they would become best friends, no matter what it took.

After a few more stumbling words, Mabel found her voice again.
"No, no! It's fine! I should've been watching where I was going!"

"Are you sure you're ok?" he sweetly asked. "That was quite a tumble you took!"

"Well, I might feel better if I knew your name," she coyly said.

The man laughed a perfect laugh that made her stomach perform flip-flops. He opened his mouth to reply. But he was interrupted by Stan. The man had dragged Dipper out of the room by the collar of his vest.

"Mabel! What did I tell you about talking to strangers?"

"Nothing Grunkle Stan!"

"Yeah well I should have. Anyway-"

Before Stan could finish, the man turned around to face Stan. The moment he saw her new best friend, he let go of Dipper. He was probably shocked by her best friend's handsomeness. His enchanting, blue eyes locked with Stan's. Her new best friend's beautiful, gentlemanly smile vanished. When he looked back at her, his gaze was chilling.

"You, you're related to him?"

Mabel could see her chances of a new friendship sliding down the drain. She quickly shook her head.

"I, uh-" her tongue seemed to twist up as she stared into his eyes. "Come on Mabel! Lie! Just tell a lie! You can do this! But Stan's feelings-"

"Stanley."

"Fiddleford."

Dipper stopped fighting against Stan when he heard the name. He looked at Fiddleford, and slowly asked, "are you Fiddleford McGucket?"

The man blushed slightly and looked at the ground. He knew where this conversation was going. It seemed he just couldn't escape the Pines or his fame. The man was used to the sort of response from people, but it was still embarrassing at times to go through.

"Well, yes."

"The same guy who owns Pear, one of the biggest phone and computer companies in the world?"

He chuckled at the question.

"That's me."

"AAARRRAAAHHH! OHMYGOSH! YOU'RE LIKE, THE MODERN-DAY EINSTEIN!"

"Heh, do people actually call me that?"

"I uh, well I do. And I'm sure there are other people that do as well! I mean-"

"While I'd like to stick around and talk, I need to visit someone. He's just in the room in front of you and-"
"YOU KNOW GREAT-UNCLE FORD?!" Dipper squealed.

The adults ignored Dipper, who was doing the best he could to stop from losing his mind. He was holding his head and hyperventilating as he paced up and down the hall. Mabel was torn between helping her brother, and listening to Stan and Fiddleford argue with each other. She needed to determine what the chances of becoming best friends with Fiddleford was.

"How'd you even find out anyways?" Stan asked, narrowing his eyes. "Ford hasn't had the chance to call anyone."

"You have your resources and I have mine," he sniffed. "I know Ford can't foot a bill for something this big, so I'm going to help him out."


"Well then maybe he needs some blood. I am oh negative after all."

Dipper pulled a pen out of his vest and scribbled on his arm.

"Blood type is oh negative," Dipper muttered to himself.

"I've done that too," Stan said.

"Oh really? How much did you donate, huh?"

"Hah! Don't even think about it Fiddlesticks! Your body's too shrimpy to donate as much as I did!"

"As if! Do you know anything about donating blood?"

"Why don't you ask the nurse? He helped! Hey nurse! Get over here!"

The nurse obsessed with Ford closed his medical files and walked over to them. He still had the papers tucked underneath his arm, and a giant grin plastered on his face.

"Did I, or did I not donate an unhealthy amount of blood last night?"

"You did."

"Well then I'll match it! Nurse, can you help me with that?"

"Are you a friend of Ford's?"

"Yes."

"Then I'm afraid not."

"Uh, but why?"

The nurse looked at the Pines family. Then he leaned in to whisper the reply to Fiddleford.

"I can't have any competition."

Cackling, the nurse practically skipped back to his spot at the desk. He opened the medical file once again and started to flip through the pages. Whether he was eavesdropping on the conversation or actually reading Ford's medical history was debatable. However, no one really wanted to question it. It was probably for the best if they didn't know what was going on in the nurse's head.
Fiddleford was thoroughly flustered by this point. What kind of a hospital was this? He tried to find another way to counter Stanley's arguments. Stanley always managed to get him so worked up. He would show that brainless jerk, trying to upstage him! He wasn't even liked by Ford! It was a miracle that Ford had even allowed Stanley to visit! Before he could think of something to say, the little girl said;

"Did you guys date in the past?"

Neither man thought they could grow so red at the question. But Mabel was suspiciously looking between the two, with her arms crossed.

"W-what? Never!"

"As if I'd date someone like him!"

"Is anyone going to include me in this conversation?" Ford asked from his room.

As she listened to her new best friend and great-uncle fight and deny things, she decided that they perfectly fit in to the category of a rom-com couple. Besides, if she wanted to see her best friend again, she could always get him married into the family! How hard could that possibly be? She could set up dates for them and make them do old man stuff together! It was perfect! Besides, Great-Uncle Fiddleford had a ring to it...

"I'm sensing some definite romantic tension between you two. Have you tried hugging things out?"

"Kid, I'm not going to hug it out with Fiddlesticks."

Mabel put her hands on her hips.

"Grunkle Stan, I may know nothing about medical science, but I'm ninety-nine percent sure that you have chemistry."

"She's right!" The nurse yelled at them. "Become friends with the Not-Stanford-Pines instead!"

"See? Even the nurse agrees with me!"

"Look. I just need to talk to Stanford," Fiddleford sighed. "Is that so much to ask?"

"Oh, go ahead," Stan replied, giving a mock-bow. "Be my guest."

"Thank-you."

Fiddleford strode past them and entered Ford's room, just as Dipper recovered from his conniption. There was still a giddy grin on his face, and he looked ready to float away. Both twins were happy to follow the relative that was not scheming to kill them back to the car. Both happy for entirely different reasons.

"They sooo like each other," Mabel said to herself.

A plan for masterminding epic summer romances had begun.
"Bills, bills, junk, bills, anonymous death threat, taxes-"

Stan paused so he could look at the crudely folded letter that had been sent to him. He was walking back from the mailbox. It was placed just beyond the gate at the front of his house. He had some letters tucked underneath his arm, and the rest of the pile in his hands. His mail security had ensured that there was nothing dangerous in the envelopes or on the paper, so the many letters had been sent through.

The threat was made up of letters that had been cut out of newspapers and magazines. It was obscene, threatening, and to the point. It may have been anonymous, but he recognized where most of the paper had come from. Coupons and advertisements for the butcher's place. As Stan looked over the junk mail again, he saw that it was not junk mail that had been sent to him. The jerks were trying to intimidate him.

The junk mainly consisted of flyers, but there were pamphlets as well. Insurance companies, funeral homes, grave stone carvings, lawyers that specialized in wills... None of this bothered Stan as he shuffled through the mail. He already had everything arranged for his death, he wouldn't worry about the so-called threats brought his way. He was old and could do whatever he darn well pleased!

He flipped through the rest of the flyers, unimpressed by the feeble attempts at threats. They couldn't even hurt him properly! They wound up shooting Ford instead. Granted that wasn't a good thing, but they were still utterly incompetent when it came to threatening him. As he got to the bottom of the stack, his lack of concern faded. Suddenly, his throat tightened, and he nearly dropped all the mail.

Stan traced a trembling finger over the title of the clipping, wondering if his eyes were deceiving him. The read the words again, hoping that his eyes had finally given up on him. Obituaries. Obituaries for children. His confidence faded as he stared at the section of the newspaper.

This... This was not good.

As much as he didn't want the twins to leave, there was no choice. He couldn't look after them all summer. It was just too dangerous for everyone involved. They could go back to a perfectly risk-free life if he sent them on their way soon. There were always busses heading out west, it wouldn't be too hard to get them some tickets. Still, he didn't want to see them go, just yet.

Stan tried to tell himself that he did not like the twins. That was why he wanted to send them on their way. He didn't care about their safety. Well, if he didn't care about their safety, he would keep them here. But since he didn't want to let them go, that meant he liked them. And if he liked them, the best thing to do was send them on their way home. Stan knew he was just going around in circles as he tried to justify his feelings.

Stan continued to walk to the house. As he entered the house, he tossed the mail in the nearest trash. He passed by the den, and paused to look at the paper-filled mess that it had become. There were crumpled balls of lined paper scattered across the floor. The twins were crouched in front of the coffee table. Their heads were close together as they quickly conferenced over something.

"Where are we going to find his number?!!" Dipper asked.

"The phone book, duh!"

"We're not going to find Fiddleford McGucket's number in the phone book! He's a celebrity!"
Instinctively, Stan snorted when hearing the name. Was his niece still on that match-making kick? It had been like, a day! Surly she could get over it by now! Even if he was interested in McSuckit, Stan was fairly certain that he had a wife and child. Not that he was above a little harmless adultery. It was the other implications for Fiddlesticks that came with it that made the endeavor seem more hopeless.

The only person that hated him more than Stanford was Fiddleford. And that was saying something. He had this dumb grudge against him. Something about not earning his money through honest means like he had. But Stan wasn't going to tell his niece any of that. If she wanted to have a little fun, it would keep her busy. So long as there was no harm involved, he wouldn't bother trying to dissuade her.

After all, how much trouble could a twelve-year-old kid cause?

"Dipper please! Just because you know who he is, it doesn't make him a celebrity! I'm sure that he has a regular phone number!"

"Well even if he does, it's not like we have a phone book on us!"

"I'm sure Grunkle Stan has one," Mabel answered. "GRUNKLE STAN!"

"Right behind ya' kid."

The twins were surprised to see Stan there. Neither of them had expected such a sudden appearance. Mabel recovered from her embarrassment first. Her determination to get three great-uncles was enough to counteract any potential humiliation she felt. Fiddleford, Stanford, and Stanley. That was like, the perfect trio of old men!

Their names even went together! That just had to be a sign of something. Mabel knew it in her heart. Stanford and Fiddleford both ended with ford, Stanley and Stanford both had Stan in them, so it must have been fate! Their lives were connected somehow and she was going to get a third great-uncle no matter what!

"Where's the phone book?" she asked.

"Holding up the couch," he sighed.

Stan pointed to the large book, which was propped up beneath the couch leg. Mabel didn't hesitate to pull it out from underneath the space. The couch collapsed, now slightly lopsided, but that seemed like a short-term problem. She eagerly opened the book and flipped through the pages. But to her surprise, there was not a single Fiddleford McGucket in the directory.

"Where did you even get a phone book?" Dipper suspiciously asked.

"You can order them," Stan defensively muttered.

With a huff, he turned and left the room. Voices carried through the house like drafts. It was almost like hearing ghosts within the walls. More often than not, it was Soos just talking to himself as he worked around the house. However, Stan wasn't always sure if he was hearing things or not. His ears had been going for a while now. But he still wondered if it was truly possible to have a private conversation in the place. Who knew where the voices could go. As he walked away, he could hear the twin's hushed arguing start up once again.

"Ouch! Mabel what was that for?"

"You didn't have to accuse him of stealing!"
"I didn't!"

"You did too!"

"He may not be a killer, but Stan's still a criminal! It's a reasonable assumption!"

"It's not reasonable! It's mean!"

"It's the truth."

Stan drowned out the rest of the conversation, letting his own thoughts take their voice's place. Stupid, paranoid kids. He couldn't really blame them for it. But after all they had just been through, a person would think they might trust him a little more. Then again, he was keeping them in danger at the moment. They were targets for his very many, very real enemies.

It was safer if he sent them home. He would get over it quickly enough. Revenge could wait. Ford could wait. The kids would never work now that they had targets pained on their backs. Heck, Ford could become one too if the morons came to the wrong conclusions over his visits to the hospital.

Revenge could wait... It was such an odd thought. So foreign. Forty years. Forty long years of suffering, insecurity, and losing everything he had ever had. He lost all his family the moment he was kicked out of the house. With that, he lost many small, inconsequential things. A bed, warm clothing for winter, his favourite boxing gloves... The real world stole what little innocence was left of his youth. Murdered was more like it. Ripped to shreds and stomped on and burned. He had lost so much, waited so long, and only now thought that revenge could wait.

Ten years. Ten, long, agonizing years. Drifting, travelling, learning the ways of the street, picking up more than simple habits. There was the time he spent in jail, the time he spent in the loony bin (Apparently he showed tendencies for something or the other medical mumbo-jumbo.) and back on the streets once again.

He thought of those first ten years together because he was getting back on to his feet. After those years, he managed to walk on his own again. As soon as that happened, he had tracked Ford down to his crummy like home in the even crummiest town of Gravity Falls. A place that was smack-dab in the middle of nowhere.

The thirty years after Ford had tried (And failed thanks to paying off the court.) to file a restraining order, were different. There was crime, more crime, and the occasional glimpses of his brother's life. Perhaps things would have turned out differently if he hadn't burned those three stupid journals of Ford's out of spite... Then again, Ford had said he wanted nothing to do with him or the worthless research he had been collecting. Not that the books mattered to Ford. He had wanted both of them out of his sight, he had made that much clear when all three were thrown at him.

Forty years sure seemed like a long time. It was more than half of his entire life. Sure he'd gotten back at his pop once he had the money to do so... Stan didn't know how disgusted he should feel for his actions, but he didn't. And because of that, Ford was next on the list. Life called of course, and it had gradually become a side-project. He was always pushing it to the side, knowing that he could always get it later.

Or so he told himself.

There was no hesitation on his part.

At all.
Of course, Ford's little brush with death had reminded Stan that if he was going to put his money where his mouth was, he would have to act soon. Life was unpredictable. Ford could have died, and he never would have gotten the chance to make him suffer. Paying his bills and giving a little blood had been more of a way to calm himself down than anything.

Or so he told himself.

He could care less about losing his other half.

So long as he got revenge first.

Some, dark, horrible part of himself was infuriated that the jerks had hurt his twin. Not because he cared, but because that was his job. He was the one who was supposed to make Ford's life miserable. Not them. They were going to pay for this. They all were. Stan didn't know what he would do to them yet, but when he figured it out, they were all going to be very sorry.

Yeesh. Maybe he did show socio-whatever tendencies like that shrink had said...

A sudden draft seemed to chase after him. Stan shivered, despite the warm summer day it was. He was an old man now. He got cold easily, something he was never pleased to deal with. Maybe it was just the house. The place really was too big. He didn't have any use for all the extra space that was there.

The basement was mostly empty, the guest rooms had not been used since the kids first arrived. Even most of the kitchen space went unused. He kept what little he ate in the fridge and in the pantry. Heck, Soos probably spent more time in the living room than he did! But the man-child had barely been working under him for five years!

The only reason he stayed was the security. Not just the systems, but the feeling. It was far enough from most of Glass Shard Beach, and no one would ever bother to come over and annoy him. At least until one summer's day, he had gotten a call out of the blue (His name was nowhere in the phone book, so he was not sure how the kids had gotten it.) and somehow got two kids.

His mind strayed back to the letters and warnings that he had found that day. It looked like he would have to tighten up security anyways. He'd have to ask Soos to get on it. Otherwise someone was going to wind up hurt.

"Hey Grunkle Stan," Dipper said.

Stan didn't seem to notice Dipper. He was holding a clipboard in one hand, and a pen in the other. The man was tapping it against his fake teeth, and obviously deep in thought as he frowned at the paper. Dipper didn't know who was in more of a daze. His sister, or Stan. Both of them were planning something though, that much he knew.

Mabel was trying to set up Stan with McGucket. Dipper had a fair idea on how her matchmaking was going to end, but he was willing to help, just in case it did work. Two scientists in the family would be amazing. They could talk at family reunions and they could do all sorts of cool stuff together! But that wasn't important right now.

"Hey Grunkle Stan," he repeated, louder this time.

"Huh, whazzat?"

"What are you doing?" Dipper asked, trying to get a glance over his shoulder.
He was gently nudged away by Stan's elbow for trying to do so. Rubbing his stomach, he tried to see what he was doing once again. This time, Stan flipped over the page and glared at him.

"Adult stuff," Stan sharply said.

"Crime stuff?"

The man's expression became more furious at hearing this. Dipper sensed that he might have pushed his luck a little far with asking that. He took a step back, not wanting to upset his great-uncle too much. Stan became no less tense, and he defensively placed a hand over his work, as if it could hide what he had written any further.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have even asked," he said, raising his hands in the air.

"You never know who's listening in," Stan gruffly replied.

Stan looked away from Dipper, but did not resume his work. The boy didn't know what he should do. Backing off seemed a little wrong. He was almost certain that he had come to his great-uncle to ask something. But now that he had, he'd forgotten what it was. But as he thought about Stan's reaction, he wondered if accusing him of planning some kind of crime scheme was the smartest idea. Surely Stan did other things with his time as well! The man was probably still sore after what had happened with the pinecones and all that attack glitter Mabel had stockpiled. It still hadn't come out of the carpet in the foyer.

Apologizing now seemed awkward, and he had no idea how Stan would react. Would he be mocked, scolded? The idea of being embarrassed by him caused Dipper to think twice before speaking. Maybe Stan was one of those actions-speak-louder-than-words types. What would happen if he didn't accept the apology? What would he do then, just keep trying until Stan took it?

"Was there something you wanted?"

"Grunkle Stan I-"

"Speak up will ya'? My hearing's not getting any better you know!"

"I'm sorry for accusing you of murder!"

"Me too."

"W-what? I-?"

"Well it's not like there wasn't evidence," Stan continued. "It was wrong of course. No one was killed this time."

"This time?"

"Kid, I spent ten years fending for myself on the streets. I've been to jail in three different countries and arrested more times than I can count. Everything I've done, every cent I own was made through some form of lying, cheating, and poor business practice. Of course I've killed people."

"I-I- but-"

None of this was what he had expected. Dipper had though, hoped that Stan would simply take it apologies and move on. And maybe he had thought that Stan wasn't all that bad of a guy underneath everything. At least after he proved that he was not planning their deaths. He had taken care of them,
and he at least tried to be responsible while doing it! Heck, he even used kid-friendly substitutes for swear words now! Stan had to be good deep down.

"Isn't your sister supposed to be the optimistic one?"

"Well yeah, but-

"Then it shouldn't come as a shock that I'm not a good person."

"But-

"Nice to two kids doesn't equal good Dipper. If anything, that's even worse."

"No, you're wrong!" he said, shaking head head.

Stanley tilted his head back and laughed. It was the same, unsettling laugh that had reminded Stanford so much of his late father. Even if Dipper couldn't make the comparison to Filbrick, the cold, short bark of a laugh was jarring. He felt his hair stand on end, and he felt the need to back farther away from his great-uncle.

"Of course I am! Stanford was the smart twin. I was the spare that no one needed or wanted."

Dipper left the room, humiliated, worried, and worst of all, completely unsure whether or not Stan had actually accepted his apology.

"That could've gone a lot better..."

---

Ford wearily eyed the needle that the nurse was holding. For once, the perma-grin had been wiped off the man's face as he pulled out a bottle of something, and filled the needle with the clear liquid. He didn't know whether it was better to remain ignorant to the contents of the needle, or whether he should punch out the nurse's lights before it was too late and he was converted into a reptilian.

Yes, Ford had discovered the truth by now. Not taking any of his prescribed medicine had paid off! He now knew they were keeping him here because this hospital was really a reptilian testing facility! They were trying to further their research in human to reptile transmutation! It all made such perfect sense. Ford rather liked his arm and leg though, he didn't want to lose them if their transmutation went wrong.

Suddenly, the nurse grabbed his wrist. Ford instinctively yanked his arm away, and instantly regretted it. A fresh wave of pain washed over his injured shoulder. The disarming shock of agony allowed nurse to get a stronger hold on his arm this time. The grip was almost inhuman. He could feel the strength of the nurse, who seemed ready to use more force if necessary.

"What's in there?"

"Oh, just a lethal dose of morphine," The nurse hummed, jabbing the needle in his arm. "I can't quite remember what the safe amount is for a person your size is."

"WHAT?"

Ford pulled the needle out of his arm before the nurse could inject any more in to him. Of course, this only caused his shoulder to start up again. Ford instinctively reached for the wound, hissing in pain. The nurse tutted, and took the needle back from him in the meantime. He grabbed Ford's arm once again, not worried in the slightest about his shoulder.
"Yeesh, can't you take a joke?" the nurse mumbled, searching for a suitable vein once again. "Seriously, you need to relax!"

"Not with you as my nurse!" he snarled. "What moron let you in to med school?"

"It's a safe dosage, I can assure you," he replied, tweaking the side of the needle. "Now hold still while I-"

Ford howled as the needle was jabbed back in to his arm.

"THAT'S NOT A VEIN!"

"I realize that now." the nurse huffed, pulling out the needle once again.

"Do you know anything about human anatomy you knucklehead?!"

"Hey it's not my fault that I can't find a vein! If anything, it's your fault for being human!"

Ford stared at the nurse, whose face had quickly become flushed.

"I uh, not that I'm not a human. I'm veeeery human. So human it would boggle your tiny human brain! And my human brain because I am so very normal and human! That's me! Human-y the human!"

"Just yesterday you said your name was Norm Al! And that washable marker you used to get rid of your previous name has come off! So I know for a fact that your name is Bi-"

The nurse decided to stab him with the needle once again, clearly avoiding a vein on purpose.

"Give me that!" Ford hissed, as he snatched the needle. "I'll do it myself!"

"I'm pretty sure you don't know how to-"

"Oh please! I have twelve PhDs, I know what I'm doing!"

"What are you doing with twelve pretty hot dudes?"

The joke was lost on Ford, as he injected the rest of the dosage himself. Ford simply hoped that he could trust whatever was in the needle to be safe. Painkiller would be welcome, but it was just so hard to accept with the crazy nurse always watching him. But with how things were going, the man felt more ready to accept some relief for his shoulder and leg.

"And that's how you do it." He said, handing back the empty needle.

The nurse swabbed the spots with rubbing alcohol and put bandages over the spots that had been unjustly stabbed. Then, he disposed of the needle in the nearby hazardous waste bin.

"So, twelve PhDs," the nurse said, licking his lips. "Wanna' make it thirteen?"

"I have thought about returning to school, updating my knowledge," Ford admitted. "With so much change in technology, it would be stupid not to. Of course, school's always been a rather horrible experience for me."

The nurse huffed in annoyance when Ford didn't respond to his question. Boy was this guy dense!

"How's your knowledge on physics?"
"Good. I haven't had much practical use for it these past years, seeing as I've been focused more on the biological aspect of-"

"How do you know if you're still good at it?"

"How could I not know?"

"Prove it."

"Will you leave me alone for longer than an hour?"

"So long as you're not dying," he added. "Deal?"

"Deal."

They shook hands, and the nurse's maniacal grin returned.

"What should I do?" Ford asked.

Kicking off his shoes, the nurse leaped on to Ford's bed. He cozied up next to him, and slung his arm around his neck. Then he got rid of all the important medical papers that had been on his clipboard. Underneath, there was a fresh pad of lined paper. The nurse kept a pen on him for job-related reasons. He pulled it out of his uniform pocket and quickly started to jot something on the paper. He did not pause once to think as he wrote out a long equation, almost as if he had memorized it all.

Everything was quiet except for the scratching of the pen and the beeping of the IV as the nurse continued to write something down. Line after line, he wrote down multiple functions and variables. Some of the signs didn't even look familiar to Ford as he took them all in. The man suddenly wondered if he had bitten off more than he could chew. But the longer he stared at the signs, the stranger he felt.

Something clicked as he looked over one line. The infinite, right next to that function in the brackets... Hadn't that been a two before? He knew what that part represented! As his eyes combed over the first lines, Stanford knew exactly where he had seen all of this from. It had been a good thirty years, but it was coming back to him now, as he stared at it all. The nurse had somehow improved upon it, found solutions he had long since given up on! But how did the nurse know about this project?

"What is this?" he finally inquired.

"Why I thought you'd never ask!" the nurse smiled. "Say us best human friends were building ourselves a special kind of, gateway..."
Eighty Dimes

Ring!

Fiddleford groaned, and he sat up in bed. He felt around in the darkness for the lamp, only to close his eyes when the light turned on. But he needed to find his glasses before he picked up the phone. All the while, it continued to ring, waking him up farther. Eventually, he gave up on finding his glasses. Eyesight was overrated anyways. He could pick up the phone without any vision. It was awkward, but he managed to grab the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Hi! Great-Uncle Fiddleford-"

"Tell him I think he's cool!" a second voice interrupted.

"Who is this?" he asked, even though he already recognized the voices.

"It's me! Mabel!"

"And Dipper! Tell him that I'm here Mabel!"

"And Dipper," The girl added.

Fiddleford rubbed his eyes and yawned. How had they found his phone number? He was certain he had asked for it to not be listed in the phone book. Then again, these were members of the Pines family. They had a knack for finding out things they probably shouldn't have. But why were they calling him at- He looked at the clock. One in the morning?

"What is it you kids want?"

"Well, we were thinking about a follow-up date for you and Grunkle Stan!"

"Actually I wanted to talk about-"

"Nerd stuff!" Mabel finished. "Anyway, does dinner and a movie sound good?"

"Kids, now I don't want to come off as rude, but I am happily married to my wife, and have a son. And I have absolutely no interest in doing anything with Stanley Pines."

"Y-you're married?"

The poor child sounded absolutely heart-broken over the fact. It almost sounded like she was ready to cry over it. Fiddleford did not know how he was supposed to accept that. Why did she want him to date Stanley Pines so much? He just did not understand how on earth she had come to the conclusion that they were couple material.

"Happily."

"Dipper I thought you knew a lot about him!"

"I knew a lot about his work Mabel! Not his personal life! That's creepy!"

"I couldn't agree more," Fiddleford added. "Now if you excuse me, I'd like to go back to sleep."
It was a cloudy, windy day outside. Mabel was at the top of the stairs, leaning against the window so she could see outside. The ocean was a dull, slate-grey, and it was starting to become choppy. Larger and larger waves crashed upon the bank. The sandcastles she had made days ago were no longer safe from the ocean as it washed over the sand. The water spilled over onto the grass, leaving sandy trails of pebbles and slimy-looking seaweed as it retreated. The clouds were closing in, keeping all of the sky from view. Outside it was hot and humid. The air was sticky, and even the breeze did nothing to alleviate the sensation. It stirred around the leaves on the trees and made tiny dust devils in the few dry patches of sand.

Mabel felt that it fit her mood perfectly. She could not believe that her match-making plans had such a large problem to overcome. He was married, and had a son! There were so many issues with that she wondered if it would ever be possible to get him in to the family. It just seemed to be hopeless! None of this was helped by the fact that Fiddleford made it clear he really, really didn't like Stan.

The creaking of the stairs alerted her to the presence of someone else. Mabel didn't look, just in case it wasn't a person who was on the stairs. Stan's house was such a large place, full of splintery floor boards, old furniture, and a lot of dust. Some of the rooms she had been in looked like no one had used them for years. There were cobwebs, flickering lights, and the occasional mouse. Not the adorable, friendly type of mice she had thought existed either.

The floors and walls seemed to constantly be shifting. Doors and windows got stuck because of the heat, and many of the sinks had rust in them. The large house was more like a mansion for ghosts than it was for people. It was creepy. Some of the time, she felt like she was being watched by someone or something. The girl wondered why there were extra beds in the house when Stan made it clear he never had anyone over. Had the house belonged to someone before? Someone who had died?

She knew it was silly to be afraid of something like a ghost, which may or may not exist to begin with. But that did nothing to make her look at the stairs. If there really was a ghost (Or even worse, a mouse.) walking up the stairs, she did not want to see it. She tried to tell herself there was nothing to be afraid of. But the thoughts she had did not help. Stan was always telling them not too speak too loudly in the house. Because you could never know who was listening to your conversation.

Was that someone, a ghost? If there really was a ghost, why was it haunting the place? Didn't they only stick around for unfinished business? What issue could a ghost have for it to haunt... Stan... Oh no... Stan... No... Stan wouldn't have... To get a house he wanted... You couldn't steal a house without getting rid of the owners...

"Mabel?"

"Ack!"

Mabel nearly fell down the stairs when she heard Dipper's voice. Luckily he was there to stop her slippy descent down the steps before it could start. The girl clutched her chest, her heart beating wildly. She tried to catch her breath, and closed her eyes for a moment. After some controlled breathing, she recovered from her little scare.

"Are you alright?" Dipper asked. "How come you didn't hear me coming up the stairs? Wait, have you been brewing Mabel juice again? Open your mouth!"

"Dipper, I'm not-"

"Open."
Rolling her eyes, she did as she was told.

"Ah."

Seeing no unnatural colouring or sparkles on her tongue and in her braces, he nodded. Mabel had not been able to whip up any of her specialty drink since she had used all of her glitter to attack Soos. It was embedded in the carpet now, making recovery hopeless even with a vacuum cleaner.

"This house is just creepy," she explained.

"I know," he nodded. "Sometimes it feels like I'm being watched."

"Well the walls and floors do literally have eyes! Boop!"

She poked one of many places on the wallpaper where the lines bent strangely. They always seemed to form some kind of eye shape around themselves. The rings in the wooden floors were natural, but they were shaped like eyes as well. It really was rather creepy. It didn't help get rid of the paranoid sensation of being watched.

"Anyways, you kinda' looked like you were deep in thought or something."

"Dipper..."

"Yeah?"

"You don't think Stan would kill someone to get this house, would you?"

Mabel had thought she knew what would happen next. Dipper would laugh at the question and shake his head. he would ask her where she had gotten a crazy idea like that from. She would explain and he would tell her that she was just spinning tails at this point. That everything was fine and she just needed to get some more sleep. Then she could go back to being happy, knowing that she did not have to worry about the house because Dipper wasn't worried about it.

But none of that happened. He didn't laugh at what she had said. He did not even crack a smile. He seemed to be genuinely contemplating it. When he did stop thinking about it, he wasn't smiling. Mabel felt what little hope she had for Stan sink. The eerie feeling of being watched seemed to grow stronger. Dipper sense it too. He looked around, up the hall, and then back down the staircase. Mabel looked too, not wanting to miss anything he saw either. When they were certain they were alone, Dipper spoke.

"I... I don't know Mabel. I mean-"

"He said he wasn't going to kill us!" she desperately said. "And he hates Great-Uncle Ford and Grandpa Shermy! T-that's more of a reason to kill someone than wanting their house!"

"But Mabel-"

"But what Dipper?"

"He has."

"What?"

"Killed other people. When I asked him, he flat out told me that he's killed someone before. More than one person!"
Her stomach felt like it was twisted in to slimy knots. Just the thought of it made her feel dread, and fear. She did not want to believe that Stan had hurt other people before. It just, it couldn't be right! He had been so nice to them, so desperate to prove that he had no intention of hurting them! Stan had climbed a tree even though he was afraid of heights so that he could talk to them. Where had that all gone?

"You must've misheard him," Mabel said. "Or m-maybe he was joking! Or maybe he was in the military you know? Fought for the country!"

"I don't think it was any of that."

"N-no! You're wrong! I'll go ask him myself!"

She got up, but Dipper grabbed her arm.

"Mabel wait! I'm not sure if that's a good idea."

"Why not? You asked him!"

"Well yeah, I did, but it ended... Badly..."

"I can't just sit here and think about it! I'll go crazy!"

"Fine," he sighed. "But I'm staying close by while you talk to him."

"-and they require lots of space to live happily and healthily. Well that'll be easy enough."

Closing the farmer's manual, Stan went over his planned checklist once again. He had most things already at his disposal. Fake identities, burglar masks, and a few other items on the list were easy enough. He could rent a tractor trailer or a cattle truck if necessary. Other things would bring up some questions though. He would have to find a supplier of feed that wouldn't ask too much about what he was doing.

Revenge for Ford was coming along nicely though. He had collected most of what he needed already, and he had made sure that Soos cleared his schedule for the following evening. By the time he had finished, the kids would already be on a bus back to Piedmont. No one would be able to strike back against them by that point, and all would be well once again.

There was a soft knock at his office door. Stan got up to open it. He assumed that it was Ford Jr. He seemed more like the type to be quiet. Especially since his sister was the loud type. But he was surprised when it was in fact Mabel that entered the room. She closed the door behind her, and came to a stop in front of his desk. Then, she hesitantly, shuffled from foot to foot, unsure of what to say or do.

"Sit," he instructed, gesturing to a chair.

The girl did as she was told, but she still squirmed in her seat and wriggled her fingers. Stan went back to focusing on his checklist. He could wait until she was ready to speak up. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see that she was growing more uncomfortable, and looked like she wanted to be anywhere but in the room with him. He got through what felt like a paragraph, but was really one sentence because he kept loosing his place with her there.

"Grunkle Stan."
"Mabel."

"Well, I might have been talking to Dipper. And wouldn't you know it, he maybe just possibly said that you perhaps once or twice maybe well-"

"Killed a person," he helpfully finished.

She nodded, looking relieved that she did not have to say the words herself.

"I figured he'd tell you."

"So, you were just scaring him?" Mabel hopefully asked.

"Nope!" He replied. "Is that all?"

"N-no as in no, you haven't killed anyone?"

Stan's amusement with the girl faded as he realized that he would be forced to go through the same conversation a second time. Well, it didn't matter now whether the little gremlins trusted him or not. They would be on a bus back to California soon enough. Ford had won this time, but not for very long. So long as they were leaving him, it didn't matter whether or not he tried to sugar-coat things for them.

"No."

"Grunkle Stan, by no do you mean no, I was not telling the truth and have not killed anyone?"

"Kid," he sighed, and closed his eyes. "There are worse things you can do to a person than kill them."

"Oh yeah? Like what?" she challenged, jumping up from her seat.

"Sit down."

"No way! I don't have to listen to you! Y-you people-murderer!"

"Fine, stand for all I care!"

"Don't tell me what to do!" Mabel yelled back, sitting down in her seat.

Mabel seemed inclined to do the opposite of what he was saying now. Why did kids have to be so difficult?

"Like what?" Mabel repeated.

Leaning back in his chair, he used his leg to swivel to the side. He tented his fingers, and was quiet, thinking about what to tell her. Stan viciously reminded himself that there was no use in sugar-coating any of his words because after tomorrow, he would never see the kids again.

He hated dealing with so-called righteous people and their black-and-white views of the world. But kids were by far the worst. They seemed desperate to understand whether someone was purely good or bad, and the twins were no exception to the rule. If they had been in his situation, they would have done the same! Or they would have died, lost themselves to drugs, prison, other terrible things...

Everything he had done up until this point was to survive, and finally feel happy once again. At first he thought being accepted by his pop again would make him feel whole again. But it didn't. If
anything, it was worse. Making amends with Stanford was impossible now. So he had to find some other way to feel better again.

"Like what?" Mabel asked for a third time.

"What would you do to a person who had ruined your life?"

"I'm gonna' need something more specific than that."

"What if you got in to a fight with your brother, and before you could apologize, someone stopped you from seeing him again? What if that someone proceeded to throw you out on to the streets, and told you not to come back until you did something practically impossible?"

"I'd do the something impossible and talk to Dipper!" Mabel declared, as if it was obvious.

"Ah, but you got in a fight with him, remember? Now he doesn't want to talk to you ever again. And the only person you have left is the same guy who helped destroy everything you cared about. Then what would you do?"

"Grunke Stan, this is just weirdly specific."

"What would you do? No one likes you, and you're stuck with people you hate."

"Well Dipper-"

"He hates you now, can't ask him for anything. What do you do?"

"I don't know!"

"Well I do."

"And you'd kill them?"

"I'd kick them out of their house, take all of their money, and use it to pay off all the charities and businesses in town so that no one would give him food or a job or anything. I'd tip off public transit too, so he couldn't skip town and find somewhere to start new. I'd make their his life absolutely miserable. And then they'd see how easy it is to make an honest buck when no one in the world is willing to help you out.

"I'd make sure that they died cold and alone like some nameless bum in the middle of nowhere. Nothing to his name, no more family to call his own. I'd make sure they didn't have a grave, that they got donated to some half-rate med school for some student to dissect and dispose of later. I'd ruin their life, and make them a dead man walking! Death would be the lighter option. The merciful one they would beg for at the end. Something he never gave me."

When he finished, Mabel was silent. He had not realized it as he talked, but he finished his speech at the top of his lungs. He was inches away from the girl, and had his finger poking in to her chest. She was trembling from head to toe, absolutely terrified of him and he could care less. When she spoke, her voice sounded like a squeak.

"W-who?"

"My pop."

"That's why-"
"Oh no, that's not why Ford hates me. He was about as crazy about the man as I was. Of course, he just fled to the other side of the country and hoped he would never have to see him again. Shermy however, he was about your age when I finally returned back home. He holds not growing up with a father against me, being our pop's favourite and all. He was the normal one who was smart enough but only had five fingers. He should be thanking me really. Kicking that man out was a favour in the long run."

"Your own family!"

"He was never that good of a father-figure anyways," Stan shrugged. "You'd do the same."

"I would not!"

He started to circle around her chair. She kept staring straight ahead, trying to wipe the tears out of her eyes with her sweater sleeve.

"Then what would you do with your new knowledge of crime several million dollars at your disposal?"

"I don't know."

"That's because you've never killed anyone."

"T-that doesn't make any sense!"

"If you had ever killed someone in cold blood, you'd know it's a lot more than some people deserve."

The girl flinched and closed her eyes.

"I d-don't want to hear any more."

"You asked, and you're getting an answer. You'd do the same and you can't deny it because you haven't been in the same situations I have. If you had to kill or be killed, you'd do what I did. You'd pick your own life over someone whose didn't matter to you!"

"S-stop it!"

"If someone ruined your life and took your brother from you, you'd find a way to ruin their life in return!"

"I can't hear you!" Mabel yelled, covering her ears. "No one's in the room with me! You're not talking!"

"There are worse things you can do instead of killing people. So if there's anything you should be worried about, it's how I won't kill you and your brother if you keep bringing up my body count."
Wow, I'm surprised and pleased by the overwhelming amount of positive response to Stan's... Outburst. I was honestly a little hesitant when writing it. I wasn't sure how far I should take things (For the record, the harshness of his speech was toned down quite a bit.) but I'm glad to see that people are fine with it. By fine I mean somewhat devastated/ready to kill Stan/waiting to see what Dipper will do. This chapter somewhat delivers on that last part...

Stan fell backwards in to his own chair and started to rub his forehead. He was beginning to feel a headache coming on. And for some reason, there was this heavy feeling in his gut. Sort of like indigestion, but it got worse when he looked at Mabel. The girl was shaking all over, and her face was a bright pink. She seemed torn between wanting to yell and be terrified of him.

Suddenly, his chest seemed more heavy than usual. He felt like it was harder to breathe. With each inhale, there was a dull aching feeling. His throat seemed to tighten, and his lungs felt leaden. Stan dismissed it as some weird old age thing trying to strike him down. It wouldn't be the first time Mother Nature had tried. Luckily, the cause of the symptoms did not stick around for long.

Tears streaming down her face, she ran out of the room and slammed the door. Almost instantly, her brother entered the room. It seemed like his office had a revolving door installed when he wasn't looking. The kid was red in the face, and pushing up his t-shirt sleeves as he stormed towards the desk.

"HEY! What gives you the right to think you can talk to my sister like that?!"

"That door locks from the outside," Stan replied. "How did you get in?"

"That's not important!" he yelled, slamming his hands on the desk. "You made her cry!"

"I take my security seriously kid. I'll need to ask Soos to change the lock for me."

Stan stood back up.

"Oh no! No way! Not until you apologize to Mabel!"

With one, large sweeping motion of his arm, Dipper pushed all of the things off Stan's desk. Paperweights and important documents were scattered everywhere across the floor in a flurry of white. He stomped on some of the papers underfoot and ground them in to the floor with his heel. Stan would have found the action intimidating if it had not come from a twelve-year-old boy.

"And how are you going to make me do that?"

"You're old! You have brittle bones and stuff!"

"Ha! Try your worst!"

He was punched in the shin. Stan yawned, not alarmed by this in the slightest. Dipper however was.
He tried to punch him again. With those skinny arms of his, he was not going to get very far. So he tried kicking him next. Stan grew tired of this. He really needed Soos to check the locks before some psycho tried to sneak a ladder in to the house. So, he left, with Dipper following behind.

By the time Stan found Soos, Dipper was holding on to Stan's leg. The man dragged him across the floor until Dipper had both carpet burn and splinters on his chin. Dipper was eventually pried off Stan's leg before he could enter the office once again. When that happened, he sprung to his feet and tried to follow after him. But the door was slammed in his face.

"Hey! I'm not done talking to you yet!"

"Well I am. Beat it."

"Not until you apologize to Mabel!"

Soos lay a hand on his shoulder.

"Dipper, dude, let it go for now."

"Soos, I can't let it go for now! You didn't hear what he said to her!"

Reaching for a screwdriver, Soos started to remove the door knob. It fell off the moment he touched it. Dipper pushed the man-child to the side so he could look inside the room. He was about to yell at Stan once again, but the words seemed to stick in his throat. Stan's glasses were off, and he was rubbing his eyes... Was Stan, crying?

Dipper was dragged away from the door by the shirt.

"Just lay off for a little bit. You dudes need to calm down."

"If you heard what he was saying to Mabel, you wouldn't be calm either Soos! Grunkle Ford was right about him. He really is a-"

"Oh no, there is no badmouthing Mister Pines under his roof!" Soos said, pointing the screwdriver at him.

"Y-you, you're on his side?!"

"Dipper, you and Mabel are cool dudes and all, but Stan's kept me employed ever since I moved from Gravity Falls."

The boy's anger faded for a moment.

"You're from Gravity Falls?"

Soos nodded and picked up the new door knob and set of keys. He tested the lock before putting it in to the knob. Then he started to attach the new door knob in place.

"Yeah, and let me tell you, Stanford is about as liked in Gravity Falls as Stan is here. He's a jerk you know, and he only cares about himself nowadays. You'd think Stan would've told you that much."

Dipper was surprised by the suddenly angry words from the man-child. He didn't believe what he was saying about Ford though. Besides, how could Soos put up with Stan's lackluster working conditions and below minimum wage jobs, yet did not want to hear anyone insult him? That didn't make any sense!
"How could you willingly work for a murderer Soos? A murderer!"

"Hey! Stan has been there for me! Which is a lot more than I can say for my own dad! When I find out where he is, I'm gonna' give him a real piece of my mind!"

"So that's it, you follow him because you both want revenge against your dads?"

"Dude, I-I don't even know what my dad looks like! I just want to meet him and tell him that he's a terrible p-parent!"

"But Soos-"

"You wouldn't understand Dipper. Just..." Soos pulled his hat over his eyes. "Let me do my job please."

"You know what? Fine!" Dipper snapped, raising his arms in defeat. "Go ahead, keep working for the sociopath Soos! Now if you'll excuse me, I have to go find my sister!"

---

"HE DID WHAT?!"

It took the twins, three separate textbooks on applied air and space physics, the hospital's rock-hard bread loafs, and the nurse to stop Ford from jumping out of bed. The man was halfway to tearing out his IV and ruining all the stitches keeping him together after Pepper explained why Bagel was so upset.

"Great-Uncle Ford calm down!"

"NO I WILL NOT CALM DOWN UNTIL I'VE TORN THAT BAST.-"

The nurse threatened Ford with a needle full of sedative. The man calmed down, fearing for his arms and his sanity. There was no way he would trust that nurse with any sort of needle and dangerous substance anymore. Especially when it was his arm that was involved. None of this stopped him from being furious with his brother, even if he could not get out of bed and strangle him to death.

"There we go!" the nurse chirped. "This sedative works like a charm!"

"Keep that stuff away from me."

"Of course. Should I leave?"

"That would be nice, yes."

"See ya'!"

With that, he left the room. Bagel sniffled again and rubbed her eyes. Pepper gave his sister a pat on the shoulder. Both children looked rather shaken, and Ford blamed himself for that. He should have done more to get them out of Stanley's hands. Really, they should have been sent back home in the first place. It would cost his brother nothing to buy the kids a return ticket, or simply send them to Gravity Falls on a bus.

But Stanley had tricked him. Ford had been in such a panic, hearing Stanley talking about his niblings that Stanley had wanted something. He had not done things the easy way on purpose. Ford was not so sure if he wanted to know what that purpose was. It involved the kids though. That was enough to make him worried, and not think things through in a rational way.
He really should have known something was up when Stanley insisted that he drive the three-day trip to Glass Shard Beach. Now he was out trying to traumatize the kids, and teach them immoral life-lessons. Of course he agreed on the part about there being worse things than death, but there was no reason for Stanley to go as far as he had. Stanford had never wanted to throttle his brother more than he did now.

"Where is he?" Ford asked.

"The waiting room I think."

"I'm going to talk to him," he firmly said. "And make sure that you're on the first bus out of New Jersey by sundown."

"It's already sundown."

Pepper pointed to the window. The sky was a greyish colour, it looked like it was ready to rain again. There were streaks of orange and red peeking through the clouds. The first traces of darkness were staring to appear, and there were a few stars twinkling in the occasional patches of sky that appeared. The sun was hidden behind the buildings in the skyline. They were black silhouettes against the fading light.

A slight blush appeared on his cheeks, but the man tried to hide it by coughing and looking to the side.

"Uh, right. You'll be out of here on the next bus tomorrow," he corrected. "Could you ask the nurse to fetch Stanley for me?"

They simultaneously nodded, and left the room. Ford cringed when he heard the nurse's obnoxiously loud voice. Why did he have to speak like that all the time? Sure Ford got that the nurse wasn't human, but that didn't mean he had to act like it all the time. Through observing other people, one would think the nurse would have picked up the basics of human interaction.

"Of course I'll find Stanley for Ford! Best human friends do that for each other!"

While he waited for his brother to arrive, Stanford pushed the books and his dinner off of his lap. He had no intention of eating any of the hospital food. It was always too cold, too hard, or suspiciously lumpy. The textbooks were on his bed because he had been brushing up on his physics after his talk with the nurse. There were so many modern advancements that he had yet to take in.

His interest in a gateway had been rekindled by the nurse. It had more to do with wanting to keep busy than anything. There really was not much for him to do beyond sitting in a hospital bed and waiting for his clothes to be returned to him. The hospital gowns were itchy and unpleasant. But he could forget about the itchiness when he had the many questions to distract him.

But of course, he tried to avoid talking to the nurse about it. He was worried that the reptilians were trying to harness the technology for some kind of horrible evil. A machine that needed this much energy could easily be used to cause large amounts of damage to the world. There was just something about the nurse's readiness to talk about the gateway and yellow eyes that made him feel uneasy. Even when he was looking at the math by himself, Ford felt like the nurse was watching him. It was an unsettling feeling to say the least.

Speak of the devil, the nurse appeared with Stanley.

"Here we are! Enjoy your chat!"
Stanley pulled up a chair and sat next to the bed. He pushed up his sleeve and glanced at his watch. He looked as nonchalant as could be, almost like he hadn't hurt two children. Ford wondered if Stanley thought they wouldn't tell. Why else he been confident enough to take them to the hospital? There was nothing he got out of it, other than wasting gasoline. It only served to make Ford angrier with his brother. He could not believe that it had come to this. Scaring two children of all things.

"You are one sick individual Stanley Pines!"

"Good thing we're in a hospital," Stan dismissed.

"That's it? That's all you have to say after you hurt them?!"

"I didn't really want to. They forced the issue."

"You called the girl a brat and told her she had the potential to murder! Who does that?"

"I does that. Do that," he corrected. "Ugh."

"It's not funny Stanley! This isn't a joke! You said that you weren't going to hurt them!"

"Promises get broken. And I already told you I promised nothing."

"You can't just hold your past against them! They have nothing to do with anything you and I have done over the years!"

"Look, at least they're never going to see me again," Stanley sighed. "By the day after tomorrow, they'll have forgotten all about me."

"Day after- You... Already bought tickets?"

"They're family Poindexter. People are going to be after them if they stick around me. They already turned you into a block of Swiss cheese. What do you think they'd do to kids in my custody? It's just easier if they don't have a reason to keep in contact with me."

"Wait..."

Stanley's eyes widened. Clearly he said something that he shouldn't have. Stanford put the pieces together. Maybe Stanley did not realize it himself, but Ford now did. He might not know his brother as well as he used to, but there were still many things that stayed the same as well. Stanley had always been the mushy, sentimental type. He was more of a people person, and better at getting attached to others.

"You care about them."

Crossed arms and rolling eyes. It was the pose that Stanley always took up when he felt the need to lie, be defensive over something.

"What? Don't be ridiculous!"

"That's why you snapped at them."

"That is not why I yelled at them! If I wanted to emotionally distance myself from them I would have ignored them until the bus arrived! Besides, doing that kind of thing is cliché and boring and everyone hates having to deal with it!"

"I never said anything about you trying to distance yourself emotionally from them," Stanford slowly
"It doesn't matter why I yelled at them," Stan quickly snapped. "I was horrible to them and now they'll never want to talk to me again."

"You're scared that they'll get killed if they keep in contact with you."

"Nope. That is in no way true. You are completely wrong."

Stanley averted eye contact by looking at the time on his watch once again.

"What you said to them was horrible."

"I'm aware."

"What are you planning Stanley?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Revenge. I know you're a big fan of that. So who's paying for landing me in the hospital?"

Stanley narrowed his eyes, and his fingers tightened into fists. The room was silent, and tension started to rise once again. Stanford wondered if his brother would confess to scheming or not. But he knew from Pepper that there was something going on in Stan's head. Whether it involved killing someone was the question. Stanford didn't want someone to die because he had been hurt. Not only would it make him a target for revenge, he didn't want it on his conscience.

"That's none of your business."

"Whatever you're doing, it's not worth it Stanley."

"Yes it is. They almost killed you."

"It was a few grazes! Don't do this for me!"

Stanley laughed. But when Ford didn't join in, he realized something.

"Oh wait, you're serious. Let me laugh even harder!"

"Stanley, listen to me."

"No, you listen to me! I'm not doing any of this for you! If anyone's going to kill you, it'll be me or that psycho nurse you have giving you meds! I haven't waited this many years for revenge!"

"So how is your revenge for me going?" Stanford asked, changing the subject. "My life hasn't really been ruined lately like you've been promising for the past thirty years."

"I'm working on it!" Stanley snapped. "I keep getting other side projects!"

"Of course. And you're already on your way to getting revenge against the people who attacked me."

He smiled a disarming, worrying smile.

"I'm getting my second-to-last thing needed for revenge today. Then all I'll need after this is a tractor trailer."
"Today's almost over," Stanford said. "It must be easy to get."

"Well it is readily available at a hospital," Stanley grinned.

The man lifted his watch, and pointed to the timer on it. The colour drained from his face as it slowly it dawned on him why Stanley had taken the children to the hospital. And it wasn't from the kindness of his excuse for a heart. Stanford watched in horror as the time turned to zero. The watch beeped. One moment later, there was a large crash, as an explosion rocked the building.

"That's my cue to leave."

Whistling a happy tune, Stanley left his speechless brother behind. The desk where the nurse normally sat was unoccupied, and there were employees running around now, trying to see through the chaos. Luckily for him, he had prepared for this, and knew the shortest route out of the building.

The kids tagged after him. Apparently they didn't hate him enough to prefer staying at the hospital. Well, at least they would actually end up eating all of that horrible junk food they had bought. When Stan first gave them the money, he had wondered how he would get rid of all the extra food after they left. Luckily, that was no longer a problem.

The sausages, now that was a problem. He still had no idea what to do with the stuff, and had quickly discovered that sausage easily got caught in his dentures. Also it only took three servings of the meal to make Stan realize he had made a mistake when stealing what he did. Next time, he'd make sure to grab a few steaks and ribs as well. Shake things up a bit.

They reached the spot where he had parked. Stan popped the trunk. Inside of it was seven liters worth of the stuff. The bottles were made of clear glass, and had a large warning sticker on them. Potentially hazardous to human health and not to be inhaled... In large bold letters, the word trichloromethane was written. The liquid was clear. And even though it was sealed away in glass bottles, it brought back memories of his days in crime. He could practically smell the sickly sweet stuff.

It was disgusting, made him sick to his stomach. He thought back to working for small-scale criminals, being a simple crony with a few jobs and the order to follow all commands. Kidnappings, kidnappers, being taken to secret locations for secret gang-related business, and that time he needed his appendix taken out, but couldn't afford a doctor... Stan shuddered, and felt the scar along his torso. Pietro had not been the greatest med-school dropout willing to operate, but he had gotten the job done well enough.

Shaking his head, he closed the trunk once again. No one was hurt, the goods had been stolen and dropped off by some friends of his, and the kids were already seated and buckled in the car. By tomorrow, they'd be gone for good, and his latest plan for revenge would be well underway.

Stan pulled out a small checklist. He could now cross the chloroform (Also referred to as trichloromethane.) off of his list of things to find. He just needed a tractor trailer of some sorts, and the plan would be ready to go. Stan got in to the car with a grin. Revenge was going to be sweeter than the chloroform he had stolen.
Stan awoke from his nap feeling refreshed. Other than some strange dream about a triangle, he had slept well. It was only early in the morning however. He had been up late the previous night, trying to find a place that would lend him a tractor trailer on short notice. He had succeeded, which made it all worth it.

The pink rays of the rising sun had gotten in his eyes, which was what had awoken him in the first place. Stan lay on the couch, wondering if he could fall back to sleep. However, that did not seem to be the case. The more he stared at the various mold spots on the den ceiling, the more awake he felt. But not only did he feel more alert, something felt... Wrong. He tried to understand what felt off. After a few silent seconds, he realized that his mouth felt strange.

A little exploration with his tongue supported the thought. He did not have any teeth in his mouth, only gums. Hadn't he fallen asleep with his dentures in? Sure it wasn't safe, but he hadn't died yet. Plus Soos did weird things with his teeth when he took them out. Stan sat up, and looked around the den. He saw no sign of his dentures. They were not resting on the coffee table or on the floor. Where else could they possibly have gotten to?

With a groan, he got to his feet. He stretched, trying to work the stiffness out of his back. He rotated his shoulders and bent his knees, trying to limber up a little more. Old age was awful. At least his slippers were still by the couch. He slipped them on, and adjusted his glasses.

Hearing sounds coming from the kitchen, he headed there first. Dipper was sitting at the counter with a fresh bowl of cereal. He had picked up the morning paper, and was sorting through the sections. His face was blocked by the paper, and he did not bother to lower it when Stan cleared his throat.

"Dish yoush shee my denturesh?" Stan asked.

"Your dentist?"

"Denturesh. You row. Teesh!"

"A thief took your dentist?" Dipper inquired. "I thought security was more important to you than that."

Stan opened his mouth and showed off his bare gums.

"Kid, rishen, my denturesh are mishing!"

"Oooh your dentures!" Dipper laughed.

"Yesh, my denturesh!"
The kid's snickering stopped.

"They're probably with your sense of morals: Missing and unlikely to return."

Yikes. Well, at least he knew where they had gone now. If the kid was going to play that way, fine! He could take it! There was so much he had put up with over the years that missing dentures were not going to bother him that much! It wasn't like he needed them to eat or pronounce certain sounds without spraying waterfalls of saliva everywhere!

Just to prove that he would not let this affect him, Stan went in search of something he could eat. There was toast, which needed teeth, cereal, which also needed teeth, all that sausage he had stolen... Well, it looked like he was simply going to starve. He could live with that. He had spent most of his years on the streets starving. This was nothing in comparison! No matter what his growling stomach said.

Stan assumed that it was just a coincidence when his first pen went missing. It could have easily rolled off the kitchen table! Searching underneath turned no results, so Stan assumed it would turn up. He pulled a second pen out of his pocket and resumed writing. Yet, the next time he got up, the pen went missing again. Just out of curiosity, he left a pen on the table and exited the room.

When it came back, not only was the next pen gone, but someone had managed to lift the other two he had kept in his pocket. That was no easy feat, considering how experienced he was at pick-pocketing. Stan would have been proud if he knew which one of the little gremlins had managed it. Soos was out of the question. He was not one for subtleties. In fact, he had been, without a doubt, the worst spy Stan ever had the misfortune of encountering.

But that was what happened when your paranoid twin brother hired someone to watch your actions. Stan supposed that he deserved it, seeing as he was constantly planning revenge against him, and Ford knew it well. Soos was just a regular non-spy handy-man now. Loyal too.

He still needed to finish his stuff though. Stan went to his office and unlocked the door. He opened up a drawer. Instead of the writing utensils he had expected, there was nothing. Had he not just gotten the locks on the door changed?! Stan decided that he would give up trying to finish his work for now. Especially since all his documents had been taken when he returned to the kitchen.

With a sigh, Dipper dropped the papers and pens on the floor. He kicked them underneath the dresser and Mabel's bed. It would be a while before Stan found anything. Especially since Mabel did not want anyone- let alone Stan- in her room. She had only let Dipper in because they needed to pack, and she seemed totally uninterested in doing it for herself. So he had been left to recover all of her sweaters, and find a way to make them fit in the suitcase. Dipper was certain such a feat was impossible. Either that or she had a wormhole somewhere.

Mabel was laying on the bed, and had built the layers of pillows around herself so she did not have to face the outside world. She was absolutely miserable, and was in a state almost worse than Sweater Town. At least he could eventually get her to take an early vacation from the place. This was different. He hadn't seen her this sad in a long time. She had never been very upset for longer than a day either...

The boy clenched his fists. He wanted to make Stan pay for what he had done. Mabel didn't though. She wasn't big on revenge to begin with. Without a doubt, Stan's actions had put her off it completely. She was afraid of turning out like him. His words had really gotten to her. Because she didn't want to get revenge, the task was left up to him. Dipper supposed so long as he didn't take
things too far, it was fine. Besides, it was the least Stan deserved. A few small inconveniences was a lighter sentence when compared to the things he had originally wanted to do to him.

Luckily, they'd be out of here soon. Stan had already given them their tickets and an instruction not to lose them, or tell their parents the truth. As much as he didn't want to listen to Stan, Dipper knew that he was right. These people who wanted Stan dead were dangerous. He wasn't too interested in being scolded by his parents either. And what if they thought Ford was a bad guardian, and they never got to see him again?

He could not let that happen. He felt like Ford understood him, and they were related too! Mabel was... Different. She was his sister and they would always understand each other in a way most siblings couldn't. But knowing there was someone out there he could relate to and talk to about things most twelve-year-olds couldn't understand... He couldn't ask for much more than that.

"Hey Mabel."

From beneath the pillows, she gave a sad response of, "Mhm?"

He patted his sister's back. She tried to swat away his hand, but couldn't when she wasn't looking at him. Dipper stopped, not wanting to aggravate her. She always used her nails when someone tried to annoy her. He did not want to be on the receiving end of the pink-and-rainbow-glitter claws that she had painted on right now.

"We're going to be out of here soon."

"I know."

"Really. And after this, we'll never have to talk to him again. You can forget all about it!"

"I don't want to forget all about it! What if we turn out like them? What if I kill someone when I grow up?"

"Mabel, Stan was just saying that stuff to get to you. He didn't really mean it."

"It sure sounded like he meant it."

"Hey, it'll all be over soon."

"I just want summer to be over."

"Just a few more hours Mabel. Just a few more..."

His sister pulled the bed covers over her head. At least he had tried to cheer her up a little more. It felt like he was getting nowhere with his sister. Dipper knew that it was going to take a lot more than talking to make her happy once again. Yet he did not know what to do! None of the usual things had helped! Making jokes, retrieving her stuffed animals as she kicked them off the bed.

What were their parents going to think when they saw her like this? What lie could he possibly tell them? Dipper had no idea what he would do if she didn't return to normal before they reached home. How would he explain that to his parents? Could any of this actually end well?

Once again, he cursed Stan. This was all the old man's fault. None of this would have ever happened if not for him! All he had to do was buy them a bus ticket to Gravity Falls, but he was too cheap to do so! The guy was like, a millionaire. Yet he couldn't be bothered to even use his fake money to buy tickets.
A new desire for vengeance came to mind, the more he thought about Stan. There were only so many things that he could steal from him before it got boring. If he was going to take something, it had to make an impact. Something that Stan would see eight away. See... Dipper grinned to himself. Stan's eyesight would be terrible without his glasses, and he knew exactly what he was going to do with the frames...

Stan blindly felt his way through the house, a briefcase in hand. He had everything he needed, prepped and ready for the plan. The case contained all the burglar masks and gloves needed. The chloroform had been loaded in to the back of Soos' truck. They would be taking his handy-man's vehicle rather than his own. The Stanley-Mobile was easily recognizable, and they needed to be discreet.

Because his glasses had mysteriously gone missing, Stan had to leave many of the directions to Soos. He was not going to miss out just because his eyesight was a little bit fuzzy... Very fuzzy... He could barely see... The handy-man already had the map, and Stan had written out the instructions for him. By written, he meant Soos had done it for him since all his writing materials had vanished off the face of the Earth. Each instruction was less than a sentence, insuring that there would be absolutely no confusion what so ever.

None.

Hopefully.

It was nearing the evening as he prepared to leave. Stan had made sure he would not be around when the twins would leave for the bus stop. That job would be up to Soos once they arrived back. In the meantime, he would cover any evidence that they tracked in with them. That way he would not have to see the kids leave, or deal with any of the awkwardness that came with it.

"Kidsh!"

A blue blob came to the top of the stairs. A green one slowly followed after the blue blob, and was dragging its feet.

"What?" Dipper asked.

"I'm goring out and ron't be bash until late. Shroos'll drive yoursh to the stashion."

"Is that all?"

No. It was not all. Stan didn't know what to say. He suddenly felt overwhelmed with things he wanted to tell the kids. None of which he knew how to put in to words. He had tried, wanted so much for them to like him. Well Ford had won that battle by a landslide, there was no doubt about that. Maybe he hadn't wanted to like them sheerly to spite Ford and get revenge.

But it was too late to bring that up. It would do nothing to improve his standing with the kids. Although, if Ford had been right about him wanting to emotionally distance himself from the twins. (Which was completely wrong because Ford had no people skills and because Stan refused to believe it.) Then he should tell them that he originally planned to use them for his revenge. It didn't matter what he said now because they would be gone from what little remained of his life after this.

Tongue-tied and gradually feeling more flustered, Stan finally choked out a quick, "Yesh."

The two blurs vanished from the top of the stairs. A lump settled in his throat. Stan swallowed hard, trying to rid himself of the feeling. Then, shaking his head, he left the house. Soos was waiting for him outside. They had a scheme to go through with. He had to keep strong after all. There wouldn't
be another chance like this for a very long time.

Ford sat in his hospital bed, twiddling his thumbs. The nurse had taken away his textbooks after he refused to make friendship bracelets with him. Ford knew the nurse wanted to give him one so that the reptilians could continue to track him, even as he left the hospital for good. This left Ford with little to occupy his mind.

At least his healing was coming along well, there was nothing to worry about now. He would be discharged soon, much to the nurse's displeasure. This had lead him to more desperate measures to further their friendship. Some of which had Ford questioning whether the reptilian really wanted friendship or a host to attach its parasitic larva to. He really wasn't interested in mating at the time, especially with that nurse, but he kept acting more desperate.

"Hey Ford!" the nurse peeked around the threshold, waving a phone in his hand.

His own cell phone. Ford did not know how the reptilians had gotten a hold of his, but there were no doubt even more tracking devices within it than before. He would never have any reason to use it again. Ford found it more concerning that the nurse had stolen one of his belongings though.

"Yes?"

"You've gotta' call from this guy claiming to be your nephew. And, I know puberty can make kid's voices change, but this seems a little too deep, even for Pine- Dipper."

"Dipper is my great-nephew," he hastily explained. "Hand me the phone!"

"I don't see what's so great about him." The nurse mumbled, giving him the phone.

Ford just rolled his eyes. The nurse mirrored this. He decided to linger, wanting to hear what the man was talking about. Besides, he needed to ask Ford who this Rick Sanchez person he had been texting was. The only scientific annoying friend in his life should be him! The nurse! Wait, didn't he have a name? What was that again? He... He'd been so in character as Ford's new best friend that he had completely forgotten!

Well, that didn't really matter, he could get over constantly forgetting what his fake names were. He hadn't waited thirty years to slip up a second time just because Ford had better annoying best friends. He would be the annoyingest and the bestest until they were caught up on schedule with the proceedings.

"Look, here's the problem with that- Yes, I understand, but at the moment I'm in the h- Yes, I understand that too-"

While he had been annoyed before, Ford gradually turned paler. He swallowed and slowly started to agree with whatever his nephew was saying. Something told the nurse that his friend looked to be in a bit of trouble. Despite the fact that he was on the phone, he nodded along with the words.

"Yes, yes, of course! I-I understand! They're no burden at all!"

His hands were noticeably trembling now.

"S-South Africa you say? With absolutely no phone reception? T-the rest of s-summer?"

There was a short response from his nephew.
"D-don't worry about the short n-notice! I-I-m sure you were busy just getting those two out of the house! W-e'll be fine! Really! Just- You have to turn your phone off now? O-of course! O-k, b-"

Obviously he had been cut short. Ford dropped the phone on the bed and groaned. He pressed a hand against his forehead and took a few deep breaths. The nurse remembered that he was trying to keep Ford from dying. That was his job. From the looks of things, he seemed ready to have a cardiac arrest. Or perhaps lay an egg. Humans did that right?

"Are you dying?"

"Africa! They're already on a plane to South Africa!"

"Shouldn't you have just told them that Stanley had them? I mean, if there was ever a good time to tell the truth, it probably would've been then."

"I tried to but he's just so pushy! How do you think I ended up saying yes to taking care of two kids in the first place?"

"And here I thought it was from the kindness of your heart."

Ford seemed much too worried to get angry at him. He dialed a number this time, and began to tap his fingers on his leg. He was tense and silent, waiting for someone to pick up the phone. After a few seconds of silence, he pulled the phone away and tried dialing the number again. He quickly grew frustrated when no one answered.

"STANLEY!" he barked in to the phone. "DON'T LET THOSE KIDS GET ON THAT BUS! IF THEY-

Ford stopped yelling, it seemed that someone had answered him.

"What's wrong with your voice? Ah yes, well you deserved it. Now, where was I? What do you mean you're in the middle of something important?! Well you can't send them home because their parents are on vacation!"

There was a short response from Stan.

"Does this sound like a joke to you? Yes I'm serious you knucklehead!"

He hung up the phone, groaning for a second time.

"Why oh why did they have to leave now?"

"Cheer up pal! At least it won't just be me and you in the hospital anymore!"

"The children's ward is on the second floor," he glumly replied.

"No, not like that, like visitors! They'll be fine, nothin'll happen to them!"

"I hope so."

The nurse turned away so that he could hide the large grin spreading across his face. He made a very persuasive travel agent if he did say so himself. Especially when last-minute bookings could be just so expensive. Not that he was about to let Ford in on that little detail. The kids would live through the summer, so long as he was around. Now the end of the summer was where Ford would really have to start worrying...
One Hundred Ten Dimes

Mabel didn't know why she had woken up so early in the morning, but she had. Dipper was leaning against her bed, still sound asleep even while holding the odd position. She briefly wondered why they were not on a bus back to Piedmont. Their stuff was all packed, and they had been waiting for Stan and Soos to return. She had fallen asleep once it got late, but Dipper had insisted that he would stay awake to wait for them.

That probably explained why he was leaning against her bed. What she did not understand was why they were still here. They should have left the previous night. They would have finally been free of New Jersey, their Great-Uncle Stan, and a lack of internet connection. Maybe they had just been late returning from their trip. She supposed it didn't matter. They had missed the bus, and would have to wait until there was another one leaving the station. Who knew how long that could take?

The girl groaned, and pulled the bed covers over her head. Maybe she could just fall back to sleep and stay asleep until summer was over. That way she wouldn't have to go downstairs and run in to Stan, or listen to her brother argue with Soos again. She didn't know how her brother was brave enough to go down and face either of those criminals. Wasn't he afraid of being yelled at? Worried about what they could and would do?

"So if there's anything you should be worried about, it's how I won't kill you and your brother if you keep bringing up my body count!"

Shuddering, she flipped onto her stomach and grabbed the nearest stuffed animal she could find. The toy gave a weak squeaking noise as she hugged it. The squeaker in it was starting to grow weak after all the years of wear and tear. What would he do to them? She didn't want to find out. But she had realized that if she annoyed Stan too much, they might find out. She didn't want to risk being in the same room as him if it meant that he was ready to do something worse than kill them.

Oh how she really, really wanted for summer to be over. School was better than this, and that was saying a lot. She didn't care about her plans for epic summer romances and making new friends anymore. Not if it meant she had to hide in bed all day. Not only was it stressful, it was boring. Really boring. There was nothing to do in bed beyond sleep. She had gotten so much rest over the past few days that she now felt wide awake... Or maybe that had to do with the thing that had woken her up. She was almost certain that it had been a sound.

She lay perfectly still, trying to hear what had woken her. All she could pick up was Dipper's snoring. Maybe he had started to snore recently, and that was what had gotten her awake? Mabel was ready to dismiss it as that, but then he heard a new sound. A long, high-pitched squeal. Then she heard Stan's voice. He was yelling something, but she could not hear what. Only the angry tone of his voice. The noise all sounded like it was coming from outside. There was another squeal.

Mabel began to feel curious. Almost curious enough to get out of bed. As she listened to the same sounds repeat every few minutes, she felt more interested in what was going on outside. Staying in one place all day was boring, and her legs were starting to fall asleep again. She could get up, stretch her muscles, and then look out the window. Yes, that would work...

Slowly, she slid out of bed. Mabel was careful to not knock her brother over as he slept. After she had stretched, she carefully crept towards the window. She pushed up the shades, allowing a thin line of light to enter the room. She had to wait for her eyes to adjust to the bright summer's day outside. From her room, she could see the backyard.
There was a truck wheeled around the back, and next to it, there was a large tractor-trailer. The back of it was open. On the smaller truck, there were large bags of some sort. Soos was hauling them out of the back, and carrying them somewhere she could not see. The girl ran back to her twin. Without a moment's hesitation, she shook his shoulders until he woke up.

"Mabel, what are you-?"

"Look out the window!"

Rubbing his eyes and yawning, he stood up. Dipper went over to the window, and looked outside. This woke him up much faster than anything she could have done to him. He pulled up the blinds and craned his neck, wanting to get a better look at the proceedings. Mabel shied away from the window, not wanting to be seen by anyone who might look up and spot them. She pulled Dipper away after a moment. She refused to risk her brother's head just because he was curious.

"I wonder what's going on."

"Yeah, it's weird. Really weird."

"C'mon! Let's go check it out!"

He was about to leave the room, but Mabel grabbed his arm.

"Dipper, wait!"

"What is it?"

"What if we get in trouble?" She asked.

"Mabel, I doubt we'd get in trouble for seeing something right on the lawn. That's just asking to be spotted."

"I- I don't think going downstairs is a good idea."

Pulling his arm away from her, he stepped out in to the hall. She reached out to grab his arm again, but stopped just before her hand could leave the bedroom.

"Come on Mabel! We'll be fine!"

"Dipper get back here!"

"I'm leaving," he said, taking a step down the hall. "Without you."

She was left behind in the room. Mabel could hear him gradually going down the stairs. Mabel knew that she could not let her brother face whatever was down there on his own. Taking in a deep breath, she took a step in to the hall. She faced no immediate punishment for doing so. After that, the girl did not hesitate to run after her brother. Dipper had already reached the bottom floor, having taken his time. Meanwhile, she leap down two-by-two until she had caught up with him.

"You left."

"We need to be quiet," she warned.

"Hey, worrying about things is my job."

She did not smile at the joke. Instead, she led them to the kitchen. The back door was wide open, and
Stan was standing on the porch with his back facing them. He was blocking most of the view. The twins stopped walking, and began a slow tip-toe towards the door. Dipper stepped on to the porch, and looked around Stan.

Mabel wondered if her brother was crazy. Sure Stan probably had bad hearing since he was old, but that was still a death-sentence. If he was going to face something worse than death, than she might as well join him. She stepped on the porch, and then looked around her great-uncle's legs.

"PIIIGSSS!"

Fear forgotten, Mabel squealed at the top of her lungs. Stan screamed as well, clutching his chest. Dipper did too, not knowing what had gotten in to his sister. Mabel paid no mind to any of this. She shoved her family out of the way so she could get a better view of them. There were almost twenty. Some large, some little, but all very pink pigs. They were rolling in the grass, wading in the ocean, and eating from the bags of pig food Soos was unloading on them.

"Good gravy kid! Are you trying to give me a heart-attack?!

Mabel ignored Stan's angry words. It was actually possible to make them out, now that he had found his dentures and glasses. From the place where Dipper had hidden them. She hopped off of the deck and ran towards the nearest pig she could see. In one motion, she had scooped up the very startled animal and squeezed it in to a hug. The pig, while frightened at first, quickly calmed down as it realized that nothing harmful was happening to it.

"Grunkle Stan, where did all of these pigs come from? And why didn't Soos drop us off at the bus station? We were waiting!"

The man looked away, tugging at the collar of his shirt.

"Pigs... There uh, native to New Jersey. They migrated here from Canada!"

"These are farm pigs, not wild ones!"

"That's not important!"

"Wait a minute. Didn't you say you had stolen all that sausage from a criminal butcher?"

"Well, yes, but that's not connected to this!"

"And Great-Uncle Ford was attached by people near downtown. The same place where the butcher's is."

"Also true," Stan admitted. "But their revenge against me has nothing to do with this spontaneous migration of pigs!"

Grunkle Stan, whoever these people are, they're going to strike back."

"Probably," he shrugged.

"But- Well... Never mind," he sighed. "Why are we still here?"

"Kid, there's no easy way to explain this, but your parents decided to go on a last-minute vacation to South Africa. For the rest of the summer."

"Y-you, you're joking! That's a joke! Our parents wouldn't just leave us here without talking to us first."
"Think again. I got the call from Ford last night."

"Great. Just great! We're stuck here, you basically have the New Jersey Mafia after you, and there's like, a million pigs to take care of."

"The pigs are temporary," Stan replied. "I'm just holding on to them until I find a willing buyer."

Mabel came over to them, still holding her new pig friend in her arms.

"Eee! Look at how he waddles!" Mabel squealed, moving the pig's little legs. "Waaaddless!"

"Mabel Sweetie, could you step on to that scale over there?" Stan asked.

She seemed to have no problem with doing what he had asked. She happily carried the pig over to the scale and stood on it. Stan watched as the needle moved from zero to one fifteen pounds. He grabbed a clipboard, which he had dropped on the porch when Mabel scared him.

"How much does that guy weigh?"

"Well I'm one hundred pounds, so he's fifteen!"

"Alright, well put old Fifteen-Poundy away from Soos. Those are the ones I still need to weigh."

"Weigh? For what?"

"Well, they're pigs Kiddo, and I've got to sell them to someone. For profit you know?"

"But, who would buy pigs from you?"

"People who are-" he paused, growing more uncomfortable. "Interested in making meat. I mean, they belonged to a butcher before you know? They've kinda' been bred to-"

"You're going to let people kill them?" She asked, hugging the pig tighter to her chest.

"That's... Kind of how it works. I can't keep them here kid!"

The kid's sadness quickly turned to anger. Stan had to close his eyes and take a deep breath. He couldn't fight with the kids, not again. If he really did have to find a way to take care of them for the summer, he didn't want it to be a miserable experience. Yesterday had been awful without his dentures and glasses. Stan did not know if he could go through something like that again. More importantly, he didn't think he could go through with hurting either of the kids again.

Part of him was excited to know that the kids would stay longer. The rest was filled with dread and worries. He needed to keep them at arm's length. As much as he wanted to make up for what he had told them, there was no way to without them getting mushy on him. Letting the kids get attached to him now was just too risky. They were supposed to be gone by this morning. No one would be able to touch them if they weren't in New Jersey. But that wasn't the case. Their moronic parents had decided to pick the worst possible time to take a trip to a place with no phones.

Now he feared the retaliation for stealing the herd of pigs from the guy's personal ranch. They were prize-winning hogs. Not easily replaceable and worth their weight in gold. Literally. It was why he had Soos weighing each pig. Stan figured he could charge that much for each swine he had. There were twenty in total, including the one that Mabel was cradling in her arms.

"It's just how these things work," he defended. "The same thing'd happen to them if they were in the original owner's hands."
"So you did steal them," Dipper said.

"No, that's a different story."

"You stole them, only so you could send them to their deaths?!" Mabel asked.

"Calm down. They're pigs, not people."

It seemed like Mabel's fear of the man had completely vanished. Seeing so many adorable animals and wanting to defend them was enough of a cause to drag the girl out of her shell once again. She was loud, defiant, and ready to start arguing with Stan, despite the worries she had experienced only moments before. It was Dipper's turn to take up the role of the worried one. The origins of the pigs was bad, but Mabel getting in another disagreement with Stan would be even worse.

"Pigs have feelings too!"

"Look, if it bothers you so much, you can keep the one you're holding."

"Really?"

"Yes really."

"Eee!"

Dipper and Stan covered their ears as she let out another deafening shriek of excitement.

"Stop doing that."

"Thank-you Grunkle Stan! I'm gonna' call him Waddles!"

The kid ran off with her new pig. This left Dipper alone, standing next to him. Stan could feel the boy's gaze focus on him. Stan purposely looked away, choosing to stare at Soos instead. The man-child was distracting the pigs that still needed to be weighed with the pig food. The ones that had been fed were content to wander around the property. Soos had already checked for openings in the perimeter, and there was no possible way that the pigs could escape from the place.

Finally, his hideously big lawn would have some actual use. He hated how obscenely large the outside area was. All it did was show off how much money he had. And it was land wasted really. He had no interest in hiring a gardener. Flowers all looked the same to him. There wasn't much else that he could build on the lawn. So, he was stuck with grass and trees that he had absolutely no use for. It was unfortunate, but he didn't have anywhere else to go. His entire life had been New Jersey. He had traveled on the streets, yes, but he was still drawn back to his little hometown in the end.

Sometimes, Stan wished he could just pick up everything and move away. But he had tangled himself in an intricate web of money-laundering, loans that did not really exist, pyramid schemes, and other complicated financial situations. Most of them somewhat illegal in one way or another.

It would take a long time to uproot and move elsewhere. There were businesses that he owned, officials that he had tipped off, evidence he had others sitting on. The people in and around Glass Shard Beach were important. Many of them were helping keep him out of jail in the various ways that he could. If he just up and moved, they'd have incentive to reveal what they could about his many criminal offenses that piled up over the years.

"That was awfully, nice of you," Dipper said, breaking the silence.
"The pig was scrawny," he defended. "A runt wouldn't have sold for much."

"So, this is revenge for Ford?"

"It's vengeance actually. They're pretty much interchangeable at this point in my life."

"Does your idea of vengeance usually involve turning your place in to a farm?" Dipper asked, gesturing to the pigs.

"Not since I dropped that llama-smuggling operation."

"How long until this guy figures out who took his pigs?"

"He's probably hearing about it right now. He'll show up a few hours after."

The boy shook his head and sighed in a way that greatly reminded him of Ford when he was frustrated with something.

"Stan, how could you possibly hope to pull this off?"

Even the words seemed like something that his brother would say. Stan had to stop himself from snapping back, like he instinctively did whenever Ford felt the need to insult him. Dipper was not Ford. He was his own person. Sure that person hated him now, but the feeling was not mutual.

"Soos and I already changed their brands so he can't accuse us of stealing."

"But he'll recognize them!"

"He won't be able to do anything legally and will come back to use force instead."

"That sounds dangerous."

"It is. But you two weren't supposed to be here by this point, you wouldn't have been involved. Soos knows the risks and I don't really care what happens to me so long as it's not jail or the psych ward. Stupid white-coats and their questions."

"If they're going to take the pigs back, then why would you give one to Mabel? That might make her a target!"

"You won't need to worry about that."

"Why not? What proof do you have to assure that?"

"I'm sending you kids out until all the pigs have been sold."

"What about the planned revenge they'll have for you?"

"Once I don't have to take care of these pigs anymore, we're going to break Ford out of the hospital and go on a road trip."

"We're going to be on the run, aren't we?"

"Yes."

He stared at him with undisguised disgust. Something Stan was used to seeing from other people at this point. But somehow seeing the expression on a little kid felt worse. Stan did not know why that
was. There was an awkward pause in the conversation. Stan was amazed that it had actually remained civilized for this long. This kid hadn't tried to beat him up once yet.

"Where are you sending us?"

"It's a bit complicated."

"What does that mean?"

"Well..."

Fiddleford was in his kitchen when he heard the phone ring. He picked it up with one hand, while he stirred sugar in to his coffee with the other. He went to balancing it against his shoulder and ear so he could pick up the mug, and the book he had been reading before. There was no response from the other end of the line, so he said;

"McGucket residence. This is Fiddleford speaking."

"Look, before you hang up on me, I need-"

Fiddleford pulled the phone away from his face when he recognized Stanley's voice. He really needed to invest in a better caller ID system. Also, hadn't he blocked Stanley's phone number after his niblings had managed to call him? It seemed like a rather strange problem for someone as tech-savvy as him to have.

"How did you get this number?! What do you want Stanley?"

"If two kids can find your phone number, then I'm sure that I can as well."

"What do you want?" He repeated.

"I need a bit of a favour."

"Is it crime-related?"

Fiddleford set his mug down at the table, and marked the page in his book. Then he sat down at the table. He took a sip of his coffee while he listened to Stanley's unsurprising answer to the question.

"No. Well yes. But not in the way that you're thinking. You see-"

"Goodbye."

"WAIT!"

"Yees?" He slowly dragged out.

"It's the kids! I can't risk them getting hurt because of my enemies. I just need someone I trust to take care of them for a couple a days-"

"You trust me?"

"Only because they're Ford's niblings as well."

"That's... A bit much for you to be asking Stanley Pines."
"Come on! You'd do this if Ford was asking you!"

"That's because Ford is my friend," he shot back. "You on the other hand-"

"Do you want me to call Ford and ask him to call you? Because I can do that."

Fiddleford had no doubt that Stanley would do exactly that. Did he really want to ensure more interrupting phone calls in his life? The man knew that the kids needed somewhere to go, and they belonged to one of his very good friends. Even if the children were a little bit strange, he couldn't willingly put them in danger. They were just children after all!

Something told the man that he might wind up regretting the decision, but he would not be able to sleep soundly, knowing that he had denied helping innocent children. Innocent children related to one of his closest friends no less. Whatever the trouble might be, he could put up with it for a few days.

"When should I pick them up?"
Sorry for the later in the day update. I'm going to be very busy this winter holidays. I've got five separate Christmases to attend (Extended, mom's side, dad's side, step-mom's side, step-dad's side.) Two ISUs and my DECA business proposal due for the first day back at school. I will not have enough time to write a chapter every other day until all of these things are finished. I'd much rather you guys have better quality chapters that update a few days later than a bunch of words that make no sense. Which is what happens when I write really quickly.

Dipper was talking with Ford, while Mabel was by the floor's sitting room and desk area. Stan had already dropped them off at the hospital, without so much as a goodbye. Mabel supposed she liked it better that way. She didn't know how she could stomach acting like she would actually miss the man during their stay with her new best friend. All of their things had been packed, and dropped off with them in front of the hospital. The twins had to carry their very heavy, numerous bags up to the third floor of the hospital. It hadn't been a very easy job. Luckily, the nurse that watched Ford spotted them. He helped carry the bags and Waddles up to the third floor. He seemed like a really nice guy!

Said nice guy was at the nurse's station, boredly flipping through official-looking papers and writing something down with a pen. He frequently glanced down the hall in the direction of Ford's room. She could relate to his apparent boredom. Just sitting here wasn't very interesting. She didn't want to go through her bags to find something to do. The magazines that were placed everywhere in the sitting room were gross and boring. They were also twenty years out of date.

Waddles had curiously sniffed some of the potted plants in the room, and then wandered over to the desk where the nurse was. He walked around it and licked his leg. Startled, the nurse practically jumped off his feet. He fell off his stool instead. Mabel winced and got up. She ran over to the desk and peered over it. The nurse was sprawled backwards on the ground, a surprised look on his face. Just as she was about to ask if he was alright, he sat up, and laughed.

"Wow! I haven't been scared like that in a while! Good job Pig!"

He lay on his back again. The nurse scratched Waddles behind the ears, something the pig was very happy to receive. He gave a pleased oink and sat down next to him.

"Sorry about that!"

"Don't sweat it kid. There aren't many things out there that startle me. Pork Chop here just happens to be the exception."

"His name is Waddles," she replied. "It's because he waddles when he walks!"

"Ah, I see. Is there any reason why you're called Mabel, Mabel?"

"Uuuh, how do you know-"

"Well after I looked through Ford's med file, I thought that I should check out his family's-"
"What?! That's weird and creepy!"

"Joking, joking," he replied, waving a hand at her. "You two have been here enough for me to figure out your names."

"Oh. So are you going to stand up?"

As if to answer his question for him, Waddles got up and sat on the man's chest. He raised his head to look at the pig.

"Not anymore."

"So... What's your name?"

"Joe. Joe Kerr."

"That's a lie!"

"Alright, alright, you got me. My real name is too hard for humans to comprehend! I can't even understand it in this human body of mine!"

Mabel decided that the nurse was pretty weird. But he was also nice, and didn't mind that she had brought Waddles in to the hospital. So, she couldn't really bring herself to be mad at a person who helped her out. However, she could take a few steps away, slightly worried about what the nurse was capable of based upon his weirdness.

"But what do people call you?"

"I don't remember," he sheepishly admitted. "I get so used to it being nurse this, nurse that! And with Ford always calling me Knucklehead and Sociopath-"

"Aw, you're not a socio-whatever." Mabel sighed. "You're just, different!"

"Hah. Actually you're right about that. Sociopaths is a human mental condition. Even then, you're not born one. And they can form some close relationships with people. Also, they can be characterized by their inability to calculate or form long-term plans and-"

The nurse started to ramble about the clinical differences between sociopaths and psychopaths. He was starting to sound like Dipper when he didn't get enough sleep. Or Grunkle Ford when he talked to Dipper about nerd things. Somewhat inevitably, Mabel ended up tuning out what the nurse was saying to her. She just couldn't force herself to listen to something so boring and scientific.

Her eyes strayed elsewhere, unable to focus on the nurse or her pig for very long. So she took in the dusty potted plants, the uncomfortable, overstuffed chairs, and the general misery of the room. It was supposed to be a sitting area, but she had not seen a single patient visit it yet. Given how drab it was, she couldn't blame them. Being in the hospital and looking at everything in it made her want to scrub herself clean.

Every time she touched something, she swore she could feel the germs crawling up her fingers. They tingled. It made her hesitate to touch other things because she felt like they would crawl over her and on to the things she came in to contact with. Just the whole sensation of being in the hospital was gross.

"-extensive criminal records can also indicate either condition. However, you need to be above the legal age of human adulthood- twenty-one by the way- and previously diagnosed with an APD-"
From down the hall, the elevator chimed, and the doors slid open. When the nurse heard this, he sat up with Waddles still on his chest. The pig slid off him, and oinked in protest. The man did not seem to care that he had upset the pig. He hastily fixed his uniform and picked up the stool. Then, he seated himself and put on the most professional expression he could manage. This just so happened to be an enormous grin that would make anyone feel unnerved.

"Hello, Fiddlesticks."

Fiddleford stepped out of the elevator. Mabel wondered how the nurse had known it was him when the desk was placed adjacent to the elevator. She could see because she was in front of the desk, but there was no way for the nurse to know exactly who was there. It was... Creepy.

"Are you ever on break?" Fiddleford sighed.

"Nope!"

"Isn't that against labor laws?"

"Of course! But I don't mind so long as I'm stationed with Ford!"

The words brought a shiver to the man. The way the nurse spoke, his tone, choice of words, everything was unsettling. There was something wrong with the man, something that set Fiddleford on edge. He wasn't quite threatening, but he wasn't very friendly either. There was also something wrong with the hospital, allowing the nurse to keep a position there.

Fiddleford did his best to brush off the feeling of discomfort. He had come here to pick up the kids, not to waste his time thinking about some nurse. The girl, Mabel, was leaning against the counter. Evidently she had been talking to the employee. However, he saw no sign of her twin or Stanley.

"Hello Mabel."

"Hey."

"I'll be taking care of you and your brother for a few days. Stanley's going to be a bit busy, and asked me to help out."

"I know."

"Where's your family?"

"Dipper's talking to Great-Uncle Ford. They started to get boring."

"And Stanley?"

"He's not here."

The man stared at her incredulously. As a parent, he did not like the sound of this. Looking past the girl, he saw that there was a pile of travel bags off to the side. It looked like more luggage than the two kids could possibly carry on their own. Especially up to the third floor of the hospital. Surely Stanley had helped them! He wouldn't just dump the twins in front of the hospital.

Fiddleford remembered who he was thinking about. Of course. That was exactly the kind of thing that Stanley would do. He never had any kids, he would have no idea how to take care of them properly. Heck, his head was probably still stuck in the sixties, where it was perfectly normal to let your little children wander around the crime-infested streets of New Jersey.
At least he would not have to talk (Or rather, argue.) with the man about anything. Fiddleford had not been looking forwards to that part. The more he thought about it, the less qualms he had with taking care of the twins. Even if one had tried to set him up with Stanley, and the other was too star-struck to speak coherently around him. It was just the Stanley factor that got to him. He was just so irritating!

"Figures," he huffed. "Anywho, I'm going to quickly visit Stanford, see how he's holding up, and then we can get going."

The girl gave a passive nod. Fiddleford would have thought she was merely shy if not for his first meeting with her. She seemed oddly subdued in comparison to the glimpses of the girl he had seen and heard before. Perhaps she was a little sad to leave Stanley. As hard as it was to think so, it might be possible.

"So, any plans for the summer?" the nurse asked her.

"I used to have plans. But now I just want summer to be over."

He snickered, despite the fact that she had not said anything funny. If anything, she looked more sad. His laughter was certainly not going to help make her look any more cheerful.

"I never want it to end," he replied.

Not wanting to spend any more time around the nurse, Fiddleford continued to Stanford’s room. As he walked down the halls, the man absently noted that the ward was eerily empty. There were no patients in any of the other rooms. The doors were all open, allowing natural light to enter the area. In each room, private and semi-private, the beds were neatly made, the floor clean, and all furniture items in the same place. Fiddleford might have thought he was walking in an endless loop if not for the number plates next to each door.

Stanford looked much better though. Less weak, healthier. He was talking to the boy, but looked in his direction. Dipper’s gaze followed. When their eyes met, the boy's mouth hung open. Ford stopped talking, knowing that he had lost his audience. The poor thing was stuttering, babbling really. His eyes were as wide as saucers, and he began to tremble.

"I suppose Stanley didn't say I would be taking you and your sister in?"

"N-n-n g-guh-"

All of a sudden, the boy started to wobble. Not a moment later, he fainted. Fiddleford caught him by the arms before he could his his head. He gently lay him out on the floor.

"NURSE!"

"Yeees?"

"Get the smelling salts!" Ford replied.

"Anything for you Fordsy!"

"Weirdo," he muttered. "Anyway, how do you do?"

"Oh, I'm good, I'm good," Fiddleford said, checking the boy's pulse.

"And the family?"
"Good as well," Fiddleford took off his glasses and held them to the boy's mouth. They fogged up, indicating that he was still breathing. "Susan's actually going to pick up our grand-daughter. Then they'll be going up to Portland, shopping."

"Why Portland?"

"Well they've got summer home in Oregon, remember?"

"Ah yes, right by the lake. Beautiful place."

Fiddleford turned the boy on his side. He took off his sweater and used it as a make-shift pillow. It was safest to cushion his head before he hurt it on anything.

"So your strength's returning?"

"Yup! I just need to follow some routine exercises and I'll be out of here in no time! Difficult though, and if I make the wrong move it can hurt like a bi-"

"DIPPER!"

Mabel ran into the room, dragging the nurse by the arm. He had a kit tucked underneath his arm, and looked like he had no interest in being there. He rolled his yellow eyes when he looked at Dipper. The girl collapsed next to her brother and desperately gave him a shake. Out of the corner of his eye, Fiddleford could see that Ford had purposely turned his head away when he saw the distraught girl. He couldn't blame him. Fiddleford felt his own heart squeeze when she nervously checked over her brother.

"Re-lax. He just fainted."

The nurse pushed her away in a less than gentle fashion. She tumbled on to her backside, not expecting the sudden shove. Then, he opened the kit and grabbed the smelling salts. He twisted the lid off and waved it underneath the boy's nose. He twitched. Then a slight groan escaped him. Dipper's hand came up to rub his forehead.

Satisfied that he had gotten the job done, the nurse packed up the kit and left the room. Fiddleford highly doubted that was standard procedure for a person who had fainted. He was more motivated than ever to have someone look in to this hospital and its employees for breaches in their code of ethics.

"Are you ok? What happened?"

"F-f-f-f."

"Fiddleford?" she helpfully asked.

He nodded.

"I-it was just a dream, I must've been dreaming," Dipper mumbled.

"Nope! It's the truth!"

"Hello Dipper."

Dipper looked ready to faint again, but his sister was clearly ready to stop that before it happened. She helped him stand up. Dipper had to lean against the bed before he could gain his bearings. He closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths, wanting to keep calm, and collected. His strength
seemed to return, as he squeaked a quick;

"H-hello!"

"Stanley asked me to take care of you two for well, until-

"Until he sells all the pigs," Mabel helpfully responded.

Ford no longer had to look at the reminder of what his own twin would have done in the same situation. Fiddleford had already been staring at her to begin with. But after hearing this, the adults' gaze focused on her with a burning intensity. She seemed startled by this, probably realizing that she shouldn't have brought it up.

"Which pigs?" Fiddleford asked.

"The pigs Grunkle Stan owns," she explained.

"Since when does Stanley own pigs?" he replied. "Ford did you know about this?"

"No! I had no idea about this!" Ford said, defensively crossing his arms.

"Ugh, never mind. At least he hasn't tried to involve the kids in it."

Just to prove him wrong, the nurse entered the room. In his arms was a small, pink pig. It took a moment for it to sink in. He thought back to the pig food with the luggage, and understood why it was in the hospital. As Fiddleford stared at the pig, he realized what this was all going to mean for the twins' visit.

"Oh no. Please don't tell me-"

"His name is Waddles!" Mabel chirped, taking her pig. "It's because he Waddles!"

"Mabel Honey is that thing trained?"

"No, I just got him yesterday!"

"Stanley!" Fiddleford hissed. "This is all his fault isn't it?! No wonder why he didn't stick around! He didn't want me to find out about this!"

"Fiddleford, I'm sure that's not what his intention was," Ford tried to soothe.

"Of course it was! He got involved in some sort of crime scheme and didn't want the kids to get in trouble! But of course he still had to rub it in somehow! I know it! I just know it!"

"Maybe the girl asked for a pig."

"He gave him to me."

Fiddleford managed to calm down, even though he really wanted to be angry at someone. But it wasn't a good example for the children. Besides, there were plenty of ways to deal with any problems the pig might cause. He wouldn't let Stanley Pines get one over him just because he wanted to bother him.

"Alrigh', I suppose it won't be too big of a problem."
It was always smartest to park further down the road. Especially one as barren and deserted at the road to Stanley Pines' house. It stopped shortly after his house, because there was nothing but a sheer drop off a rocky cliff, in to the ocean below. At least, when it was high tide. If it was low tide, a person wouldn't be so lucky as to survive. But there was nothing to worry about. Unless you fell. But in that case, you then really had nothing left to worry about.

The north wall of the property was the side where the ocean started to curl around. The backyard faced the east, and the side with no water to the south. The west end was the front, and the road continued west to the sheer drop in the land. But that was outside the walls of the Pines' residence. The last dying rays of light had slowly crawled up and along the front of the house, growing fainter as the sun fell lower in the sky. Stars popped out, and planets became visible. The moon was a slight, silvery sliver in the sky. It cast long, irregular shadows everywhere.

For a brief window of time, it was dark. But not dark enough for the lights, that surrounded the walls of the property, to turn on. The small opportunity was perfect. Just as the sun vanished behind the horizon, they flickered to life, bathing the wall in a yellow-orange light. Along the driveway, smaller lights turned on, as did the outside house lights. Around most of the house, there was a circle of light. But outside of its reach, darkness reigned.

What couldn't be seen beneath the grass was just as dangerous as the visibility the light created. Luckily, the trees provided coverage from any unexpected hazards. It was stupid to have let so many grow on the property. It took no effort to climb a single tree, and continue above ground without facing any harm.

He could not see his partners, thanks to the wall in the way. But he could hear them grumbling and commenting to each other over the communications system. So he had a fair idea of what they were going through, even from his parking spot down the road. He was certainly glad that he had drawn the longest straw, and got to avoid traipsing in the lion's den of traps and security measures.

Knowing that they were safety in, and on their own, he kicked his feet up on to the dashboard of the car. They weren't his responsibility anymore. All he had to do was keep watch for any outside activity and listen to any reports his cohorts had to make. And yet it still brought in a good amount of money. When Stanley Pines was involved in a job, it always came with a hefty sum. Thank goodness he had rigged it when they drew lots. Not only was he getting paid to do nothing, he was getting paid extremely well to do nothing. A smirk curled on his lips.

"Status report."

There was static on the other end of the system. Then he heard a distorted voice reply, "Didn't you just ask for one?"

"Yup."

"I'm not going to update you every two seconds man. It's a waste of time."

"Do you plan on walking back?"

There was more crackling on the other end of the line. The sound of leaves blowing in the wind and branches snapping was heard.

"We're climbing down the trees. Now there's tree sap on my hands. My partner has hit me with a pine cone."

"Any sign of the pigs?"
"No, but there are tire tracks. They fit the description of the truck spotted."

"Follow them."

"What do ya' think I'm doing genius?"

"Put the other one on the line."

"I'm here," the other one said.

None of them had names to refer to each other as. Not even code names. It was just too risky and they would get found out easily. Potential leaks and rats were everywhere. No one could go tattling when there were no names, not even code ones to give the police. It was smart thinking really. He wouldn't have thought about something like that himself. But that was what made the boss the boss, while he was just an employee.

There was nothing to worry about when it came to names. They all knew who was who, based upon the sounds of their voices. So while they couldn't place a name, they could place a face. He was the handsome one of course. The other two were alright if one squinted in the dark and were also suffering from horrible eyeball-eating parasites.

"We found 'im. They're all rounded off in the back."

"All of them?"

"We're counting now."

There was another round of silence. He impatiently tapped his fingers, waiting for a response. A bonus would be nice. And if their boss was happy, he would be able to get just that. Personally he could care less about the stupid farm animals. But they were apparently valuable. Which made no sense to him.

If they were so valuable, then why make bacon out of them? It wasn't like shark fins or the other garbage parts of animals that rich people ate. Pork was pork! There was no difference between these pigs and the ones Old MacDonald and friends probably raised. Why they were worth so much was a mystery to him.

Getting them back made sense, their worth did not. Any reasonable person would want their stolen property back. Since it was obvious that Stanley Pines had something to do with this, they were investigating his house and were ready to use force if necessary. They had everything all planned out, because returning empty-handed was not an option.

"Damn. We're a couple short," he growled. "It looks like he's already pawned off a few."

"Check again."

"We did check again!"

"Then you'll just have to ask him."

"I'm sure that'll be easy."

"Doesn't he have those two kids staying with him? They'll be easier to grab. Stick a bullet or two in them and he'll be willing to talk."

"He won't talk if they're dead."
He rolled his eyes. Not only was he the handsome one, he was the smart one as well. And the clever one. It was a great burden, being the only person in their trio to have any remotely interesting qualities. But it was a burden that he was more than willing to take. Soon, he would be the rich one as well. Rich, handsome, and smart. He would definitely go out somewhere fancy tonight...

"Shoot them in the arm. Or the leg. It'll hurt, but it won't kill. They'll be crying and bleeding all over the old man, begging for help and he'll tell you two anything you want."

"How big are the kids?"

"I think the boss said they were twelve or so. Boy and a girl. Twins maybe."

"Oh no, they're twins alright."

There was a clicking sound that followed the third, new voice. His partners both swore. He did too, realizing that they had been found out. There was no reason for him to linger any longer. They had found the pigs, that was their sole goal with the mission. Number of losses and being found out were not going to diminish his pay. With that, he pulled his feet off the dashboard and started the car.

"Also they were only visiting for a little bit. Not that you morons would know that."

"Well there goes that plan," he snorted.

"Listen old man. It's two against one. And maybe we'll let you live long enough for the boss to see you die. If you tell us where those pigs have gone."

"Is that supposed to be an appealing option?"

"Yes."

"Hah!"

"What's so funny? We could shoot you dead right now!"

"I'd like to see you try!"

"Believe me, it won't be that-" 

Crack!

There was a surprised cry of pain from one of his partners. The other yelled. Now it was only one-to-one, and he had a fair idea of how that was going to turn out. At least he would still get his bonus pay for this. But he was not stupid enough to stick around and hear if his verdict was correct or not.
The differences between McGucket's house and Stan's made it much easier for Mabel to feel safe. She didn't need to hide in her room anymore. She didn't need to worry about upsetting Stan, or something terrible happening to her brother. McGucket's house was better kept than Stan's was. There wasn't a single speck of dust in the place. There was no rust in the sinks, and the perpetual feeling of being watched left her. The house was smaller than Stan's, but it looked like people actually lived in it.

The furniture was more modern than the pieces that Stan owned. Most things had some wear on them, but they were not ruined beyond recognition either. The windows were well-polished, and nothing in the house was in need of a new coat of paint. It was not just the appearance of the house that gave off the impression. There were smaller, more personal touches to the place as well. Something that Stan's house was greatly lacking in.

The fridge had little alphabet magnets on it, and there were a few pictures that someone younger had drawn. But the most visible difference was the number of photos that McGucket had in his house. Almost every surface had a picture on it. The walls, the fridge, and every table she passed. There were countless photos of smiling McGucket look-alikes. Few of them actually had the man in the picture. It seemed like he was the one usually behind the camera.

The photos ranged from black-and-whites to modern, coloured, digitals. But they were all carefully tucked in their different frames, completely smooth and not creased. She could practically feel the love radiating out of them. Despite the many faces staring at her, Mabel did not feel like someone was watching her. Not like at Grunkle Stan’s place. The people in the pictures all had something in common. The same gentle smile, or warm eyes, and other details.

There were only a few exceptions to the rule, they were probably friends and in-laws. Some of these different people caught her eye. There was a blonde girl in a picture with Fiddleford, a elderly woman with blue hair, and many others. There was one in particular that caught her attention. He resembled her own dad. The picture was mounted on the wall by the staircase. Mabel had to walk up the first few steps so the picture was at eye level. The picture was another black-and-white one.

It had lost some of it's shine, but was still in good condition. There was a banner in the background, and two men standing in front of it. One looked like just another member of the McGucket family. The different man wore large glasses, and he had a mess of stubble growing on his face. The two men were dressed in long, black gowns. They had graduate's caps on their heads, and diplomas in hand. The words were too tiny for Mabel to read, but she could tell they had graduated from school. Both men had shy smiles on, and the familiar man had his arm around the McGucket's shoulder.

"Who are you lookin' at?" Fiddleford asked.

Mabel looked up to the top of the stairs, where the man was standing. He was still in flannel pyjamas and slippers. It was the morning, and Mabel was sick of lying in bed. After the past few days she had spent laying only in bed, she was more than ready to spend much of her time awake. Normally she didn't like getting up too early, but this was different.

"This one," she said, pointing to it.

"I can't see what you're pointin' at from up here."

"It's the one of two people graduating. They've got those little hats on and they're holding diplomas."
Rubbing his chin, he gave a nod.

"Ah, that's the one of me and Stanford, just after we got our first PhDs."

"That's Great-Uncle Ford?" she asked. "But he's so small!"

He laughed.

"Heh. Yeah. Neither of us were the most physically fit in school."

"You guys really went to school together?"

The man came part way down the stairs, tightly gripping the railing as he did so. He stopped just a step above Mabel.

"Yup," he pointed towards a picture that was a few photos above the other. "Here you can see us on campus. It was awfully cold that year, and so we're both bundled up. That winter was also how I picked up knitting as a hobby. It was so snowy outside that we would get lost just going from the dorms to the cafeteria. I ended up making two-person scarf later that year so Ford and I couldn't loose each other in the snow."

"I thought I was the only person with an idea like that!" Mabel gasped. "I tried to make Dipper wear mine with me but he didn't want to!"

Fiddleford gave her a knowing smile.

"It was the same with Ford. But you know what I did?"

"What?"

"I tied the scarf in to a lasso and got it 'round his neck!"

He mimed tying and knot and throwing it at Mabel. She giggled, and played along, pretending to pull the imaginary scarf that was wrapped around her neck.

"Get out of here!" Mabel laughed, giving his arm a small punch. "Did you really did that?"

"I sure did," he replied, rubbing his arm.

"Then what happened?"

"Well, he was stuck like a pig. Ford had no real choice but to wear it with me!" Fiddleford waved towards the winter picture. "Thus the photo you see there. It went in to the school newspaper as well, and everyone saw it."

"What did they think of it?"

"They loved it! Ford was embarrassed, and he's worn a turtle neck instead of a scarf ever since, but they still loved it. In fact, the scarf worked so well and everyone loved the picture so much that I had people lining up, wanting me to make more. I had more requests than balls of yarn!"

He stretched his arms as wide as they could go. Mabel's eyes were wide. She was completely enchanted by the story. The girl could imagine how many balls of yarn it would have taken him to make the scarves. There would be bright cherry reds, evergreen, and many other yarn colours. It already took five extra large balls to make one of her sweaters. Making a two-person scarf would take even more than that. There was also the work and love that had to put in to ever knitted item.
Those were limited resources! She could already feel the callouses so much knitting would have given her fingers.

"How did you knit so many scarves? Did Grunkle Ford help you?"

"Oh no. I couldn't afford enough yarn to make that many."

"But what did you do then?"

"I knitted one GIANT MEGA SCARF THAT MADE A HORRIFIC HUMAN-YARN AMALGAMATION FROM WHICH THERE WAS NO ESCAPE! AH HA- ah..." Fiddleford coughed. "Oh, 'scuse me, I got a little carried away there. Anyway, it didn't end well for the people who wanted a scarf from me."

Mabel thought back to the last time she asked an older man if he was telling the truth or not. Since Stan did turn out to be a criminal, she decided not to ask him if he was serious. Besides, it wasn't like some of her knitting projects had gone badly before. There was that yarn version of Dipper that scared her brother to no end. There was also that sweater filled with pockets that were filled with pockets that were also filled with even smaller pockets. That had caused her brother to go temporarily crazy, as he tried to understand how it was possible. It was a simple knitting pattern, but he just couldn't wrap his large head around it.

"Ah, haha, you're funny."

The man cleared his throat and nodded.

"Yes. But the moral of the story is to not lasso your roommates with scarves, no matter how good your intentions are."

He stared at her until Mabel realized that he was waiting for her to promise not to. She thought it was a little strange, but didn't dare say so out loud.

"I won't."

The strict expression vanished, and he smiled at her.

"Good girl," he said, ruffling her hair. "Now how about we get something to eat?"

"Ooooh! Can we have pancakes?"

"Aw. You are too cute!" he said, ruffling her hair again. "No."

That was the exact opposite reaction she had been expecting from the man. She was used to a smile and a laugh meaning yes, not no.

"I- but-"

"It's not healthy for children your age to have so much sugar."

She frowned, and looked down at her stomach.

"I guess Dipper and I did have a lot of junk food at Stan's."

Fiddleford snorted.

"Figures. What would your parents say if they knew what you'd been eating like for the past week..."
"and a half?"

"I... I never really thought about it."

"Luckily-" Fiddleford picked up Mabel and carried her down the last few steps. ":I am more than capable, and qualified for childcare."

They walked towards the kitchen. Unlike Stan's house, Mabel did not have to worry about the floor boards tripling her or nails sticking in to her feet. She didn't have to pay attention where she was walking, so she could talk more to Fiddleford instead.

"Oh yeah, you said you had a son."

Mabel winced when she thought back to the awkward phone call she and her brother had with the man. If she had known that he was married and had a family, she wouldn't have been in that situation to begin with! At least she still has the chance to work on making the man her new best old man friend. BOMFs were not something you just do happened to stumble across every day. Mabel couldn't let a person who was so sweet- and knitted as a hobby- just slip through her hands like that.

"Yup."

"Where does he live?"

"He's in Oregon. We've visited Ford in Gravity Falls a few times and he fell in love with the little town," Fiddleford chuckled. "And a woman."

"Oooh, romance. What happened next?"

"Maybe later. For now we need to get you something to eat. Regular meals are important to your know. They play a vital part in your growth and development."

Fiddleford pulled out Mabel's chair for her. Then he started to grab everything that she needed. Mabel started to kick her feet, as they couldn't reach the floor from her seat. She looked around the kitchen. It was lighter, and neater than Stan's. But that was no real surprise, as Stan did not seem interested in doing many chores. The kitchen here was organized, the granite counters clean, and the place-mats actually washed. There were French doors, that lead to the backyard.

Both doors had large stained glass window pattern on them. The picture they formed was the view from the top of a cliff. There was a valley with a tiny stained glass city within it. Behind the city, the valley seemed to close again. Two hills reached out towards each other. They were connected by a lone bridge. Through the coloured glass, there was a view of the backyard. It was small, but well tended to. There was even a garden, and a few bird feeders. Mabel could see that there was a squirrel stealing the bird seed for itself. It was chased off by a larger, angry bird.

"Here we go."

A bowl of the blandest, brownest cereal Mabel had ever seen was placed in front of her. And to make it worse, there were dried raisins in it. Those were the absolute worst! She wanted to complain, but Mabel knew that she couldn't. It would be rude, and she knew her parents would probably make her eat like this if they found out how much junk food she had eaten.

"Thank-you."

"You're welcome."
She poked her cereal with the spoon, unsure how to go about eating something that was so clearly going to be terrible. Waddles seemed to know what she was thinking. Fiddleford said the pig was not allowed to sleep on her bed, so he had found his way on to his instead. Now the pig came downstairs, waddling in to the kitchen and taking a seat underneath her chair. Now all she had to do was wait for something to distract the man.

Today seemed like Mabel's lucky day. Dipper entered the kitchen as well, dressed, but still looking very tired. The drive from New Jersey to Pennsylvania had been a long one, especially with Mabel in the car. It was nowhere near as bad as their trip from California to (the wrong) state of New Jersey, but it was up there. Dipper was still recovering from sitting with his sister for three hours.

"Morning Dipper!" Mabel said.

"Morning," Fiddleford chimed in.

"M-m-

For a moment, it seemed like Dipper was going to start stuttering because Fiddleford had greeted him. However, he sneezed instead.

"Hah! Kitten sneeze!"

"Mabe- achoo!"

He sneezed again, and then once more. Dipper sniffled and rubbed his eyes.

"Ugh, for dome reason by allerdies are bodering be." He mumbled.

"What are you allergic to?" Fiddleford asked.

"Cats."

"Oh dear me! I should've asked you about allergies before," Fiddleford said. "My wife owns a few cats. They're with her right now since we just use this house when I have business on the east coast but-"

Fiddleford picked up Dipper (Much to his indignation.) And sat him down on the counter top. Then the man started to ramble off a list of different allergy medications that were in the medicine cupboard. Dipper's eyes and face were starting to look red. He was still sneezing, and looked more uncomfortable in his body than usual. He pointed to one of the ones he knew worked, and Fiddleford grabbed it.

"Can you swallow pills? If you can't you could take it with a cookie or I could-"

"I can dake dills," Dipper mumbled.

"Oh, right, of course. Do you want it with juice or water or if you'd like I could-"

"Dust the dill is finde!"

"But you shouldn't take a pill dry! The medication can burn your throat if you don't know what you're doing and-"

"I'll dake it width wadder please."

Mabel was amused to discover that McGucket easily became just as flustered as Dipper. Of course,
Dipper was recovering from being star-struck around McGucket the entire time. Fiddleford was still going, practically babying her brother. Since it wasn't happening to her, Mabel thought it was funny that McGucket was treating Dipper like a child. He had the exact opposite reaction that Stan did with these sort of things. When Dipper got a splinter in his foot—no thanks to the house's old, rotting floorboards—he was told to man-up and pull it out with some pliers.

While this went on, Mabel was given the perfect opportunity to not eat her terrible cereal. Waddles did the job for her while Fiddleford had his back facing her. Dipper was too miserable with his allergies reacting to see what she was doing. The bowl and spoon were licked clean. Mabel carried her dishes over to the sink, Waddles trailing after her. The pig was hoping for more food.

"Put those in the dishwasher," Fiddleford said, not looking their way. "Also you should probably let your pig outside for some fresh air."

"I will."

So while Fiddleford continued to worry over Dipper—who had already taken the pill and just wanted some breakfast—Mabel took her pig outside. The back door lead to a small deck. There was a swing and patio table set up on it. Mabel sat down on the swing and used her heels to slowly push herself. She closed her eyes for, and sighed. She suddenly felt tired again...

The yard was fenced in, so she didn't have to worry about her pig wandering too far away. Despite that, she opened her eyes again. Waddles sniffled some of the grass, and then flopped down. He rolled around in the grass, content to relax in the warm summer sun. It was a very nice day outside, and the neighborhood was quiet. It gave her a little space to relax, and to think.

It was a little hard for her to relax on an empty stomach, but she had gotten away with feeding her cereal to the pig. Mabel wondered if she should go get something else to eat. But then she wondered about the questions that might bring up. And the trouble she would get in for not eating her cereal. It had been rude of her to feed the cereal to Waddles. Really, she shouldn't have done it. But how was she supposed to eat breakfast after lying about it now?

"You could always go ahead and find something good when no one was looking."

Mabel felt herself freeze at the thought. Her breath hitched, and her stomach felt like it was filled with ice water. The warmth of the summer sun seemed to vanish. She found herself floundering, trying to understand what she had just thought, and why she had. Stealing was wrong. It wasn't like she would die without breakfast. If being hungry mattered to her that much, then she should admit to not eating. She deserved whatever happened to her because of it.

"Why should I do that when I could eat, and not be in trouble?"

The second question echoed in the back of her mind. Mabel tried to shake herself of the sudden thoughts. They were too much like Stan's. They sounded like something Stan would say. Those suggestions were things that she could imagine Stan doing. Yet, she could suddenly picture herself sneaking in to the kitchen while everyone was busy, and grabbing whatever she wanted...

"Hey, it's just a little snack. It's not like you're killing someone."

"I-it's wrong," she whispered aloud. "I don't need to. I'm not Stan."

"You'd do the same."

"I-I would not! I'm my own person."
"Then what would you do with your new knowledge of crime and several million dollars at your disposal?"

"This is just about breakfast. That has nothing to do with this!"

"That's because you've never killed anyone."

"I'm not taking anything from the kitchen. I don't care if there's a way because I don't need to do anything!"

"You'd do the same and you can't deny it because you haven't been in the same situations I have!"

"Well I'm not going to now. So there."

Out of all her thoughts, Mabel knew that one was the truth for certain. Not because she knew what she was capable of doing, or believed that Stan was lying to her. Mabel knew the only reason why she wouldn't steal anything from the kitchen now was because she was no longer hungry. At least for now, she wouldn't have to know the answer to any of her worries.

As he drove towards the hospital, Stan grinned.

The last of the pigs had been sold. A guy would be coming for them later that night to take them away. Stan would be glad to have the little monsters off of his hands. They were ruining the grass and stinking up the place. They were also ruining the shore and the water by mucking it up. More than once Stan had to pull a pig out and away from the rocks. So not only were the kids curious to discover what was underneath them, the pigs were too. But Stan had no intention of letting either one find out.

Stan was sick of staring at his backyard and coming face-to-face with the farm animals. He was glad that they would all be gone soon. While Stan was tired, he was also victorious. Despite his frustration with the pigs, he couldn't help but smirk every time he looked at them. That would show everyone! Now he just had to worry about the repercussions for stealing. He had a new plan all ready to go, so it shouldn't be too much of a problem, but one could never tell for certain.

After some more thinking, Stan had decided that he was going to involve Ford in his escape plan, whether he liked it or not. Probably not, considering they had that whole hatred of each other thing going on. But Stan decided it was too dangerous to leave his brother all alone in New Jersey while he took the kids on a road trip. Someone might try to nab him when he couldn't be found. Stan couldn't remember the last time he had performed a kidnapping, but he knew that he hadn't done it since going solo. Luckily, there was still some of the chloroform left from the pig rustling. So, he would be able to use that to help make thing easier.

He had already made the call to McGucket, telling him to bring the kids back to the hospital tomorrow. The nerd had sounded a little annoyed, but Stan figured that was his natural tone of voice. The kids and pig would probably be driving him up the wall by this point. He knew that they sure had when they first settled in at his place.

So, with any luck, they'd be on the road by tomorrow, far away from most of New Jersey's problems. Stan had already packed himself a suitcase of things. His most important documents had been locked in his apocalypse-proof safe, just in case some wise guy tried breaking in to his place when he was gone. With all the traps and security he had set up, they probably wouldn't get too far, but there was no harm in being cautious.
Stan had also packed a second suitcase with most of his credit cards, and the majority of the cash he had been keeping in the house. There was also a bag of gold valuables. It was there in case they needed big bucks quick, and he could pawn it off wherever. A dead-end town might not accept credit cards. Heck, there were some places that wouldn't take anything above a twenty-dollar bill. But gold was universal, and it was smart to keep it around.

After talking with a buddy, he had managed to purchase an RV, with no questions asked. Soos was painting it over now. Stan would get a new license plate for it once he returned from his visit to the hospital. His own car wouldn't be able to hold all of them for very long. Ford would drive him crazy, the kids would drive him crazy, Soos would drive him crazy, and the one remaining pig, would ensure that he was locked up with a straight-jacket and given the title of sociopath again.

Picking the closet possible spot in the parking lot, Stan got out of his car. A short elevator ride later, he was standing outside of Ford's room, listening to him argue with the nurse.

"I can take the painkillers myself!"

"Of course, of course."

"Then give me the needle!"

"Friends give each other drugs Ford. I saw it in the PSA on TV!"

"No, friends don't give each other drugs!"

"Well nurses do. Now hold still."

"YEOW!"

"What are you crying about? Don't you know these are supposed to kill pain?"

"Well it doesn't feel like it."

The nurse left the room, disposing of the needle on his way out. He gave Stan a creepy smile before resuming his post at the desk. Stan shuddered in disgust. There was something creepy about that guy. It made his skin crawl and his hairs stand on end. He entered Ford's room, glad to escape his gaze. Ford was rubbing his arm and muttering under his breath.

"You look terrible," Stan greeted.

Ford did not look up at him, or make a snappy comeback like he had been expecting.

"I feel terrible."

Ford really did look terrible though. He seemed a lot more fragile in the paper hospital gown. Ford's eyes looked more sunken than usual, and his glasses were askew. While his hair was normally messy, it didn't look so greasy or thin. As he inspected his wrist, Stan realized that Ford's hands were shaking. He seemed very frail, and it reminded Stan that they were both suffering from old age. This seemed like more than a simple case of old age however.

"What's botherin' ya' now? Lack of uh- uh..." Stan couldn't think of a good enough insult. "What's bothering ya' now?"

"That nurse," he groaned. "Stanley I thought I was going to die when I got shot, but now I'm certain that if anything will kill me, it's going to be that nurse."
"You suggesting I should-" Stan drew his finger across his throat.

"What?! No! Stanley it was just an expression! Don't-"

"I'm not going to."

"Then what are you going to do?"

"How did you-"

"You're always planning something Stanley, don't think I don't know that."

"Well how do you know it's about you?"

"It's just a feeling. Well, that and you showed up here with no twins as an excuse this time."

"I'm going to break you out of here before anyone tries to go after you."

Ford sighed.

"Why now?"

"Well, I've provoked the underground of New Jersey enough to warrant a vacation far, far away."

"I just want to get out of here," Ford admitted.

"Whew! Well that makes things a lot easier!" Stan said. "Be ready for tomorrow!"

Ford was not given the chance to respond. Stanley had left the room before he could even fully grasp what his brother had just told him. Not a second after Stanley had left, the ever-present nurse entered the room.

"Interesting conversation?"

"That's one way to put it."

"Is it interesting enough to share with your best human friend?"

"No."

The nurse rolled his eyes and went back to skulking outside of his room. Ford sighed in relief. It would all be over soon. Even if Stanley was the one breaking him out of the hospital, he would be free before the nurse knew what hit him.
"Staaanfooord!"

The man in question shuddered when he heard the nurse. The only thing stopping him from tearing out his hair was the assurance that he would escape the hospital. After what felt like an eternity, he would be free of this awful place. The first thing he was going to do once he escaped was take a real shower. His skin felt like it was crawling with germs and contaminants. He’d shower with soap, hot water, and no one watching him for "safety reasons." He had tried to tell the nurse that friends did not help each other bathe, but he was not very convinced. Ford was certain he was deliberately not acting like a human by this point. There was no reason for him to act like the reptile in human skin that he was when the rest of the hospital staff almost seemed like genuine people.

Luckily, none of that would matter for much longer. Even if he didn't like the thought that it was Stanley saving him from the hospital, he would be free. Ford was just glad he had been given some time to get ready. If he hadn't, he would be totally unprepared to take care of his wounds while on the road. They were healing nicely, but he still had to change his bandages, and make sure to disinfect them. Ford was more than certain he could manage a simple task like that on his own. He dealt with minor injuries all the time in Gravity Falls. Were-wolf bites, scratches from flesh-eating plants, and worse. A few measly bullet wounds would not be that hard to deal with.

He had even been stockpiling on some pain killers to make things a little easier for himself on the long road trip ahead. It hadn't been that hard to accomplish. A few empty promises of eternal friendship to the nurse had been enough to give him a large stock of pills. The nurse had gone all-out, making him shake hands and agree that it was a deal. But he had still gotten more than enough to keep himself set for the summer and then some.

"Fooord!"

Rolling his eyes, he asked;

"Yeees?"

"You've got a visitor!"

A visitor implied that it was Stanley who had shown up. Stanford thought it was a little strange, because Stanley was not the type to show up early. But the kids and Fiddleford would take a little longer to arrive because they had a bit of a drive ahead of them. His friend's nearest house was in Pennsylvania, which was where he had been staying while he was in the hospital. Ford found it touching that he wanted to stay close while he was in New Jersey. But it probably had something to
do with his weariness of Stanley as well.

Fiddleford might want to keep an eye on him and Stanley while he was hospitalized. Ford wasn't too happy about being on the other side of the coast, what with Stanley and his need for revenge so close-by. He would have thought the nurse was paid off to make his life painful if not for how creeped out Stanley was too.

The nurse escorted Stanley in to the room, even though he knew exactly where the place was by this point. Instead of going back and pretending to do his job, the nurse lingered.

"So, any plans for today?" he asked. "Is there something, special going on at all?"

"Yup! Ford's leaving the hospital!" Stanley said.

For a moment, Stanford thought that his heart had stopped. He remained still, wondering if his brother had just admitted to a plan that involved breaking him out of the hospital. The nurse did not seem to know how to react to these words either. He too was absolutely still, unblinking. The only indication he had heard Stanley's words was the slight twitching of his smile. After a few, pained seconds of silence, he adjusted his footing, and then blinked.

"You didn't tell me about that Ford."

"We're just going for a short walk. He needs fresh air and whatever."

"There's plenty of air inside," the nurse replied. "Also, you're in the city. The air is fresher inside than it is outside."

"Hey, Buddy-"

"It's Dee. Dee Mann."

"Look friend-o, it's not like we're running away to the other side of the country," Stanley lied. "He'll be back before you know it!"

"Oh. Yes, of course," he said, shaking his head. "Should I get you a wheelchair?"

"I do not need a wheelchair," Ford snapped, crossing his arms. "My leg is perfectly fine."

Stanley raised an unimpressed eyebrow. Ford took the bait, and tried to get out of bed. On shaking legs, he managed to get his feet to the floor. He put pressure on his uninjured leg. It felt a little weak, but he had not been getting the best of exercise just lying in bed most of the time. Slowly, he put a little more weight on the foot. He looked up at Stanley, grinning triumphantly at his twin.

Stanley still looked unimpressed with his feat. Just to prove that he did not need help from anyone, he tried to lean on his other leg. Before Ford could realize what he had done, his leg gave away. Stanley and the nurse caught him by the underarms, stopping the fall before it started.

"I'll go get one."

Stanley stuck his head out the door and watched the nurse turn down the hall and out of sight. The moment the nurse was gone, he turned back to his brother. Ford was heavily leaning against the edge of the bed and glaring at the offending leg. He was panting slightly, and beads of sweat glittered on his forehead. He tried to climb back into bed, but wound up making a slow slide down to the floor. He crossed his arms again, and did not look at Stanley.
"Is there anything important you have here?" Stan asked, gesturing to the room.

"Empty out the pillowcase."

Stanley grabbed the pillow and turned it upside-down. Four, small pill bottles that were filled to the brim tumbled out. Stan picked one of them up, and read the label. He shook them in front of Ford's face. Ford chanced a look at his twin. He had an unimpressed expression, a disappointed one. A horribly familiar look.

Why did he always have to be so disappointed? He had tried his hardest to become rich, but scientific research had never been that profitable of a field... Ford shook his head, reminding himself that he was looking at Stanley, not his father. He wished that Stanley didn't have to look so much like their late father.

"They're, they're just in case," Ford defended.

"I'll hold on to them," Stan said, stuffing the bottles into his pants pocket. "Is there anything else?"

"The kid's cards."

With a well-practiced hand, Stanley grabbed the little cards the niblings had made for his brother. He tucked them into the inside pocket of his jacket. The twins had nothing more to say to each other. They stood- sat in Ford's case- in silence. Stan ended up crossing his arms and looking away from his brother, much like Ford was doing to him.

The nurse returned with a wheelchair, and they helped Ford off his feet and in to it. He was still glaring, obviously not pleased with the development, but he did not have much choice on the matter. At least if he wanted to get out of the hospital sooner rather than later.

"By chance could I get a well mapped-out plan of where you two plan to go?"

"Well first, we're going to Tennessee, and then we'll make a little detour to Kentucky, and after that."

"Stanley!"

"Just around the block. We're going to get Ford something that isn't hospital food to eat."

"Yes, of course. Hospital food is gross."

Stanley started to push his brother down the hall. Ford seemed especially sour about this, but he could not move himself when he had a bullet wound in his shoulder as well. The nurse followed them all the way to the elevator, trying to make idle conversation and stall them from leaving.

It was stressful, and Stan started to wonder if the nurse was on to his schemes. He had no intention of finding out whether it was legal to take a patient out of the hospital before their treatment. It might just end up as a kidnapping charge, but those could be a little more difficult to circumvent. There were only so many excuses you could make for taking a person after all.

They stepped on to the elevator. The nurse followed. Ford became noticeably paler again. Stanley could feel a cold sweat break out on the back of his neck. They really needed to ditch this nurse. Before he could kick the man out of the elevator, the doors slid closed.

"So, what floor are you going to?" the nurse asked, purposely blocking the buttons from them.

"The lobby," Stan said.
The nurse rapidly pressed the button. Ford now looked ready to faint. Stan just rolled his eyes. Ford always seemed to forget that he was a very capable criminal mastermind who could get them out of the situation in no time. Like usual, lying was the easiest way to get out of everything.

Stan already had a plan formulated to deal with the nurse. But of course his brother would panic in a situation like this, because crime was not the way to get out of bad luck. Not that this was a crime. Maybe just assault if the nurse was feeling especially law-suit happy that day.

There was a chime, and the elevator doors opened.

"You first," the nurse said, smiling at Ford.

"Go ahead," Stan replied.

"Really now, Ford should leave first."

"Oh no, I insist."

"Don't you mean insist?"

"Nope."

**WACK!**

Stanley drew back his fist and slugged the nurse right in the face. There was a crunch, and a surprised yelp from the nurse He stumbled backwards, out of the elevator. There was blood streaming from his nose, and he fell down, dazed.

"Close the door close the door close the door!"

Ford pressed the close door button until they slowly started to shut. The nurse recovered, and quickly got back to his feet. He reached the elevator just as the doors closed. There was another painful crunching noise. The twins could hear the nurse's second cry of pain, which was followed by some muffled swearing. Stan wiped off his knuckles on Ford. The man just scowled at him.

"What floor?"

"Parking garage."

The elevator resumed its descent once again.

"I wish I'd been the one to do it," Ford mumbled.

Despite the annoyed expression on his face, Stan could hear the thankfulness in his tone of voice. Stan figured that would be all the thanks that he would ever get for the rescue mission, but he wasn't too alarmed by this. Ford wasn't too big on apologizing and thanking people now that he was old and grumpy. Then again, he was old grumpy, and not interested in manners either. Maybe it was just a family trait.

"You might get your chance."

"What? Why?"

Stan pointed to the indicator above the doors. There was a matching one on each floor, telling people
where each elevator was going and what stories it would stop on.

"That may be a problem." Ford said.

"Well, so long as the kids are on time, we shouldn't have a problem."

They reached the parking garage level. Stanford looked around for Stan's trademark car, but did not see it anywhere.

"There's no way we're riding in my car," Stan answered. "We've got an RV instead."

"I don't see an-"

Just to prove Ford wrong, an RV swung around the corner, with Soos at the wheel. He stopped right in front of them. In a surprising feat of strength, Stanley lifted his brother, wheelchair and all, up the steps of the RV. Soos got out of the driver's seat and helped Ford in to one of the passenger spots.

The inside of the vehicle was rather spacious, if not a little worn. There were multiple seats, and wide tinted windows. The entire inside smelled like it had been recently washed, and there were multiple pine tree air fresheners hanging from every available spot in the RV.

"Now, we just need the kids," Stan mumbled. "Oh wait, right on time."

Fiddleford's car appeared in the parking garage. Stan got out and waved the man down, knowing that he too would be looking for his usual red car as well. He stopped in front of them, and helped the kids with their bags. Fiddleford looked at Ford, who was in the RV, then at the RV itself, and then back at the man who was clearly behind all of all of whatever Stanley was now planning. Stanley grinned back at him, and waved to the kids.

"Stanley, why do you have an RV?" Fiddleford asked. "And how come Ford is in there?"

"I'm not going back!" Ford yelled.

"Stanford, you need to stay in the hospital until you've healed!"

"I won't go to a hospital for the rest of my life!"

"Put your stuff in the back," Stan said to the twins.

They both stepped forwards, ready to do as they were told, but Fiddleford stopped them.

"Hold on! What exactly are you planning?"

"A road trip to escape my many enemies," Stan said, rolling his eyes.

"Well I don't exactly think that's safe for these children."

"Well I don't exactly value your opinion," he retorted. "Get in the RV."

"Oh Staaanfoord!"

The Stans' eyes grew wide when they heard the nurse's voice echoing throughout the parking garage.

"Kids, get in the RV," Stanford repeated.
"Wait just a minute! The welfare of these children is your responsibility! And I wouldn't feel comfortable until I know what exactly you have planned for them. So I intend to talk to you about it."

"Oh, you wouldn't feel comfortable?" Stan asked in a faux-polite tone. "And we should talk about it?"

"Yes."

"Oh, of course! We can talk about it in the RV."

"No, Stanley I am not doing that."

"And I'm not asking."

Click

Reaching in to his jacket, Stan pulled out a gun. Almost lazily, he pointed it towards the man. His eyes were focused elsewhere as he looked for the nurse, but no one doubted that he would fire if necessary. Mabel squeaked. Grabbing her pig, she ran into the cover of the RV. Dipper grabbed as many bags as he could carry, while still facing his great-uncle. Dipper was pulled up the stairs by Mabel before he could take anything else with him. After a few tense moments of staring him down, Fiddleford caved.

"Ugh! Stanley Pines how dare you point that- Rrr!"

Fiddleford was absolutely livid, furious that Stanley had the gall to threaten his life over something so trivial. And Ford was behind his brother with whatever this plan of his was! Snarling and spitting under his breath, Fiddleford picked up the remaining bags and loaded them on to the RV. Stan then took Soos' place at the wheel. He revved the engine, and drove straight through the guard rail by the toll parking booth.

"Well, that was easy!" Stan cheerfully said, taking a sharp turn to the right. "Now what was it you wanted to talk about Fiddlesticks?"

"Nothing," he spat. "Just nothing."

Suddenly, Ford started to stutter. What little colour his face had recovered vanished once again. His face was so close to the window that his wheezing breaths were fogging it up.

"H-he-h-hu-g-g-"

"Can you stop doing that?" Stan asked. "I just got these windows cleaned!"

"IT'S THE NURSE!"

"Jésus take the wheel."

Stan undid his seatbelt and walked to where Ford was sitting, near the back door of the vehicle. Sure enough, a man in a white nurse's uniform was running behind the RV. There was blood staining his clothes and murder in his eyes as he chased after them. It felt like he had upset a force much more dangerous than the law. Stan could suddenly relate to Ford's need to stutter in fear. This nurse was like something out of a horror movie. But if he lost his head, everyone else in the place would do the same.
"Wow, he's really keeping up," Dipper commented, impressed. "Mabel come look at this!"

The RV began to slow down, the nurse was gaining on them more than ever before.

"SOOS! What are you doing?"

"There's an intersection dude!"

"Run through it!"

"I can't! Not again!"

They were almost at a stop now, and Stan realized he would have to do something if he wanted to get away. So, he rolled down the back window. As the nurse got closer, he yelled, "What are you doing?!"

"Ford can't leave! He promised me eternal friendship!"

"Did you promise him eternal friendship?" Stan asked, looking back at his brother.

Ford instantly became sheepish.

"Well-"

"Ford says that he crossed his fingers when he made that promise!"

"What?! Stanley I did no such thing!"

The nurse stopped running, a look of surprise on his face. His bottom lip began to tremble. The cars that he was blocking in the street honked their horns at him, but he ignored the noise.

"W-what?!"

"Also he says you're crazy and you will never be friends for real! So go back to your dead-end job and never contact us again!"

"I- Well, ok."

Hanging his head, the nurse turned on his heel. He slowly wove his way through the traffic, still ignoring the blaring of car horns and angry voices yelling at him. The dejected gesture was oddly sad. Stan might have felt bad for the guy if he cared. But, since he didn't, he was more than ready to take the wheel from Soos and continue driving far, far away from the hospital.

The light changed, and they were driving in the opposite direction of the nurse's path back to the hospital. Ford watched as his figure grew smaller and smaller until it was nothing more than a tiny white smudge of a dot among the traffic. He might be gone for now, and it was a great relief. But somehow, Ford knew that would not be the last time he encountered his best human friend for all eternity.
Fifteen Dollar Bills

Chapter Notes

Yesterday I was at the DMV- which was a nice hour and a half wait for me to go through the usual driver's test- (Also for some reason Stanley's driving advice constantly came to mind, but I still passed with a perfect,) and I saw a man who looked exactly like Stanford Pines. No joke. He had the turtleneck sweater, the same streaks in his hair, five o'clock shadow, and the same glasses straight from the eighties. So maybe he was cosplaying? (Also maybe that's why I had Stan on the brain when doing the test.) I don't know why you would cosplay at the DMV but it was weeeird and I will forever have to keep my eyes peeled for a man who lives in my region and looks like a Gravity Falls character.

It made me want to write a DMV AU, which is without a doubt the most horrible idea I've come up to date. Stanley would be running the place and selling fake licenses, license plates, and other DMV-related things on the side. Stanford would be one of the always-stressed driving instructor, the twins trying (and constantly failing) to get their licenses in Spogebob-esque ways, Bill being the take-a-number person who does all the paperwork and enjoys making everyone suffer, with Soos botching things even more as his co-worker...

Actually this all sounds like a horrible Disney sitcom. I'll shut up now that I've shared enough.

They drove long in to the night. The group passed straight through Pennsylvania, only stopping briefly for a pit-stop at Fiddleford's house. From there, he had grabbed a few of his things and locked up the house properly. While he had originally been voluntold (Kidnapped really.) into joining the Pines on their cross-country trip, he now intended to stay with them. His main reason for this being that he did not trust Stanley or Stanford with the twins. Mainly Stanley, as he was the real trouble. Stanley Pines was a threat to the twins' morality, mental health, and society in general.

Stanford... While Stanford was his friend, and a very smart man, he was also completely clueless when it came to properly taking care of children. He still seemed to think that the same standards for childcare in the sixties applied in modern-day America. The cluelessness of this also extended to basic common sense, and personal hygiene. Neither of which he would ever bring up out loud to his friend. Ford was a little isolated, it was only normal that he would be like this. Stanley, however, he was an entirely different case.

Either way, Fiddleford had no idea how the Stans had managed to trick the twins' parents in to thinking that they were responsible adults who were capable of taking care of children. The thought of his own granddaughter, who was the twins' age, spending long amounts of time with the two Stans made him shudder. The man-child did not count as a good, watchful eye, no matter how nice he was. So someone had to look out for them, and it was clear that he would have to be the person to do it. The route they were taking even meshed well with his own summer plans.

Stanley intended for them to be on the west coast by the end of things, but they would take a bit of a
evasive route through it. He was convinced that people would be following after them as they left New Jersey. Fiddleford wondered how true the paranoid thought was. He certainly hoped it was little more than an exaggeration, but he could not tell for sure. So long as they wound up as a whole in Gravity Falls by the end of it, he would be happy. Fiddleford intended to catch up with his son and visit his granddaughter at some point in the summer, and then would be the perfect time to do so.

Pennsylvania was in the past now, and they were making their way through Ohio. Stanley and Soos had been taking alternating shifts at the wheel, resting when they were not driving. Stan was driving at the moment, but he was starting to look less alert. Soos was sleeping on the back seat, and looked like he was in a deep sleep. The twins were as well. Dipper had taken a spot on the couch, and had his hat over his head. He was sleeping on his back- something that was definitely not good for a growing child's circulatory system- and was snoring lightly. Mabel had fallen asleep on one of the booths. She kept a precarious balance between the table and the seat, and her face was smushed against the window. The position was not good for her neck, and she would have to do some stretches in the morning to prevent further cramping.

But Fiddleford couldn't being himself to wake either twin from their sleeping positions. A good night's rest was better for them. The previous evening they had both slept fitfully. Mabel had nightmares. She was unwilling to discuss them with him and denied remembering what they were about. Fiddleford had a hunch the nightmares had to do with Stanley. Meanwhile, brother had trouble sleeping in a room without his twin. He had been up and wandering around the house most of the night. The sound of him walking through the place had driven Fiddleford slightly barmy as he tried to fall asleep.

Neither twin had gotten a good sleep the night before that because they had driven from New Jersey to his home in Pennsylvania. Now that they were actually sleeping, it seemed like it would be a waste to wake them up. They were finally relaxed, as were most of the other occupants of the RV.

Stanford was awake at first, but was quickly dozing off. He would occasionally take off his glasses and polish them with his shirt- Stanley had the foresight to bring his brother some clothes so he was not trapped in a hospital gown- before placing them back on again. But even the repetitive task could not keep Stanford awake for very long. He soon started to sleep, his glasses still resting in his hands.

Fiddleford was still on edge after being held at gunpoint. He was a little leery about falling asleep in the RV with his kidnapper driving. While part of him wanted to doze off like the rest of the group had, the rest was worried about what might happen if he did. Stanley was dangerous, and he did not know the man well enough to tell how far he would go. Could he have actually died then and there in the parking garage? Was he really willing to traumatize the children just because things were not going his way?

Countless, tiny questions began to buzz in his mind. Fiddleford looked around the RV, and searched for something to distract himself with. But with most of the occupants sleeping, there was no one for him to talk to, no way to take his mind of of things. The pig was awake, but he hardly counted as a person or a distraction. The animal wasn't trained, and refused to come over when he called its name.

So the only other person to talk with was Stanley. The root of all his problems. But Fiddleford's worrying got the better of him. Biting the bullet, he quickly asked, "Will we be stopping soon?"

"Not until we've reached Lake Erie."

"Why there?"

"I want to put as much distance between us and New Jersey before anyone notices that we're gone."
"I think the nurse already did."

Stanley actually chuckled at this. It was an unpleasant sound, a raspy cough-like noise. Hearing it made his stomach feel slightly queasy.

"I guess you're right."

"Do you really think running away from your problems will solve anything?"

"It's just for the summer," Stanley defended. "I can't let the kids get hurt because of my line of work."

Fiddleford almost felt like laughing when he heard this. It was a lot of talk, coming from a man who had no reason to care for the children. Imagining that he liked them in the slightest seemed silly, impossible really. How could he let two children entirely re-write his goals? It seemed nothing like the glimpses of Stanley Pines that he had come across before. But then again, he had let them shape his plans for the near future. They were technically on the run, because he did not want them in danger.

"Oh. Is that why Mabel's terrified of you now?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

Even as Stanley said so, a frown began to crease his face. He looked towards the girl, but his eyes darted back to the mirror. Stanley focused on the road more intently than he had the entire trip. The small, sleeping figure of his great-niece gave him enough of a reason not to look back.

"It's basic psychology Stanley. You've pushed them away so there's no risk of emotional attachment."

His fingers tightened on the steering wheel.

"Ugh, you sound like Ford. Why is the fact that I'm a horrible person so hard for you all to accept?"

Fiddleford did not reply to the question. He couldn't think of a good answer to Stanley's response, because he didn't know what he was trying to prove to the man. Fiddleford was a realist more than an optimist. But he was sure that somewhere, deep down, Stanley had a soft spot of some sort. Not for the kids, but for something else. He couldn't be unattached from everyone his entire life. Somewhere along the way he must have formed connections. Even those that had been severed before had an affect on him. Stanford... He realized that was a good point to bring up to Stanley. His own brother...

"You followed Stanford from the hospital, paid for all his medical bills, and you showed up when he was first admitted."

"Yeah, so what?"

"You were there for him."

"I just don't want him to die."

"Why not?"

"Because I need to get revenge on him."

Stanford stirred awake when he heard this.
"How is that going by the way?"

"Shut up and go back to sleep."

"Way ahead of you..."

Stanford fell back to sleep, and they returned to driving in silence. Fiddleford sighed, and he leaned against his seat. He wished that he could fall asleep like everyone else, but he felt more awake than ever. Stanley was more alert too. Their conversation must have woken him up a little more, as he seemed intent on paying attention to his driving. Stanley was actually obeying the rules of the road now, because he was looking at the road ahead. Fiddleford assumed this was to avoid looking at his great-niece still.

Fiddleford's gaze strayed out the window too. They were off the highway at this point in their trip, and were driving down a side road. Water came in to sight- lake Erie presumably- and the vegetation became a little more wild. Scrubby, unkempt tufts of grass and scraggly-looking trees sprouted up from the sandy surroundings. There were beds of smooth, rounded-looking stones near the edge of the shore. The water was very still, only gently pushing itself up against the shore. Lifeguard chairs sat abandoned in the sand, along with stands holding preservers.

The sun was beginning to rise. There were bright streaks of orange near the end of the horizon, and the sky around it was lightening up. Some of the clouds above became more visible, a soft shade of pink colouring the bottoms of them. From across the lake, the sky's colours began to reflect upon the water. Rippling lines of orange and magenta appeared, dancing across the edges of the lake.

"How do you know she's afraid of me?"

The soft question drew his attention back to the driver's seat. A slight chill ran down his spine, and a sixth sense told Fiddleford to look away from the window. Stanley was staring right at him, road rules forgotten. With the rising sun shining in his eyes, it was impossible to see what his expression was. He may as well have been another shadow in the RV, shapeless and dark.

"Stanley you should really pay attention to the road."

"Is it bad?"

"There are signs Stanley."

"Well I'm not paying attention any road signs until you tell me-"

"No, not those kinds of signs! Well, yes, but not the kind that I meant!"

"Ah."

Stanley looked back at the road, again. He steered away from the shoulder, narrowly avoiding collision with a stop sign.

"Dipper isn't too fond of you either."

"Mhm."

"Why do you ask?"

"We're here."

"Pardon me?"
They came to a stop. The brakes of the RV hissed, and Stanley opened the door. He stood up and stretched. Fiddleford did as well. He looked back out the window and saw that they had come to the parking lot for the beach. Stanley had somehow driven around the toll booth, and found them a parking spot close to the water. There was a twenty-four hour convenience store and gas station in the parking lot, and a public bathroom and showers closer to the water.

Stanley walked down the length of the RV and unceremoniously shook his brother awake. Stanford opened his eyes, and closed them when he saw Stanley. When he was shaken again, he swiped a hand at his brother, but he avoided it. When he was shaken for a third time, he opened his eyes and yawned.

"What?"

"Do you need anything?"

"What?"

"Never mind."

Stanley rolled his eyes. He pushed Stanford back on to the wheelchair, and out of the RV.

"I'll just stay with the children!" Fiddleford called out to them.

"Yeah, you do that."

They headed in the direction of the convenience store. As they approached the brightly-lit building, Stanford had to squint and wait for his eyes to adjust. They went up the little ramp in place and entered the store. A chime sounded as they entered, and an employee appeared from the back. There was a magazine covering his face, and he seemed to be intently focused on reading its contents. Stanford rolled his eyes, but Stanley grinned. The man then realized what his brother had planned.

"Stanley, don't do this," e quietly pleaded.

He was pushed towards the freezer.

"You still like pistachio?"

"Stanley-"

"Pistachio it is," Stanley said, dropping a tiny tub of it on his lap. "Neapolitan for the kids, Soos likes cotton candy, some chocolate for me, and any idea what Fiddlesticks would want?"

Stanford knew that there was no way around it. His brother was already pocketing everything in sight. Stanford didn't even have his wallet on him. He couldn't offer to pay without it, and he knew that Stanley had no intention of paying for anything. With his leg still out of commission, there was no way for him to alert Fiddleford either. Sighing in defeat, he replied, "Butterscotch."

"Good. Now I suppose we should get some healthy food before Fiddleford freaks out on us."

"I think I'll leave that to you."

"What? You want me to just leave you here in the freezing cold aisle?"

"Well-"

"Suit yourself!"
Cackling, Stanley abandoned him in the frozen goods section of the convenience store. Stanford instantly regretted this decision. With his arm also not in working condition, he was somewhat stuck where he was. Stanford shivered, Stanley's clothes were not the greatest for keeping out the cold. What he wouldn't do for a sweater right now. Why did the frozen goods aisle have to be so cold?!

Using his good arm, he tried to wheel himself out of the cold area. Stanford inched forwards at a painful rate, but he managed to get away from the icy air. Yet for some reason, he did not feel any warmer as he escaped the freezers.

The employee was walking down the next aisle, with his back to Stanford. He stopped occasionally checking the stock on the shelves. He had a clipboard and bright blue pen in one hand. He still had his magazine, but would put something down so he could write something down with the neon-blue ink. From the row over, Stanford could hear his brother quietly laughing, and muttering something about idiotic workers to himself. It grew quiet at the employee walked to the next row.

The effort it had taken him to get to this point left Stanford exhausted. He was already so tired from his uncomfortable nights at the hospital, and now his brother wanted to buy food at some ridiculous time in the morning. Stanford's chest and eyes started to feel leaden, and his arm gave him painful protests as he tried to move towards the exit. Just as he got to the end of the row, the employee reappeared. Stanford couldn't warn the idiotic worker before he walked straight into him.

"Watch it you knucklehead!"

"Oh! Sorry Stanford! I really should've watched where I was going there," said the nurse.

"Don't... Mention..."

Stanford's chest suddenly constricted. He recognized that voice anywhere, even if it didn't match the body. The nurse- for it was without a doubt him- lowered the magazine from his face, revealing the same, inhuman yellow eyes.

"You!"

"Me!"

"How did you- your body- I-I-"

"Best human friends can find each other no matter where they run to!"

"Oh no. No, no, no! This can't be possible! You're in New Jersey!"

The nurse laughed.

"I'm everywhere Stanford Filbrick Pines! Eeeveeeeryyywheereee!"

"W-what? How did you-? I got rid of my middle name years ago!"

"Hey, eternal friendship comes at a price. I guess you're used to the flimsy human promises that you and Stanley made about being friends forever."

Stanford wondered if he had gotten in to more trouble than he could deal with. This seemed like a lot more than government conspiracies and lizard people working to use the general population to make their own society prosper. Those were things that no one but himself should know, things that this, whatever this horrible nurse was, there were things that he shouldn't know. Things that weren't kept on paper, and no one had ever been told. No amount of reading his medical file could allow the nurse to discover old memories and broken promises.
"Y-you-"

"Yes, me."

"Stanford."

"What about your name?"

"Stanford!"

Before Ford knew what was happening, someone had shaken him awake again. Instead of yellow eyes, he saw Stanley's annoyed ones. His arms were stuffed with items from the store, and his blazer looked more lumpy and heavy than usual. Despite this, Stanford had never been so happy to see his twin.

"Stanford! Why would you fall asleep now?"

"I- It was just a dream," he dumbly said. "None of that was real. It wasn't real."

Clutching his head, Stanford gave a slight chuckle.

"It was all in my head, that's why he knew those things. It was just..."

"Yeesh, what's up with you?"

"It was all in my head," he repeated. "We're in Ohio, he's in New Jersey."

"Whatever you say."

Stanley pushed them out of the store, not spending a single cent on anything that was on him. But there was no one to stop them from walking out with half of the store's inventory. The employee, whether he had been there for real or not, was gone. So Stanley carried him back in to the RV, and started to stock up the fridge with all the food items that they had taken.

Fiddleford was asleep, so he could not voice his disapproval. The sun had risen higher in the sky, and was above the lake at this point. Daylight was starting to show, and the sun was glaring into the windows of the RV at this point. Despite the fact that it was still early in the morning, Ford felt nowhere near ready to sleep. He was tired, but the thought of dozing off and dreaming of him again was too much.

Instinctively, he reached to polish his glasses again. The action would keep him awake for a little while. But his hand stopped in front of his eye as he noticed something on it. Ford put some distance between himself and the hand, so he could clearly see what was on it. The breath in his lungs stopped, and Stanford felt every inch of himself freeze as he looked at the words written on his hand. Scrawled in the same, unmistakable cyan ink that the nurse had been using to write with.

*Just because it was in your head, it doesn't mean it wasn't real.*

*Trust me running won't work for long, since we've got a deal.*

Suddenly he wasn't feeling so tired anymore.
The shore of Lake Erie was nice, a very peaceful and serene place. The lake was shallow and sandy, the water was warm, making it perfect for swimming in. Overhead, seagulls squawked as they circled around the beach. Many people had filled up the parking lot once the day began, but the group had already claimed a shady spot under some willow trees for themselves. The branches formed a glowing curtain of green around their little site, only letting some of the light filter through the area. Thin blades of grass pushed their way through the sand in places, and there were pieces of drift wood mixed in with it.

Stan had cleared an area for himself and set down a towel. He was napping with a hat over his face, much like Dipper had done the night before. Before dozing off, he had left everyone with the instruction not to wake him unless there was someone out to kill them on the beach. No one would be able to recognize that until it was too late, but none of them could find a way to argue with it either. So Stan had been left alone to nap.

Soos was trying to use the small barbecue that was set up in the sand. Stanford was sitting at a close-by picnic table. He was guarding the food from seagulls and bossing Soos around as they tried to light a working fire. Fiddleford was torn between making sure the children had proper sunscreen on and making sure the barbecue did not turn in to a bonfire. After Stanford decided to pour extra lighter fluid on the charcoal, he decided the twins were old enough to know how to put on sunscreen properly by themselves.

They were, but Dipper was not interested in putting any more on his face. He had his hat, and that was as good as sunscreen. Mabel sunburned easily, so she had made sure to properly put it on her and Waddles. His sister went off, pig trotting behind her, to try making some boyfriends. Apparently seeing so many shirtless men that weren't Stan had jogged her memory. One of her large goals had been epic summer romances, but she hadn't gotten the chance with the Stan mix-up. That left Dipper-who was up to his neck in pool floaties thanks to McGucket- alone with not much to do. Everyone but him was busy with something else.

He could see Mabel through the trees, talking to some noticeably shirtless and suspiciously buff boys playing volleyball. Dipper thought about going back to talk with Grunkle Ford, but he still seemed busy with Soos. McGucket was also there, scolding the both of them. Grunkle Stan still looked out of the question. After another moment of deliberation, he decided to take his chances with whatever issue was going on with the barbecue.

"I have twelve PhDs! I think I know how to light a barbecue!"
Fiddleford snorted at this.

"Yeah, well maybe I would agree with you if that PhD meant pretty huge di- DIPPER!"

The attention was instantly drawn to him. Fiddleford was visibly blushing, and Stanford's momentary anger had faded. Soos didn't understand why Fiddleford had suddenly become flustered, but he calmed down too.

"Hey dude."

"Uh, hey. What's going on?"

Soos and Stanford went back to glaring at each other.

"Well someone with all his fancy science knowledge thinks that-"

"Oh please! You couldn't even play spy! Why would I trust you with a-"

"Maybe if you did your own dirty work instead of sending teenagers on life-threatening jobs-"

Fiddleford got over his embarrassed state, and he pushed the feuding pair away from each other before someone's eye got poked out. The man put on a clearly fake smile, showing all too many teeth as he struggled to stop the duo from fighting.

"Oh, don't you worry your little head about that!" he chirped. "You go off and have some fun in the sun! Fresh air is good for your health!"

"But there's nothing to do!"

McGucket's fake smile began to twitch.

"Go make some friends Dipper! It's excellent practice for your social skills and will aid you greatly later in life."

"But-"

"I said go."

Taking the hint, Dipper left. He rolled his eyes, unable to believe that he was told to simply go make friends. It wasn't that easy! Talking to people was hard, and other guys his age were always weird. He didn't get why girls and first person shooter video games were so important to them. There were so many more strategic, imaginative things to play, and they always went for the same rehashed game, that had no effort put in to it and was too expensive. Besides, he was trapped in all of these water wings and inner tubes. He couldn't go around the beach looking like this. That was more Mabel's speed.

A quick look past the trees further proved it. She was now playing volleyball with the guys, and actually using all of her floaties to help her hit the ball. Mabel didn't even know the rules to volleyball! Granted neither did he, but that wasn't important. Dipper supposed that the rules didn't really matter to any of the boys now, seeing as his sister was flirting with them. Shaking his head, he took a step away from the edge of the trees.

"Bored?"

Dipper almost jumped out of his shoes when he heard Stan. His face was still covered by a hat, making his voice a little muffled. The boy wondered how Stan had known he was there when he
couldn't see anything.

"Kind of yeah."

"There should be a newspaper in the cooler, and Ford's always got a pen on him."

"Er, right. Thanks."

The return trip to the picnic table was less eventful than before. Ford had his arms crossed, and was looking away from the barbecue. Soos was on the other side with his arms crossed as well, and he was staring in the opposite direction of Ford. Now Fiddleford was the one manning the barbecue. He was cooking hamburgers, and would occasionally shoot a warning glance at the grown men. The cooler was placed underneath the picnic table. Dipper found the newspaper in the side compartment.

"Grunkle Ford could I borrow something to write with?"

The man did not say anything, but he handed Dipper a pen. He looked like he wanted to talk, but a single stare from Fiddleford was enough to keep his mouth shut. Sensing the tension between the group, Dipper decided it was for the best if he left them to cool down for a bit. He gave them some space, and then sat down in the sand closer to Stan. He quickly found the puzzles section and worked from there. Dipper tried to focus on the cross-word, but had trouble paying attention to it.

The day was hot, and the heat of the afternoon was starting to kick in. Even in the shade of the trees, it seemed like he was beginning to bake in the sun. For some reason, he kept looking back to Grunkle Stan. He looked like he was asleep, but there was no telling for sure. He had sounded fairly alert before, and had even known that he was close by. Dipper decided to push his luck, and try talking to the man.

"Grunkle Stan?"

"Who's stabbing who?"

"No one."

"Then why are you talking to me?"

"Because you're awake."

"Didn't I say not to bother me unless someone was dying?"

"Actually, you said not to wake you unless someone was dying. And you're already awake."

"Whelp you got me there," Stan sat up and placed his hat back on his head. "What do ya' want?"

"I'm all for the beach and stopping to take a rest and stuff, but shouldn't we keep driving before anyone finds us?"

"Dipper, Dipper," Stan laughed, shaking his head. "We can afford to let our guard down a little."

Dipper looked up and through the branches of the willow trees.

"Are you sure about that?"

"Of course! Would I lie?"

"Yes. Also you might not be right."
"What makes you say that?"

Dipper pointed through the trees. There was a tall man walking towards them. A man in a lifeguard's uniform. In his arms was an enraged Mabel. She was struggling, clawing and biting at the man's arms. Her floaties had all been punctured, and hung limply on her. But he was more than capable of holding her out and away from himself. Waddles trailed behind. The pig was squealing loudly and trying to jump on the man. It seemed like he knew that his owner was in trouble.

All Stan saw was the badge of the authority he had. That was enough to make him leap to his feet. He picked up Dipper and the towel in a single scoop, and ran towards the picnic table.

"We gotta' bail!" Stan yelled, shoving Ford back on to the wheelchair. "Forget the stuff, we can always steal more! We just need to get out of here!"

Soos immediately leapt to his feet and obeyed Stan's orders. He had the keys to the RV, and ran off to the parking lot to get it started. Fiddleford however, was nowhere near as willing as Soos to do as he was asked.

"Stanley! These burgers are stolen?!"

"That's not important," Stan responded, pushing Ford towards the RV. "Now come on, we've gotta' go!"

"What about Mabel?" Dipper asked.

"You can always ask your parents to make a new sister. I'm sure they're working on it now in South Africa."

Fiddleford, infuriated by what Stanley had said, started to run beside the man so he could yell at him.

"Stanley that is vulgar and there is no need to soil this innocent child's ears with horrible-"

"Grunkle Stan I am not leaving Mabel behind like this!"

"And I'm not getting arrested!"

"-the innocence of youth is important and must be protected at all costs from those who are willing to-"

"No! Put me down! Grunkle Stan-"

"How about I talk to the lifeguard?" Ford asked.

"Oh great, we'll let goodie two-shoes here talk to the cop."

"He's a lifeguard Stanley. They don't have the authority to make arrests."

"He could be undercover."

"Undercover, and a lifeguard?"

Stanford forced his brother to let go of the chair. Stan briefly stopped running, but gave a shrug. He continued to run towards the RV with Fiddleford and Dipper still yelling at him. The short look from his brother made his heart squeeze. He knew that Stanley was more than capable of leaving him to fend for himself, but having it actually happen to him was worse.
Taking a deep breath, he faced the lifeguard. Mabel had stopped fighting against the man after realizing that he was both shirtless, and buff. She was fluttering her eyelashes at him now, and trying to touch his abs. The man kept her at the same distance, but there was a slight smirk on his face.

"You left your Mabel behind, Stanford."

The warmth of the summer day seemed to vanish as he heard the lifeguard speak. Stanford shook his head in denial, not wanting to believe that he was hearing the same, haunting voice yet again.

"Oh no... Please no!" Stanford pressed his hands to his head again. "This is just another dream, you can't be here because this is a dream!"

The life-guard pulled down his sunglasses for a moment, letting Stanford see his eyes. Stanford pinched himself, hoping that the nurse had not managed to find him in real life. This had to be a dream, just like before. He must have simply fallen asleep while sitting at the picnic table. He had gotten rather tired trying to stop himself from yelling even more at the "spy" (turned traitor) he had attempted to hire so many years ago. Yes, this was all a very realistic dream that looked like the beach because he had been there so recently.

"How real do you think this is?"

"Great-Uncle Ford are you ok?" Mabel asked. "Apparently I'm just not allowed to have a pig on the beach. I'm not being arrested or anything."

"How do we know that for sure?" Stan yelled over at them.

The lifeguard placed Mabel on the ground. Like a magnet, she grabbed on to his leg. The man's tiny smile faded, and he tried to shake the girl off of him. She held fast, hugging his leg tighter.

"Hey uh, kid, you can let go of me now."

"She's fallen in love with a cop! Let's bail!"

"Do not bail on me Stanley Pines! I swear if you do I'll-"

"Just make her let go of the cop."

"Mabel you heard Stanley. Please, let's just go far, far away from him- here! I mean here!"

"Not until I get somebody's phone number."

"Do you even have a cellphone?"

A sheepish expression appeared on her face.

"My parents may have taken my phone away for the summer because they wanted my brother and I to get fresh air. But you can write it on my face!"

"Ooor, I could simply put it on Stanford's cellphone."

"Oh no, absolutely not! There is no way I am letting you anywhere near my phone!"

"Come on Grunkle Ford! Why not?"

"Yeah, why not Fordsy?"
"Well for starters, you're an *adult* and she is *twelve*. A minor in the eyes of the law and my fists."

"Pffft? What? I'm just a very tall teenager! Trust me!"

"Are you over the age of sixteen?"

"I'll have you know it is quite rude to ask a lady her age!"

"Good thing you're not."

The lifeguard looked down at his chest.

"Right, forgot there were differences between the two... I uh... Hey look at that thing that's over there but not over here!"

Neither Pines was stupid enough to fall for this. The lifeguard was now beginning to sweat. He nervously shifted in his spot, and tried to shake Mabel off of him again. But if anything, her grasp on his leg seemed to be getting stronger. She may as well have been stuck to him with the universe's most powerful adhesive.

"Say uh, kid. If you let go of me you can feel my abs."

In record speed, she had let go of the lifeguard and touched his abs. The only thing faster than Mabel was the man as he sprinted far away from the Pines family. Mabel sighed in disappointment, and Stanford gave a sigh of relief. He was gone, the lifeguard had left them. It was over...

"That's five guys today!"

"Just be glad it's over."

Now that the lifeguard was gone, Stanley returned. Fiddleford and Soos followed. The moment Dipper was put down, he kicked Stan in the shins. Hard. Not just hard, but strong enough to make Stan hurt. Unlike the last time he had tried to get revenge for his sister, he managed to cause him a great deal of pain. Stan howled in agony. Bouncing on one leg, he held the injured one in his hands. Dipper did not stick around long after that. He ran over to his sister and gave her a hug.

"You're safe!"

Mabel did not share in his feeling of relief.

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"Stan wanted to leave you here with the lifeguard!"

Instantly, Dipper realized that he should have thought his word choice out a little better. His sister was frowning, and looking over his shoulder to where Stan was. He had grabbed a frozen tub of ice-cream from the cooler, and had it resting on his leg. Fiddleford was shaking his head at him, and seemed too preoccupied with the state of the barbecue to scold Dipper for hurting Stan. Seeing as the entire thing had gone up in flames while unsupervised, that was understandable.

"He wanted to leave me behind?"

"Stan thought the lifeguard was a cop," he explained. "It was just."

"Stan being Stan," she quietly finished.
"Well," he rubbed the back of his neck. "Yeah. I mean, I'm sure that he was just panicking a little and he would've come back for you, or at least bailed you out of jail afterwards."

"Pigs aren't allowed on the beach."

"Mabel?"

"I'm going to go take Waddles back to the RV."

"Oh, ok. Do you want me to come with you?"

Mabel shook her head. She patted her leg, and Waddles trotted over to her.

"C'mon Waddles, let's go."

The RV was closer now that Soos had driven up on to the grass by the edge of the beach. Mabel did not have far to go, and she began a slow walk around the picnic area. She dragged her feet up the steps of the RV and vanished from sight. This caused Dipper to snap out of his reverie.

The boy remembered that he was still furious with his great-uncle for wanting to leave his sister to fend for herself. He went back to the picnic table where Stan was sitting. Fiddleford was scraping off the burnt remains that had once been hamburgers, while Soos and Stanford had returned to not looking at each other. Fiddleford looked up from the grill when he arrived.

"Oh Dipper, the burgers got a little burned-"

Pain forgotten, Stan snorted.

"Incinerated is more like it. I should hire you to burn evidence for me."

"I'm rich too Stanley," Fiddleford reminded. "And while I think it's a little crass to put it like that, I do not need any of your help to earn money through hard work."

"You still upset that the burgers were stolen?"

"Stanley you've got plenty of money at your disposal! Why would you bother packing a suitcase full of it if you're not going to use it?"

"Hey, that's for illegal purchases only."

"Oh, you plan on buying a few nuclear warheads while we're out?" Fiddleford asked, flicking burnt bits of burger at him.

"No, I was thinking more along the lines of some company. To get you laid for the first time in your-"

"I have a wife and son! And I probably get more-" Fiddleford froze, his eyes straying back to Dipper. "Oh fu- fudge! Dipper I am so sorry I forgot you were there and-"

"It's, it's fine," Dipper said.

Despite this, the boy felt his cheeks flushing as well. He didn't really need to hear any of that conversation.

"I uh, here," Fiddleford tossed his wallet to him. "You should go buy yourself and Mabel something to tide yourself over. Lunch won't be for a while."
"Don't you guys want anything?"

Fiddleford glared at the other three.

"No thank-you. We're going to sit here and talk about barbecue safety like grown adults."

"Ok."

For the third time that day, Dipper decided that it was best to leave the adults to sort out their problems.

Bzzzt!

Ford groaned when he heard his cellphone chime. He never used the darn thing. Why would it be going off now of all times? They were on the road again, driving off to who-knew where. He was just glad to be as far away from the convenience store and the lifeguard as possible. Ford wanted to believe that he had not encountered him again, but it seemed like it had happened in real life. He couldn't recall waking up suddenly or no one bringing up what had happened with Mabel. Stan was still complaining about the shin Dipper had kicked, and Mabel had been looking rather down ever since the lifeguard had left. Presumably because she didn't have his phone number.

Bzzzt!

Another message? This was exactly why he never used his cellphone. It was a waste of time and money. He just didn't want the government to get suspicious if they didn't have some method to keep tabs on him. But keeping the phone on him at all times was beginning to seem like a mistake. At least now that it was interrupting his sleep and he wanted to ignore whoever was trying to get in contact with him.

Bzzzt!

It quickly became clear to the man that he would not be free unless he checked his texts. Or turned the phone on silent. Seeing as he had to move anyways, Ford decided he might as well check. Squinting in the bright light of his phone, he tried to make out the number. It was one that he did not recognize, and the area code (six-one-eight) was unfamiliar to him as well.

Bzzzt!

He checked the messages, and instantly regretted doing so.

Since leaving the hospital, I've begun to miss you.

So was thinking maybe we could have a rendez-vous.

How does Illinois sound?

Good hopefully. I'm sure I'll see you around.

Chapter End Notes

... Told you it would make sense!
Sorry for such a late update everyone. I have been super busy lately. Exams are coming up, I have a figure skating test coming up, I've got a DECA presentation coming up, and a million other little things to be focused on. The time I've been spending writing had mostly been devoted to the next installment of Abomination, an SU story. (That's 20,000 words so far for anyone who is curious.) Also I have a fun new story idea for Gravity Falls. One involving the shape-shifter... But you won't hear any more about that until it's out. Anyways, here is the next chapter. More will be on the way soon.

Brownie points to the person who catches the Addams Family reference.

It was a little difficult to accomplish, but Ford managed to take the seat right behind the driver's spot. This was usually a difficult task because Soos, the man-child and horrible ex-spy slash employee of his had claimed it for his own. Apparently he saw Stanley as a father-figure or something ridiculous like that now, so it was a little hard to get close to his brother with the man-child around. It had taken spilling a bag of cheese puffs on the floor of the RV to distract the man-child long enough to take his spot.

Soos was currently busy eating the fast-food snacks off the floor, mumbling something about the five-second rule being changed to the infinite-second-rule-so-long-as-it-wasn't-moldy by "real" scientists. His leg was healing up nicely at this point, so he was able to lean a little out of his chair so he could talk to Stanley. Stanford had been thinking about what to do ever since he had first started getting messages from the nurse, and knew that he had to avoid him at all costs.

"So, where are we stopping next?"

"Illinois."

Stanford felt his heartbeat stop for a moment. Not a good thing, considering his old age. They were really going there? The same place that the nurse had said they were going to? How had he predicted such a thing?! Stanley had not told him the truth about their route! But somehow, much like many other, personal things, he knew. Stanford didn't know how that was possible or if he was truly going crazy. Something this weird belonged in Gravity Falls! Not in New Jersey, or inside of his own head.

"Hah!" Stanford tried to laugh off the feeling of nervousness. "Illinois? What can you even do there? Sounds boring!"

"We're stopping by Chicago, I've got a few buddies there that can help keep people off our tails."

"Or, we could keep driving," Stanford suggested. "That would really keep them off our tails!"

Stanley sighed in disgust and shook his head.

"Leave the criminal stuff to me."

"But won't our enemies expect us to stop in Chicago?" he desperately asked, grabbing Stanley's arm.
"Maybe we should just go to the next state over."

Stanley swatted away his arm.

"We're already half-way there."

"Which means we're close to South Dakota as well! You know, they have interesting attractions there as well! Corn Palace, Mount Rushmore, Horse Thief Lake... You stole those pigs! Why not horses?"

"Unless you tell me the real reason why we can't stop in Illinois, then we're going to Chicago," he replied.

"It's- well-"

Stanford did not quite not know what to say. It was the evening, so they were on the road again. Most of the vehicle was dark on the inside, just barely lit by the few interior lights that still worked. There were no street lights. They were driving along a long, barren highway. Tall fields of corn grew on both sides of the road. Fiddleford was tucking the kids in their make-shift beds, and he was quietly talking to them. Soos was still very enamored with his cheese puffs, and Waddles was helping him clean up the floor by eating them.

While everyone in the RV seemed busy with their own business, Ford hesitated to tell Stanley what was on his mind, and what was happening to him. What if he just wrote it off as him being senile, trying to pull his leg? Stanley already hated him, wanted him dead. He would probably just find this funny. And if that was how things were going to play out, he didn't want everyone else thinking that he was loosing it as well. Stanley was one thing, but his friend, and the kids were another.

Maybe he really was going crazy. What did that mean if he truly was loosing his mind? Or maybe he was not imagining things, and there really was a not-human-or-qualified-nurse out to get him for... Eternal friendship. Alright, he was senile. He had to be crazy. Things like this didn't happen outside of Gravity Falls. Well, they did. But not on a scale like this...

"Any reason?" Stanley asked. "Is there any reason at all?"

"Yes."

"Aaand?"

"It..." Stanford grit his teeth. "May have to do with the nurse."

"Ha! You're still afraid of that nerd aren't you?"

"He's not just a nerd! He's not even human Stanley! I swear!"

Stanley whistled and twirled a finger around the side of his head, clearly indicating what he thought on the matter. Stanford instantly regretted telling Stanley what he was thinking, and why he did not want to go to Illinois. This was so humiliating. It wasn't like he actually had any proof on him, even if he, an expert on things weird could tell what was human and what was not. Anyone who had yellow eyes, used human as an adjective, verb, and noun in a single sentence was definitely not a person. And how could he forget all of those terrible fake names? Norm Al, Hugh Mann, Nott. A, D. Mann... Of course Stanley couldn't see it.

"Maybe I should be watching how many painkillers you take," Stanley mused. "You shouldn't be this delirious from a single dose."
"Maybe you're right."

Stanford turned away from his brother and let Soos reclaim his spot. He returned to his own booth, and managed to drag himself into a sitting position on the seat. At least it was more comfortable than the wheelchair, even if there was stuffing leaking out from it in places. Dipper was sleeping in the spot across from him, his hat pulled over his eyes. Mabel was still awake however, and Fiddleford was still talking to her about something. Ford caught up with the conversation, and realized that Fiddleford was telling the girl a story. It was oddly relaxing to listen to him talking. His quiet southern drawl was soft, and rather calming. It helped him feel a little better about humiliating himself in front of Stanley for absolutely no reason.

"What happened after that?" Mabel yawned.

"Since there was so much studying to do, I invented a PARASITICAL ROBOT THAT WOULD LATCH ON TO THE EYES OF ITS MASTER, FORCING ONE TO READ UNTIL THEIR EYEBALLS WERE LITTLE MORE THAN SHRIVELED HUSKS!"

The sudden outburst startled Ford out of feeling relaxed. Fiddleford was no longer crouching in front of Mabel. He had risen to his feet, and had raised a fist into the air. Fiddleford was panting slightly, the maniacal speech seemed to have drained some of his energy.

"Fiddleford! You're not telling that story to her are you?!

Fiddleford's wide, suspiciously innocent blue eyes turned to him.

"Why? What ever is wrong with it?"

"You can't just tell a little girl a story about- that."

"Why not?"

"She's a child."

"She's the same age as my own granddaughter-"

"Your granddaughter and Mabel are two completely different girls. I know! I live in the same town as her! She's a blonde-"

"Watch what you say Stanford."

"Well you can't tell a story about... Those kind of things... To my great-niece."

"Suit yourself," he sighed, crossing his arms. "I'm going to rest then, and you can tell her a story."

"Maybe I will!"

Fiddleford lay down in his spot. All of him but his legs were hidden by the seat when he did this. However, this did nothing to muffle his voice.

"You have to. Otherwise she's not going to fall asleep."

Stanford turned back to Mabel. The girl looked sleepy enough. She had a blanket tucked up to her chin, and she seemed to have trouble keeping her eyes open. More than once she had yawned. Stanford figured that she would be able to fall asleep easily enough on her own. Besides, the girl was twelve. She didn't need a story to fall asleep! That was just ridiculous! However, Mabel did not seem
to agree with the idea. The girl was awake enough to realize what he was thinking. She made her eyes especially wide, and batted her eyelashes like her life depended on it.

"Pleeease could you tell me a story? I won't fall asleep until you tell me one."

Ford already had visions of her pestering him until while he was ready to fall asleep. He already wasn't getting much of that as it was. He was not going to sacrifice what little rest he could get because his great-niece refused to sleep without a story. With a sigh, he sat down at the booth across the aisle. Mabel flipped around so that her head was on the side with the aisle than the window. She fixed the blanket and grinned innocently at him.

"Mabel, I'm not very... Good at telling stories."

"That's a lie," Fiddleford chimed in. "Back when we were in grad school, Ford used to write fanfiction for-"

"We don't speak of that. It was full of grammar errors and plot holes and- It was bad alright? Now what kind of story do you want to hear about?"

"An interesting one."

"Does it have to be funny?"

"Nope. But it shouldn't be sad either. Then I'll never get to sleep!"

"Does it have to be true?"

"Just interesting, and not sad. Also there should be some romance."

"I'll meet you half-way. I guarantee that it'll put you to sleep, and will be interesting without being too sad. I set the limits at romance though."

Stan snorted.

"Yeah. You wouldn't know anything about that."

Ford blushed, and did his best to hide it. Fiddleford laughed, but tried to cover it up with a cough.

"Sounds good," Mabel said, rubbing her eyes.

"Good," he echoed. "Now, what have I told you about my research in Gravity Falls?"

Mabel rose her hand.

"Question: is this story going to involve big science words?"

Ford pushed away her hand.

"No. Now you answer my question."

"You've talked about it with Dipper."

He nodded.

"A little, but not much. You see, I research anomalies. Things that are, weird."

"Like the nurse's yellow eyes?"
A chill ran down his spine at the memory of them. Even when he had tried to act friendly, there was just something unsettling about looking at them. But they could always just be contacts. Or maybe he was simply a reptilian in a human's body doing an internship. That could explain why he was so... Not human. That was probably the most logical explanation. They were everywhere in the government and international royalty.

"Yes. Like his eyes. Now, like I was saying, the town where I live shows an increased amount of the weirdness. That's why I live there now, so I can research. Now, one day, about a year after I first moved to Gravity Falls, I was investigating a strange skeleton. As I continued to dig up the bones, I uncovered an egg."

"An egg? In the dirt?"

"Well, turtles bury their eggs in the sand, why is this so strange?"

"I'm playing along Grunkle Ford."

"Oh, right, of course. So, here was this egg, much larger than any chicken's, almost as big as my own hand," Ford waved one of his hands in front of her face. "Is hidden there in the dirt. It was cold as ice, and I figured that there was nothing inside of it. You see, most warm-blooded species need some form of warmth for the animal inside of it to survive. Just as I was about to put it down, I felt a slight tapping. There was something inside."

"There was something inside?"

"Yes. Aren't you listening to the story?"

"Playing along," she reminded.

"Of course, my bad. Not a moment after I had picked up the egg, it hatched!"

"What was inside?"

"My son, Stanford Jr."

"Grunkle Ford!"

"What? That's the truth!"

"Come on Grunkle Ford. Even I know where babies come from! When a lady kisses a man, someone will see. So they'll tell the mom's guardian angel! So the angel tells the stork. The stork flies down from the magical place where they keep the diamond mine! And then the stork left a diamond under a leaf, in a pumpkin patch, and the diamond, turned into a baby! And then-"

Stanford had to stop himself from chuckling as Mabel continued with the little story her parents had no doubt told her. If only his own parents had decided to spare his childhood innocence as long as they had with the girl. There were some points in his life where he wouldn't have really minded not knowing everything that was out there. He supposed that it was a little funny that she actually believed that story, but not his own. Stanford wondered if Dipper knew the truth or not. He was a smart kid, he had probably figured it all out by this point.

"Mabel, which one of us is telling a story tonight?" Ford asked.

She gave a guilty smile.
"You are."

"Right. Now, like I was saying, my son, Stanford Jr. was not a human being. He was actually, a shape-shifter!"

"What do you mean by was? Isn't he still your son?"

"It's a bit complicated Mabel. It turned out shape-shifters don't really need parents, and I ended up releasing him in to the wild again."

"Oh. So what do shape-shifters do?"

"Well, Stanford didn't really know because there were no other shape-shifters around. That's why he asked me if he could-"

"Wait, he asked you?"

"Of course. Shape-shifters can talk!"

"He just knew English? Or did you have to teach him to speak?"

"He already knew. Instinctive thing I suppose."

"So you took care of him for a little bit?"

"Yup! It was one of my more challenging experiences in Gravity Falls. Sort of like taking care of a pet and a child at the same time."

"I'm sorry you had to let him go."

Stanford shrugged.

"It's better that way. I still run into him in the forest some of the time. He's old enough to be your own father now."

"Wow. That-"

Once more, the girl yawned. She seemed to finally be ready to sleep, now that she had been told a story. Ford too was starting to feel more was quietly snoring, and Stanley looked like he was pretending to focus on the road. Probably so they didn't run into another cow. Those were a little harder to drive around than the average squirrel. The other occupants of the van all seemed to be sleeping as well.

"That was a good story," Mabel said.

Just to interrupt the peace, Stanley laughed.

"Yeah, some story."

Stanford rolled his eyes. He was not going to rise to the bait this time. Or so he told himself. However, as he saw his great-niece frown, something caused him to reconsider. Suddenly, the smile he had worked so hard to achieve had been wiped off her face, and it made him feel strangely defensive. So, naturally, no matter how high and mighty he wanted to be on the matter, Stanford found himself wanting to argue with Stanley once again.

"I'll have you know that the story is one hundred percent true."
"Of course. You just found a magic shape-shifter in the woods," Stanley replied. "And you have no evidence of his existence"

"I have pictures, diagrams, and Fiddleford," Stanford replied. "Right Fiddleford?"

Fiddleford tiredly groaned in response to his question.

"Mmn... I'd be hard to... Forget."

"And I actually do happen to have a picture. For sentimental value."

Grabbing his wallet, he sorted through a few of the negative twelve-dollar bills he had left, until he came to the little black-and-white polaroid of him and the shape-shifter. He unfolded the picture and rubbed it on the edge of the table to prevent getting rid of some of the deeper creases. It was faded and creased at the edges, and the picture was a little blurry.

The shape-shifter had taken on the form of a younger version of himself for the picture, just for the fun of it. Fiddleford had been the one to take the picture. He and his wife were a little adverse to the strange things in Gravity Falls, but they liked spending their summers in the town none the less. He proudly showed it to Mabel.

"Wow! He looks just like Dipper!"

"So you mixed the negatives," Stanley brushed off. "That doesn't mean it's real."

"Don't listen to him," Stanford cut in. "Once we get to Gravity Falls, I'll introduce you."

"Really?"

Ruffling the girl's hair, he nodded.

"Really."

"Thanks Grunkle Ford. G'night."

"Good night Mabel."

"See you in the-"

Before she could even finish what she was saying, Mabel had fallen asleep. Perhaps it was just the exhaustion of the long days they had been sitting through, or the paranoia and stress that seemed to be taking over his life bit-by-bit. But telling her the little story about his adopted son had helped him feel a little more ready to sleep as well. The little smile from her and the way she had gotten into the story had made him feel oddly... Happy. She was an interesting child, that was for certain. Something about telling her the little story reminded him of the shape-shifter.

It seemed like it had all happened just yesterday, and at least it hadn't ended too badly after the shape-shifter decided it wanted to leave. There was no point in trying to change the nature of another species, to essentially train him to act human. If he wanted to shape-shift into people and cause mischief, he could do so. It was not like his species had done that all the time before he had ever been born. The distracting thoughts were enough to help him relax once again. And before he even knew it, he had drifted off too.

The next morning, Ford was alarmed to realize that they had stopped. From where he was laying, he had a view of the blue sky, and the sun shining in his eyes. This was what had initially woken him.
up. But it was the understanding that they had come to a stop that had really awakened him. After getting so used to the rumbling of the RV's tires, the sudden stop was jarring. Stanford thought they had stopped in Chicago, like Stan had been planning to do.

He dreaded to get up, not knowing what could be waiting for him outside of the vehicle. Well, he knew exactly who was waiting for him in Chicago. It was the nurse. So, he was not very interested in getting out of the RV if that meant beginning a whole new nightmare. If only Stanley had listened to him... Unfortunately, laying down until they left the city behind was not a very feasible idea. He was hungry, and the sun shining in his eyes was steadily starting to blind him. Stanford supposed that sitting up couldn't possibly hurt him. It wasn't like the nurse was in the RV with him. He would have heard breathing then. Right? The nurse did breathe, right? Come to think of it, Stanford was not so sure if he really did breathe.

That did not make him feel any more willing to sit up. But the sun was so glaring! Stanford bit the bullet and sat up. It took him a moment to let his eyes focus without the sun shining in them. But when the red vanished from his eyes, he could clearly see that someone was staring at him from the outside of the vehicle. It was...

Abraham Lincoln?

And there was Jefferson, and the other two. Stanford had to rub his eyes, wanting to make sure he was truly seeing what was in front of him. Maybe he had gone crazy. For the last time he had checked, the Mount Rushmore memorial was in South Dakota, not Illinois. He looked away from the sculpted faces in the mountain. As impressive as the works of art were, he wanted to know why they were here.

Everyone was in the parking lot. The day outside was pretty and clear. There were tourists mingling around in the parking lot, but he could see the others from a mile away. Fiddleford taking a picture of the twins and Soos in front of the mountain, and they were striking all sorts of poses. Stanley was standing closer to the vehicle, and he looked like he did not want to be involved with the group. He had a pamphlet and he was reading it. Stanford pushed open the RV window and stuck his head out.

"Where are we?"

"Ah, sleeping beauty awakes," Stanley replied, snapping the brochure shut.

"I thought we were stopping in Chicago."

"We did," Stanley replied.

"We did?"

"You slept through it."

"I highly doubt I would sleep through an entire stop."

Stanley rolled his eyes and crossed his arms. So Stanford knew that his twin was about to lie.

"I used the leftover chloroform to knock you out for the duration."

"But it's early now. If we had gone to Chicago, it would be morning by this point."

"Yeah, it's actually tomorrow. So there."

As if that made any sense. Stanford decided that it was just better if he did not try to question what
Stanley was lying about. He shut the window, and let out a sigh of relief. They hadn't stopped in Illinois, he was safe. The nurse was not here with them. It felt like a heavy burden had been lifted off his shoulders with that. It would be nice to spend some time not worrying about where the nurse had gone, and if he was still following after them. Hopefully it would be a very long time before they had another encounter.
"No one will find us here! We're in the middle of nowhere."

"We're two miles away from Mount Rushmore," Ford replied.

They were passing through a forested area, and were headed along a dirt road. The trees were not densely packed at first, but it grew harder to see between the vegetation as they travelled down the winding path. Occasionally, they would spot a small body of water on either side. Most of them were glassy and still, swampy areas. Occasionally, flocks of birds or deer could be spotted, wading in the water. Every time she spotted a deer, Mabel would announce it to the entire group. His sister had her face practically glued to the window as she stared at their surroundings.

In a strange change of pace, Fiddleford had taken over the task of driving. He had not wanted them to crash in to a tree or forest ranger because of Stan's careless driving or Soos' ability to get distracted by the most simple of things. The man-child was helping Mabel spot for animals. Stan was sitting across from Dipper, and Ford was looking over a brochure. Everyone seemed in relatively high spirits, which was strange. Usually when one person was happy that meant everyone else was annoyed, or bored.

"Grunkle Stan, how did you find out about this place anyway?" Dipper asked.

"I know about anything and everything that has to do with thievery," Stan replied.

Stanford rolled his eyes and shut the travel brochure.

"Actually, Horse Thief Lake has nothing to do with thievery. It's just a campsite area in the Black Hills National Forest."

"That still has to do with stealing," Stan quickly replied.

"DEER!"

The RV swerved slightly as Mabel yelled. Ford was sent rolling down the aisle. Luckily, Soos caught him before he could get too far. Dipper fell out of his seat, and the others nearly did so too. He quickly recovered, and brushed off his shirt.

"Mabel Honey, could you not do that while I'm drivin'?" Fiddleford asked.

"Only if I get to call you Grunkle Fiddleford."

There was a moment of silence as he contemplated the idea.

"Alrigh', deal."

"Thanks Grunkle Fiddleford!"

"Oh boy."

Stanley laughed, but no one shared his amusement with the situation.

"What's so funny?"

"Looks like I'm not the only one in the family good at striking up deals."
Mabel frowned, but she turned back to the window so she could hide it. Ford started to frown as well. Since his memory of deals all seemed to involve a nurse with yellow eyes lately, he was not too enthusiastic about hearing the words either. Making deals had ended up with a permanent weird stalker. Unless he truly was going insane, and he was only imagining that the nurse was following him.

It could also just be a bad case of paranoia after everything he had experienced in that terrible hospital. The fake overdoses of painkiller, the terrible food, the not-so-subtle hints to try building another gateway to unimaginable power. His great-nephew seemed to notice that everyone had suddenly gone quiet. He cleared his throat and said, "So, we're going camping there until-?"

"Just for the day," Stan replied. "Camping's boring, no one will be there, and no one will be watching us beyond those forest police."

"Park rangers," Ford corrected.

"Whatever. They're probably working with the lifeguards from before."

"I certainly hope not."

They eventually came to a small booth by the side of the road. One incredibly bored-looking employee was sitting there. Fiddleford did the talking, and the paying. It was much easier, and less stressful, than the Stanley method of doing things. They did not have to worry about getting in trouble with the law, a nice bonus. Since Stanley was not the one paying, he did not mind doing things the legal way for once. They were given a campsite number, and parked accordingly. Mabel was the first one out of the van, she was followed by her pig and brother.

"Don't go too far!" Fiddleford called after them.

"We won't!"

"Soos, go unpack," Stan commanded. "And grab Ford on your way out."

"Yes Mister Pines."

For a man of his size, Soos was surprisingly strong. The man-child had no trouble lifting him wheelchair and all out of the RV. He was set on the gravel parking spot, and pushed towards a nearby table. The twins were visible between some trees, exploring the area and poking things with sticks. The pig was following them, curiously tasting some of the different plants growing in the area. Soos returned to the RV to grab more of their things. He picked up the cooler, and dragged it himself to the picnic table. Then, he went back to grab more of Stanley's things.

"Why are you even listening to him?" Ford asked.

"Mister Pines is my boss," Soos replied, as if it were obvious. "I kinda' have to do what he says."

"Is he paying you to do everything for him?"

"Well he pays a lot more than you ever did."

Stanley, the one who refused to buy anything so he could keep his money, paid his employee above minimum wage? It was probably just by a couple of cents, but he still found that slightly hard to believe. He just didn't understand why the man-child was so blindly loyal to someone so... Well, he was Stanley, the grown-up Stanley. The Stanley that had been his twin brother, and the one that he was with now were practically two different people. That was enough to explain why it was a little
hard for him to get why Soos actually seemed to like his brother. Soos went back to the RV so he could continue to unload everything that they had brought along with them. So, he went to looking around the area instead.

The kids were exploring near the shore of the lake, and seemed to be walking along the edge of it. The water here was rather still as well, providing a perfect reflection of the forest. The other side of the lake was clearly visible, and the mountain range started to climb back up there again. The area was green and grassy, there was no sand, but there were large, light grey rocks protruding from the ground. Most of them had most growing on them, ranging from pale orange to green in colour. There was a slight chill to the air that day, most likely because they were in the shade of the trees and there was a small breeze. Patches of daylight appeared between the gaps in the trees, patterning the ground in varying shades of light. From all around, there came the sound of birds chirping, tree branches rustling, and the quiet noise of the water washing up along the shore.

The area reminded him a little of Gravity Falls. The lake front there was rather similar. Some of the wildlife was different, and the mountains were shorter, but it still bore a resemblance to his home. He could not wait to get back there. He had his research waiting for him, and his mailbox was probably stuffed to the brim. A little privacy would be welcome too. In the hospital, he had constantly been around the nurse. On their escape from the hospital (And the criminals out to kill Stanley.) he had been surrounded by other people constantly. The kids, Fiddleford, the man-child, and Stanley.

There was no escaping any of them, and it was starting to become a little bit suffocating. He supposed being suffocated by friends and family was better than being suffocated by the nurse, who had suffocated him figuratively and literally during his stay in the hospital. Stanford nearly jumped out of his seat when he was pushed from behind. When he looked back, he saw that it was Stanley who had him.

"What do you want?"

"It's time to change your bandages."

That sounded like a horrible idea, and Stanford did not like where this was going. Normally Fiddleford helped him with the parts of his shoulder that he was not able to reach, and he could handle the wound in his thigh on his own. Stanley did not seem to care about this though. Stanford could see that he had gathered all the things that were needed to fix his dressings and the bandages.

"Fiddleford can help me with that."

"He's busy lighting a fire, since none of us are allowed to anymore."

Stanley started to push him closer towards the edge of the lake. They stopped near the water, and then started to go to the left, away from where the kids were exploring. There was a thin peninsula that stretched out towards the lake. It was barely a meter wide, and grew smaller as Stanley continued to push him. The water was clear, and he could see that it was not very shallow. However, the fact that the solid ground was getting more narrow (and mushy) made him feel more nervous. He could not exactly swim with his arm and leg out of commission, and he had no intention of trying to do so now.

"Where are we going?"

"To change your bandages."

From where they had set up, it would be hard to find them unless someone was looking hard. Stanford knew that Stanley was up to something, and he was worried that he might finally try to kill
him after all these years. Now would be as good a time as any. They were already part-way across the country, close enough to the west coast to leave the kids and Fiddleford behind. There was another one of the grey rocks on the peninsula, and this was where they stopped. Stanley put down the things he had been carrying in one arm, and sat down on the rock.

"Shirt, off."

"I know how to dress my own wounds thank-you very much," Ford replied, crossing his arms.

"I'll give you five seconds before we start to do things the hard way."

Stanley looked down at his watch and started to count.

"One. Two-"

Stanford took off his shirt before he could find out what Stanley's idea of the hard way was. He was just reminded of the nurse, and how he got everything done around the hospital. He was not going to relive all that nightmare again, just because his brother was being stubborn. At least it was warmed in the sunlight than it was in the shade. But what he wouldn't give for a sweater after this was all over.

Maybe he had the sweater-wearing gene (Which he seemed to have passed onto his great-niece) or maybe he was just getting old and cold easily because of it, but he hated not having a sweater to wear. He received a small tap on the shoulder, the uninjured one. Stanley seemed oddly quiet all of a sudden, and his realized this was because of how pale his brother happened to be.

"Where does it hurt the most?"

"Everywhere unless I'm on the painkillers."

"Right."

Stanford raised his arm, and, with a pair of scissors, slowly started to cut him out of the bandages and medical tape. There was not much blood on the actual bandage that covered the graze, but it was still enough to make Stanley look disgusted. He wet a paper towel with some water -he had brought along a bottle of it- and started to sponge around the wound. once or twice, he had to wince as Stanley pressed too hard against the flesh.

It still stung in places, and he felt like his arm was constantly sore. Of course, there was no sense in complaining about it to everyone else, because they couldn't do anything. Taking the painkillers just made him feel like there was no feeling in any of him, like someone else was possessing his body while he sat there and watched. It was a little too surreal for him, and he did not like it.

"So, what do you think of the kids?"

The real reason behind helping him clean the bullet wounds had arrived. At least it didn't involve murder.

"I like them. They're both interesting children, and they have very large personalities."

"Do you like them enough to keep them for the rest of the summer?"

"Well I'm certainly not leaving them with you," Stanford answered. "And Fiddleford is sticking around in Gravity Falls to visit with his son this summer."

"And you'll tell their parents-?"
"I was out in the woods when a hunter mistook me for bigfoot."

"I was talking about me."

"Nothing. Chances are if I told them that I had a twin brother, they would think that I was senile."

Stanley didn't say anything. He pulled out the roll of bandages, and lifted his arm once again. The doctor's orders were to not put any dressings on the wounds because that could stop him from healing fully or cause even more infection. So long as he kept everything clean and waited, he would be fine. The stitches had been removed before he left, so now all there was to do was stop himself from catching something and dying before he could heal. Stanley began to wrap up his shoulder, fixing it with tape in places. At the end of it all, he used two bandage pins to help keep the bindings all in working order.

"So, what do you think of the kids?"

"They're kids."

"And?"

"Their parents are irresponsible morons."

"I'm sure they're better than our own were."

"At least our Pop never sent us to live with our criminal uncle for the summer, and then proceed to leave the continent without asking if that was ok with you beforehand."

"Huh, I guess he really did know how to be a decent parent deep down."

They both chuckled at this.

"The best thing he could do as a parent was not be one," Stanley replied.

"I'm sure Shermy begs to differ."

"Yeah, yeah I'm a monster for making him half an orphan."

Stanford did not know how to safely reply to that, so he chose to say nothing. Instead, he rolled up his pant leg. One didn't wear sweaters and shorts. Even though he currently was sweaterless, that was not going to stop him from wearing pants. Being in a hospital gown for several weeks insured that we would wear pants for the rest of his life as well. His wound, he could deal with himself, but Stanley remained sitting by the edge of the lake. Occasionally, he would pick up a pebble and throw it into the water, watching it splash and make.

While he dealt with the bandages, the twins started to swim. Mabel started splashing water at Dipper, he returned the favour. So Mabel turned to grabbing seaweed and throwing it at her brother. Dipper responded by dropping a handful of it down the back of her bathing suit. Mabel screamed, and she fell forwards into the water. Her pig squealed as well, and jumped in the water to rescue his owner. Soos joined them in the lake, making an even larger splash as he belly-flopped in from the edge.

Stanley quietly sighed. Stanford looked up at his brother, who was staring away from the group in the water. However, Stanford still knew that he had been watching them just moments before. He had caught the slight movement out of the corner of his eye. There was a sad, sort of wistful look in his eyes, something that he could understand. Watching the twins play reminded him of their own summers in Glass Shard Beach.
The lake setting was entirely different than the shore of New Jersey. It was quieter, there was less sand, and clutter. He supposed the only similarity it held to any of their summers was the twins playing in the water. Not that he was going to express any sort of sentimentally for something like that in front of him. Maybe if it was a life or death situation, but not for any reason less than that.

Dipper grabbed his sister by the shoulders. Then, using all of his weight, he pushed her underneath the water. But he suddenly fell backwards. Mabel had presumably grabbed him by the ankles. The girl resurfaced, and started to laugh at him. They did not seem to grow tired of their play-fighting. Fiddleford however, did. Eventually he appeared at the shore of the lake, and appeared to be scolding them for something. The twins both nodded, but quickly resumed what they were doing right after.

"Do you plan on changing that, or am I going to have to do that for you?" Stanley asked.

"I'm just airing it out."

"No, you're just oozing blood all over the place."

He was not oozing blood all over the place. There was only a small trickle on his leg, which he quickly tidied up. Stanford resumed changing his bandages before his brother could get any ideas. Once they were finished, Stanley gathered their things, and he started to push them back towards the campsite. Fiddleford had set up a fire, and he was boiling water to give them something safe to drink. Stanford supposed with how much water the twins and Soos were throwing at each other, they would be sick of it by the time that he had a steady supply to give them.

"You all cleaned up now?"

Fiddleford did not seem to be listening to what he was saying. The man was more focused on watching the fire, and trying to keep the campsite in working order than paying attention. Understandable, so Ford left him be. The man was already busy enough, trying to look after all of them and stop anyone from killing each other before they reached Gravity Falls.

"Good, good. Do you need any pain meds? I know you said Stanley's holding onto them, but I may have taken a few when he was sleeping, just in case."

"No, I'm fine. I don't need any now."

"Your shoulder didn't give you any trouble when you tried to clean it up."

"Stanley helped."

"That was nice of him."

Stanford looked over to his brother. He was sitting at the picnic table, resting his head on his knuckles. He had gone back to silently staring at the kids and Soos again, with the same expression on his face.

"Yes, it was..."
Fun fact: both stories are actually a part of my own childhood. The outhouse one was a terrible short story written by me, when I was like, nine. So it's pretty terrible. It was also inspired by my favourite firework type, The Burning Outhouse. You would light the firework in the chimney, and it would send up a bunch of rainbow-flares (The screaming kind too.), while the entire structure burned down to cinders. Actually, it was called The Burning Schoolhouse, but my parents didn't want me getting any bad ideas.

The story about a haunted school washroom was an urban legend at my old elementary school. That started after one of the girls (Whose name was not Annie Smith because I changed it for the story if it wasn't obvious already.) going there died of a brain tumor, before I even went to school.

Like usual, you'll understand what this means by the end of the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The night was dark, and the only visibility came from the flickering campfire. Crickets chirped, and the lake took on a quiet quality. The soft sound of the waves from before seemed to vanish. The fire crackled and popped occasionally, the world was alive with the sounds of the forest's night life. The sky above was crystal-clear, providing a brilliant view of the stars. Occasionally, a bat could be seen flying overhead. More than once, an owl hooted. It seemed to be stalking the area.

The group was all sitting around the campfire. Stan had dragged the picnic table all the way from its spot chained to a tree. (He had sawed through the chain just for the law-breaking pleasure earlier.) Ford had his wheelchair, and Soos was sitting next to Stan. The twins were together on the ground, with Fiddleford to their left. All of them reeked of bug spray, a futile attempt to ward off the mosquitos and blackflies. Fiddleford was using his many different tales about inventions to tell scary stories, instead of bedtime ones.

"And then, I turned it on. But something went horribly wrong. The robot's eyes turned a menacing, flickering amber. And before I knew what was happening IT STARTED TALKING ABOUT BUILDING A GATEWAY TO UNIMAGINABLE POWER! But of course he failed miserably because everyone knows that there's now humanly possible way to build something so ridiculous. Why, you'd probably need one of Ford's paranormal thingums and their magic to get you anywhere."

All was silent except for the singing of the crickets. Even the owl seemed to have gone silent. No one had even reacted to his story, and he had really tried to make it scary this time. Finally, Stanley decided to speak up.

"Uh, was that supposed to be scary?"

"Well, yes. I spent ten weeks trying to perfect that thing, only for it to start talkin' nonsense."

"Your bedtime stories were scarier than that," Stanley replied. "I'll tell you a real scary story. Once, there was a couple, in a car. They switched on the radio, and heard a report about a prisoner who had-"
"We've heard that one before," Dipper replied. "Hook-handed prisoner escapes and they find the hook on the door."

"Fine. How about this one? So, it was a dark night, and a lady was driving home from her school dance when a truck behind her started to flash the high-beams-"

"Murderer in the backseat," Fiddleford interrupted.

Stan crossed his arms.

"Aw come on! You ruined the ending!"

"Oh, I know!" Ford said. "A baby-sitter is watching two children for the night. Much like you, Dipper and Mabel. Everything seems to go fine, however, the girl feels like something is watching her throughout the night. Nothing has ever gone wrong when she watched the children before. But eventually, the parents get a call, and she-"

"They don't own a clown statue," Soos interrupted. "Come on dude, even I know that one. But the story no one knows it about a girl and her dog."

"Serial killer pretends to be the dog, licks the girl's hand so she feels safe, and in the morning, it turns out that the dog is dead," Mabel said.

"Alright, alright. How about someone comes up with an original ghost story?" Stan suggested.

"Oh! Oh! I got one! It's based off of this dream I had!" Soos said. "There was this weird British dog-man, and a talking triangle named B-"

"No dreams," Stan interrupted. "Those are just creepy."

The group was silent, as they all tried to think of a good, original ghost story. That did not involve creepy dreams. It was Soos who came up with an idea first.

"Ok dudes, I've got a great one! I call it, the Curse of the Haunted Outhouse! Now told through shadow puppets."

Soos grabbed the flashlight that was placed on the picnic table. He flicked it on, and placed it between his knees. The light was powerful, and it shone all the way over to the trees. This was where he had his make-shift screen, for it was dark. Then, he made a few practice shadows with his hands. He smiled, knowing that he had all of the group's attention.

"Once upon a time, in a small little village, there lived a girl."

Soos made a house-shaped shadow.

"Was she a girl like me?" Mabel asked

"No, no. Mary-Sue was nothing like you Mabel. First, she had blonde hair, and she was a total spoiled brat that no one liked."

"I don't understand the correlation between being blonde and being rich," Fiddleford huffed. "I mean, my granddaughter may be-

Soos made a sad-face gesture with his hands. Everyone stopped listening to Fiddleford and "ooohed" in admiration at his shadow puppet skills.
"So, in this small town, there was a hill. And there, right on top of the hill, was the town's only outhouse. One day, as Mary-Sue climbed up the hill to the outhouse, she did not return," Soos turned the happy face into a more sinister expression. "Even though no one in town liked her, they sent out a search party, but could find nothing. When the day was over, one man travelled back up to the outhouse. And it was there, that he discovered the body of Mary-Sue had fallen into the outhouse's well, you know. And it was so disgusting that she died!"

From behind them, there was a scream. Everyone jumped. The beam of light swung around wildly as Soos dropped the flashlight. Mabel grabbed her brother's arms in a vice-like grip, and Stan was half-way to reaching for his gun. Even though the sound had been rather distant, it was still rather startling to hear. It had at least come from across the lake, sound quickly traveled after all. But that did nothing to stop the story from seeming any less Soos-like. They all relaxed as the man-child fixed the flashlight, and started to recount the end of his story.

"And so, she died. The end!"

"What? That's it?" Dipper asked.

"What about the ghost?" Stanford added.

"Aw dude, there was supposed to be a ghost in that story?"

"It was very creative Soos," said Fiddleford.

"I liked it," Mabel chimed in, patting the man-child on the shoulder. "And your shadow puppets were cool as well. We should do a show one day!

"Really?"

"Definitely. We can write musical numbers and everything."

"Nice."

"Anyways, I have a story to tell too."

Stan shrugged at this.

"Well, let's hear it."

"Alright, well this one is a true story."

Instantly, Dipper groaned.

"Oh no, not this one again. Mabel."

"Dipper just doesn't like it because he got in trouble for going in the girl's washroom to investigate the ghost," she cut in.

"Hah! The story hasn't even started yet and I already like it," Stan said.

"Well, if only Dipper knows it, then I don't see why we can't hear it," Fiddleford added.

"Go on, let's hear it."

"Flashlight please."
Mabel was given the flashlight. She switched it on, and placed it underneath her chin. The light only illuminated part of her face, and made her braces look like they were floating in the air. She took in a deep breath, and rolled her shoulders. After a moment longer of mentally preparing, she began.

"Long ago, before I was even born, a school was built. An elementary school, one of the finest in the area. It was new. They had those fancy new-fangled box-computers that our friend here invented."

Fiddleford blushed.

"Uh, Mabel Honey, that's not exactly-"

Mabel leaned over and pressed a finger to his lips.

"Hush! I'm telling the story now!"

The man nodded, and he pushed away her hand.

"Everything about seemed perfect, normal, at Eggbert Elementary Public School. So normal, THAT IT WAS WEIRD!"

Everyone for Dipper flinched when Mabel yelled this. He had heard the story enough times not to be surprised with each twist and turn in the story.

"Eggbert Elementary Public School seemed like a perfect place. They had a good budget, no one had been suspended ever since the school had opened. The students all got high grades, the vending machine had pop instead of water, and the office ladies would actually let you eat the candy they kept in those fancy glass bowls. And not only was it good candy, it wasn't the healthy kind school tries to force on us now! Everything about the school seemed happy and promising for years to come. But everything changed, when a horrible, terrible tragedy occurred. One of the students, a girl named Annie Smith died of a horrible disease that no doctor could cure her of!"

The group all pretended to act shocked at the statement. Dipper rolled his eyes, but he gasped and shook his head with the rest of the group.

"She just, died?" Soos asked.

"Dead!" Mabel repeated. "The school held a mandatory memorial service for her instead of classes, the day before her funereal. However, not all of the students showed up to pay their respects. Three girls, three foolish, stupid girls, decided to skip the assembly because it was boring! So they decided to hide out in a place where no teacher would ever find them! The girl's second-floor washroom!"

"No!" Soos cried. "Not the girl's second-floor washroom!"

"Yes, the girl's second-floor washroom! And this would trigger a series of events so terrible, so horrible, that the years to follow would be passed down in Eggbert Elementary Public School history! Everything that continued to happen would all be connected to the death of Annie Smith in some way!

"It all began when the students first returned to school on Monday. The brand of toilet paper, had been changed! The once soft and cotton-white toilet paper had been replaced! Yes, replaced! With the very same brand that still resides within schools across the world today. It was brown-yellow, and practically see-through. And whenever you wiped-"

"Uh, you don't need to get into that much detail Sweetie," Stan quickly said.
"It was one-ply! And rumour has it, it was made from the bones of students who had failed a class in school. Yes, their very bones! Ground up and mixed with water, before spread out by a steamroller on the cold, cold, floor of the gymnasium. What was the name brand of this toilet paper you may ask? SMITH! IT WAS SMITH! THE VERY SAME LAST NAME OF ANNIE SMITH WHO WENT TO EGGBERT ELEMENTARY SCHOOL AND DIED OF A HORRIBLE DISEASE!"

Ford did not gasp with the rest this time. He rubbed his chin, and nodded along with what she was saying.

"Yes, that is a rather interesting coincidence. Do go on."

"The next, event, at the school did not happen until one day, the students noticed that there was a picture of Annie Smith in the hall. You see, in the front entrance of the school, there was a little sitting area, if the office got to crowded. And so, her picture was placed there, right between two dusty, fake trees. Now, the hall closest to this area was where all the graduate photos were kept. Since the school's opening in the eighties, picture after picture had been hung up on that wall. All depicting the faces of the grade eight classes. And Annie's would have been next. If not for her tragic death earlier that year!"

"What does the picture have to do with her death?" Fiddleford inquired, tucking his knees up to his chin.

"I'm getting to that part!" Mabel snapped, shining the flashlight in his eyes. "After her picture was hung, strange things started to happen to the other pictures. Even though the plaques were made of wood, the printed photos started to peel off of them. They warped, and it got to the point where one of the photos, the set that she would have been in if she had not died, fell to the ground and shattered. The school got them all repaired, and said that some misfit student had to do with it. However, that was not the case, and they all knew it. Eggbert Elementary Public School didn't have any misfits. At least, not yet... So the school hung the photos on the second floor, in a trophy case far away from the photo of Annie Smith."

The sound of splashing came from the lake. Instantly, the group all turned their heads in the direction of the water. However, they could not see anything in the darkness, beyond the reflection of the moonlight on the still surface. The floundering noises continued, and did not seem to go away. They tried to ignore it, but this was difficult, especially when they seemed to be so loud. Stan reached for his gun, ready to shoot if something really was there. Soos huddled closer to Stan, and Dipper did the same with his sister. For a moment, it was silent, as they all started around the campsite, wondering if there really was something out that night. Mabel recovered, and started her story again.

"The third, and most creepy thing of all then happened at Eggbert Elementary Public School! And it happened, in the girl's washroom. The girl's second floor washroom, where the three girls hid before. Now, to give you some background on this washroom. There were nine stalls exactly in there. If you were to walk into the washroom, five stalls were to your right. One of them was the wheel-chair designated stall. There were only three on the left, near the back of the bathroom, because the sinks, mirrors, and hand-driers took up most of the space. Now, all of the stalls were painted as bright red as a fire truck, and only had normal graffiti on them before. Boy's names, lists of who was the cutest to who was the least cutest—"

"I knew it! I knew girls did that!" Stanford interrupted. "But you would never believe me! It was always just me being paranoid!"

"They still would have said I was the cuter twin," Stan replied, crossing his arms.

Mabel shined the light in their eyes. Both men hissed, and they shielded their faces from the
brightness. Having silenced the group once again, Mabel resumed telling her ghost story.

"But, new words started to appear in the wall. Annie's name, swear words, mean drawings of other girls. It wasn't like before, where all girls teamed up to make fun of boys. There was trouble in the henhouse."

"Who taught you that expression?" Fiddleford asked.

"ANNIE SMITH!" Mabel yelled. "Haha, just kidding. I learned it in school. The very same school where this ghost story took place! Now, out of these nine stalls, all of them had been in perfect working order. However, they all started to fall in to disrepair. The second stall's lock broke, so no one could use it. Then, the third stall in got its toilet seat replaced for mysterious reasons. But this was no normal toilet seat replacement, it was black! Even though the rest of the toilet was white! The fourth stall had a working lock, but the light above it stopped turning on. So it was creepily darker there. And no one used the wheelchair stall because that was for people with disabilities, so we weren't supposed to go in there.

"Now, the three stalls to the left are where things really got interesting. The first one, closest to the sinks, had its lock get stuck. But you could get it to work if you knew the trick. By turning it a full three-sixty clock-wise and then making a sharp turn counter-clock wise, you could get the golden lock to appear! Unlike all of the others, which were silver, this one was gold, and when the light touched it, there was a strange, rainbow glow that surrounded it.

"The stall next to it wasn't so lucky. Not only was the light broken, the entire lock was ripped out. If you wanted to use it, you would have to ask a friend to hold the door for you. And cover the hole where the lock once was. And the last stall, this stall... Not only was the light broken, not only was the lock torn off it, but it had a black toilet seat! And these three stalls, were said to represent the three places you could go to, after death. Heaven, purgatory, and a word I'm not allowed to say. Woooooo!"

Mabel flicked the flashlight on and off, and she wriggled her fingers. However, no one seemed scared by this news.

"Well, what did you think?"

"You got into weirdly specific detail about things that didn't matter and you used the words the very same too much," said Dipper.

"Why did both stories tonight involve bathrooms?" Stan asked. "And how come nothing else happened in the bathroom?"

"There are a few other stories that go along with it: the mysterious shadow-man who appeared in the boy's bathroom, oh and those three stalls to the left were the ones that the girls hid in during the assembly. One redeemed herself, one did nothing, and the other went bad. There are lights that appear in the schoolyard on parent-teacher night, mysterious drops of blood in the girl's washroom toilet water-"

"There's a logical explanation for blood in a girl's washroom," Stanford said. "It is the ideal place to perform demonic rituals after all. The other things however, these are the clear symptoms of a level seven ghost! Eight if she ever appeared in a mirror when you chanted her name."

"Really?"

"No doubt her spirit was in turmoil because she somehow knew that three students did not show up
to her school memorial! Can you think of any other details?"

Stan yawned, and then stretched his arms.

"Yeah, while that was interesting and all, I think it's time we went to bed."

"I'm actually going to side with Stanley on this one," Fiddleford said. "Kids, go brush your teeth and then head to bed."

"I already have."

"Me too," Mabel lied.

"Mabel, I saw you eating marshmallows as Soos told his story," Fiddleford pointed out. "What would your orthodontist say if he had to look at your braces now?"

The girl sheepishly hung her head and admitted, "They're messy."

"Exactly. Go get your things and head to the washrooms."

Mabel nodded, and got up from her spot. The washrooms consisted of a small cinderblock building that was just a little down the road. The lights were on, and were visible once she got to the edge of the campsite. In hand, she had her toothbrush, special braces floss, and toothpaste. Mabel looked back at the campsite. They were all standing now. Fiddleford was dousing the fire with water, and Stan was pushing Ford towards the RV. She could saw Waddles climb up the steps of the RV before Ford could get on. Then, Mabel turned back to the road.

The gravel path was dark, and she could barely see a foot in front of her. The bathrooms may have been illuminated brightly, but it was practically impossible for her to tell where she was going and what she might step in. It was also impossible for her to see what might be hiding between the trees. However, she had to brush her teeth. She couldn't just get away with lying. She needed to brush her teeth, and that was that. Reluctantly, she took a step forwards. The crunching sound caused her to stop, and look around. There was nothing, other than herself, at least as far as she knew. But the sound of her footsteps just seemed so loud.

She felt like everyone in the park could hear her, see her. She felt like she was being watched. Pricks of sweat start to appear on her forehead. A wind brushed through the trees, and a rustling sound began. It did not stop when the wind did. Mabel's hair start to stand on end. Something was there with her. She knew it. The girl ran all the way to the bathrooms and did not stop until she had reached the safety of the light. There were moths fluttering around it, and the orange-yellow light made a slight buzzing sound. The interior was not very nice. The floors were concrete, and the sink seemed to drip permanently.

When she entered, the hand-dryer turned on. There was a boy, around her age, drying his hair with it. He was soaking wet, and was wearing a Boy Scout's attire. She did like a boy in uniform. But this was not how epic summer romances were supposed to go. Mabel wondered if she had walked into the wrong bathroom, or if it was the boy's fault. But then she saw that there were no urinals, so she had to be in the right place. Slowly, the boy turned his head to face her.

"H-hey there! I-I didn't know these bathrooms were co-ed!" Mabel; nervously laughed.

The Boy Scout grinned at her. Mabel instantly felt very uncomfortable when she saw this. He smiled with too many teeth.
"They're not."

"Oh. Well uh, should I go or-?"

"I just need a working dryer," he calmly explained. "You see, I *accidentally* fell into the lake."

Mabel thought back to the scream from across the lake, and all of the splashing sounds that they had heard while she told her story. So it had just been a harmless potential boyfriend all along! That was good! And he seemed totally ok with the whole bathroom situation. So, she set down her things and started to brush her teeth.

However, out of the corner of her eye, she made sure to watch the Boy Scout as he attempted to dry himself off. Something about the way he was still smiling at her, and his eyes was very wrong. Why was it that everyone seemed to have *yellow* eyes lately? Was that a trend? Was she missing out on something here?

"What's your name? Mine's Mabel!"

"It's uh- ah- T. Rust-Worthy."

"Oh. What does the T stand for?"

"Ah. Haha. Good question. It's for uh, Teddy! Like the human president on Rush Mountmore!"

"Ha! You're funny!"

"Yes! I Teddy the hy-oo-am, am incredibly funny! And human! And a Boy Scout too! The epitome of human normal!"

Mabel rinsed off her toothbrush and gathered her things.

"Well, it was nice meeting you."

The Boy Scout stopped trying to dry off as soon as she said this. He followed her out of the bathroom, and as she started to walk back to the campsite. And he was still smiling. Alright, that was really creepy. She was pretty and all, but she hadn't gotten to the stage in life where she could make boys want to follow her everywhere she walked. Unless she had suddenly developed that skill on their road trip?

"So, is your camp this way?"

"No. I need to swim across the lake to get there."

"Then why were you trying to dry off?"

"Do you have any siblings, *Mabel*?"

"I have a twin brother named Dipper. But that doesn't really answer my-"

The Boy Scout was gone. Mabel did a double take, and then she walked around in a circle. But he had vanished without a trace. The girl shivered. Maybe all those ghost stories were starting to get to her head more than she had realized. There was probably a logical explanation for him vanishing.

That did nothing to stop her from running back to the campsite.
Chapter End Notes

Made sense didnit’? ^^
Remember that story idea I mentioned about the shape-shifter? This is the shameless advertising for that. It's called Kindred Spirits, and it's mainly humour and family-oriented with a small serving of angst on the side. You should definitely read it after this chapter.

Read, review, and enjoy!

When Stanford was helped out of the RV, he noticed that it was suspiciously lower to the ground than usual. He looked around, and realized that the tires of the vehicle had been slashed. Well, perhaps slashed was sugar-coating it. The tire's hub caps had been stolen, and the rubber had been shredded and torn to bits. Pieces were scattered everywhere on the grass, and the rims of the wheels were dented, and burned in places. How had none of them heard this happening last night?!

Stanley was standing near the lake and talking on the phone. Even from where he was, it was clear to see that his brother was furious. His words were incomprehensible, but nonetheless angry. His face was red as a tomato, and he was pacing along the shore. If he had been any more angry, the grass around him looked like it might have ignited. Fiddleford was tending to the campfire, it appeared that he had made breakfast.

His great-niece was sitting at the table, facing towards the RV. Dipper was sitting across from her. Or so he thought. As he approached the table, Stanford realized that it was not Dipper, it was a boy about his age. He was wearing a very messy, soaking-wet Boy Scout's uniform, and seemed to be having trouble using his knife properly. Either that, or he just enjoyed stabbing his sausages. His great-niece looked rather uncomfortable with the whole thing. She was tightly hugging her pig, and her food was completely untouched. When he got closer, her eyes grew wide. Mabel jumped up from her seat and ran over to him, pig and all.

"Grunkle Ford! You're awake!" Mabel said, her voice a little too bright and cheery. "Teddy was just asking about you!"

"Teddy?"

"Teddy Rust-Worthy," she repeated, settling her pig on the ground.

"T. Rust-Worthy? His name, is trust worthy?!"

"Yup."

Stanford had a fair idea of where this was all going. The horrible fake name that had a double-meaning, the mysterious appearance of a complete stranger. The Boy Scout slowly turned around, and smiled at him with all too many teeth. Then, he went back to making a mess with his breakfast. And there were the bright yellow eyes he had come to recognize.

Of course. He just couldn't be cut some slack. One look at the Boy Scout told Stanford exactly who had slashed the tires of the RV the previous night. But he doubted anyone else had an idea on who
had decided to completely annihilate the wheels. He pressed a hand to his forehead, and sighed, trying to mentally prepare himself for the conversation he knew was coming.

"Oh boy."

"Oh boy is right." Mabel echoed. "I mean, he's ok I guess when it comes to looks, but he's not really my type, and I just can't get rid of him! I don't want to be mean, but he just can't take a hint!"

"Not your, type?"

"You know, boyfriend material?"

"Oh yes, of course."

While he did not have that much experience when it came to dating, Stanford got an idea. He knew that the guy was incredibly creeped out by his great-nice flirting with him. He had run away the last time she had clung to his leg and refused to let go. If he could just change her mind on the matter, he would be gone in no time.

Stanford rested a hand on his great-niece's shoulder, and pushed her closer to the boy again. Mabel dug her heels into the grass, just as reluctant to move forwards as he was. So she tried to move him closer to the Boy Scout as well. This time, Stanford stuck the heels of his shoes into the ground, all while pushing his niece forwards. She returned the favour, and soon enough, they were both standing behind the kid.

"So, you're Teddy?"

"I sure am!"

"So how long have you been dating my great-niece?"

The boy choked on his food, and Mabel glared at him.

"We are-"

"-not dating."

"You two even finish each other's sentences!" Stanford said, raising his voice. "That is so-"

"Grunkle Ford, stop it!" Mabel hissed, jabbing him in the side with her elbow.

"Young love is so-

Stanford ended the phone call with a frustrated huff. Stupid mechanics. He had to pay full-price for those stupid things, because apparently it wasn't possible to buy unsafe tires. Well he'd show them! He tucked the phone back in his pocket, and turned away from the lake. Stanford was awake now, so it looked like Dipper was the only one still sleeping. He should probably tell Soos to go check on the kid to make sure he wasn't in a coma.

In Dipper's place, there was a strange-looking kid, wearing a nerdy uniform. What kind of a looser wore an ascot anyways? Stanford's eyes seemed to grow especially large when he looked at his brother. He was saying something rather loudly to the kids, and he arm gestures he was making seemed large, very exaggerated. Mabel was red in the face, and she was shaking her head. The kid looked like she wanted to be anywhere but there. Something told Stanley to go over and see what was going on with the two weirdos.
"-why it reminds me of a story about-" Stanford stopped when he walked up. "Why Stanley, I was just telling Mabel's boyfriend here."

The boy scowled, and crossed his arms. Stanley realized there was something familiar about the kid, and he understood why a moment later. Stanford was trying to get rid of the little brat, but it clearly wasn't working. Given how terrible his acting was, Stanley didn't find it that surprising. This was a job for a true con-artist. He knew exactly how to get rid of the little monster, and maybe even get Fiddleford in the act while he was doing so.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. Boyfriend?" Stanley asked. "Where'd this kid even come from?"

"The lake."

Turning in the direction where Fiddleford was, Stanley cupped his hands around his mouth, and hollered;

"MABEL, WHERE DID YOU SAY YOU FOUND THAT NEW BOYFRIEND OF YOURS AGAIN?!"

Fiddleford looked over at the group, and then back at the campfire. He seemed to decided that monitoring the flames was not worth it. He walked over to them, gradually looking more and more upset with each step he took towards them.

"Mabel, you have a boyfriend?"

"Grunkle Fiddleford-"

"Well I'm sorry to say this, but both of you are much to young and nowhere near emotionally mature enough to be dating. Especially since you haven't even known each other for twenty-four hours."

The boy opened his mouth to speak.

"But-"

"No buts about it young man," he interrupted, placing his hands on his hips. "Now it's fine for you to just be friends, but neither of you should try dating until you're much older, and know each other better. It's just not healthy to try forcing things like these."

"But-"

"I say he's got bad intentions," Stanley said, rolling up his sleeves.

"But-"

"Clearly," Stanford agreed, rapidly nodding along with him.

"But I just want to-"

"I say we throw him into the lake! Back from where he came!"

"Now Stanley, I don't think we need to go that far."

"Look! I'm not interested in your great-niece! She's too weird! And not in the good way!"

There was a deathly calm silence after the boy said this. Stanley looked at Fiddleford. Fiddleford looked at Stanley. Then, Fiddleford rubbed his hands together. Slowly, he said, "Perhaps, in times of
extreme necessity, it would be socially acceptable to throw a child into a body of water."

They both glared at the Boy Scout, who realized his mistake much too late. It was Fiddleford who reached him first. He grabbed the boy by the ear, dragged him over to the water. Stanley joined in, grabbing the screaming kid's legs. Fiddleford picked him up by the arms. On the count of three, they swung him back and forth, and then sent him flying into the water. All in the meantime, Stanford and Mabel cheered in the background. The boy resurfaced, treading water and sputtering in surprise. Fiddleford dusted off his hands, and Stanley flipped the bird at the little snot. The kid started swimming away from their camp, not wanting to risk their wrath for a second time.

Stanley sat down at the picnic table, across from his great-niece. Stanford was sitting next to the girl. Stanley looked at the plate in front of him and wrinkled his nose in disgust. The boy had stuck his knife into the table, and it was clear that before he had been carving little triangles into the wooden surface. Man was that kid a psycho or what? The sausage was completely torn to shreds as well, just like... The RV tires...

"WHY THAT LITTLE BRAT! IT WAS YOU! YOU WERE THE ONE WHO DESTROYED THEM!"

The kid looked even more terrified when he hear this. Stanley got to his feet and ran towards the edge of the lake. The kid saw this, and started swimming faster than before.

"THAT'S TWELVE HUNDRED DOLLARS WORTH OF DAMAGE!"

Stanley stopped running when he reached the shore of the water. He debated going in and chasing after the kid, but he didn't know if he could catch up to him. Besides, he wasn't really up for a swim right now. For a third time, he returned to the picnic table, where Fiddleford was cleaning up the mess, and Mabel was nibbling on her toast. Knowing that the kid was not going to eat the sausages he had stolen the previous week, what with her owning a pig and all, Stanley plucked them off her plate and ate them himself.

As he ate, Stanley looked anywhere but at his great-niece. Soos had gone off, and Dipper must have really been in a coma, because he was still not out of bed even after all the yelling. Stanford looked like he was still mentally recovering from another encounter with whatever that thing stalking him was. He probably needed some space, and some time to think.

"What a weirdo," Stanley muttered, shaking his head.

"Thanks for getting rid of him," Stanford and Mabel simultaneously said.

They looked at each other, and grinned slightly. Stanley just rolled his eyes and crossed his arms.

"Yeah, yeah, it was nothing."

"I'm not that weird, am I?" Mabel asked. "I mean, he was the one drying to dry off his uniform in the girl's bathroom!"

"He was in the girl's bathroom?" Stanford incredulously asked. "That's how you met him?"

"Well, yeah. He said the other washroom didn't have a working dryer."

"Now that's just creepy." Stanley said. "At least you're not weird and creepy."

"Just weird."
"The Pines family doesn't do normal kid. You're sitting across from an incredibly handsome genius and his weird nerdy twin brother."

"Hey! I have made countless scientific achievements in my lifetime!" Stanford defended. "And I'm the genius in the family!"

"A genius with no common sense. Who's ever even heard of that?" Stanley asked, gesturing towards his twin. "See, your brother's pretty smart, and his has common sense. Stanford? It's just weird how little street smarts he has!"

"Stanley!"

"It's true. Poindexter here is pretty weird. Your brother is too. Soos can fix anything with duct tape and lick his own elbows."

"But none of you have girlfriends!"

"I'll have you know that I've been divorced! Twelve times!"

"Twelve times?"

"I find that hard to believe," Stanford replied.

"The moral of the story is that people are terrible and you should just avoid that whole romance thing as much as possible. Also don't try to strike it rich by marrying rich. It just winds up with a bunch a legal issues."

"Er, right."

Mabel excused herself from the table. She and her pig went to go wander along the lake shore. They were both clearly looking out for the Boy Scout, should he ever dare try to return to their campsite. There were no visible signs of him though. At least, not from the picnic table.

"So what are we going to do about the tires?" Stanford asked.

"Well, the way I see it, we've got two options," Stanley said. "We either salvage some tires, or find a new RV."

"Find a new RV? Just how exactly are we going to do that?" Stanford asked.

"We go to a rental place and get one."

"And how will we even get to a rental place, when we have no mode of transportation?"

"We'll just ask those forest nerd for help," Stanley replied. "They've got golf carts. And all we need to do is st- ask to borrow one while we look at new rentals."

"Stanley we are not stealing one of their golf carts!"

"It's just a little forceful borrowing," Stanley dismissed. "It's not like anyone's going to get hurt."

"Yes it will! Your stealing got me hurt! I took two bullets to the shoulder and the leg Stanley!"

"That was a mistake!"

"That was your fault!"
"Alright then, why don't you fork over the twelve hundred dollars for replacements?"

"Why is it so hard for you to just pay for things? You have the money! I know you've got it all tucked away somewhere!"

"That stash is for emergencies only!"

"And this isn't?"

"Not if there are no officials to bribe or criminals to scare off."

"You know, I could always pay for the tires," Fiddleford volunteered.

"Stay out of this," they both snapped.

"You've already paid for enough," Stanford went on in a much kinder voice. "And seeing as Stanley threatened you at gunpoint to come on this trip, literally."

"I had no choice!"

"What about the money for bribing officials? Why not bribe the nurse?"

"Money doesn't work on crazy people."

"It works on you," Stanford retorted.

"Oh yeah? And what are you saying?"

"You're crazy Stanley," he calmly replied. "You're crazy for stealing pigs from your arch-nemesis to aggravate him farther, you're crazy for forcing us all on a cross-country road-trip to escape said nemesis, and you're absolutely out of your mind if you think I'm going to let you steal again, and wind up with someone else getting hurt."

"Fine! Here!" Stanley reached into one of his pockets, and tossed a roll of cash at his brother. "Take it! Go call a tow truck and buy some replacements."

Stanley got up from his seat and stormed down to the edge of the lake. He began walking to the left, in the opposite direction of where Mabel and her pig were wandering around. There was no use in yelling at the kid. He did not stop walking away from his brother until the campsite almost entirely out of sight. Soon enough, it appeared to be completely hidden behind the trees. The ground started to get more marshy as he walked closer to the water, but he did not really care.

Stan finally came to a stop when he reached the small peninsula, where he and Stanford had talked before. He walked right up to the end of the peninsula, and crouched down there. Most of the area was surrounded by tall, reedy grass. Bulrushes sprouted in places too. There was a beaver resting near the tip of the peninsula, half in the water and half out. It appeared to be enjoying the rays of the sun, and was not scared away by his presence. The thing just stared at him, with small, beady eyes.

"What are you looking at?"

Stanley felt a little bit dumb for actually talking to a beaver, but he didn't want to yell at anyone else either. Well, unless that person was Stanford.

"He just doesn't get it," Stanley huffed. "I didn't spend ten years on the streets to spend money whenever!"
The beaver opened its mouth, almost as if it were sticking its tongue out at him. Instead, it ate some of the leaves off of a near-by plant. The animal chewed with its mouth open, and it made slight crunching noises as it did so. Sort of like Soos. But more... beaverish. Stanley made a face back at the animal.

"I'm not like Fiddlesticks, who can just make one of his computers a slightly different colour and still have people lining up to buy it. He's all set and making money like no one's business. Meanwhile, I'm not getting anything unless half of what I get from a heist is spent on the supplies, or bailing out Soos whenever he messes up."

Having finished chewing on the leaves, the beaver closed its eyes, and it sank deeper into the lake.

"There's the money that's tied down, stashed away in different bank accounts under different names. And right after that, you've got the still on-going bribes. I'm gonna' be pulling of schemes until I'm on my death bed if I want to have enough money to keep me out of jail."

The beaver turned its head in the direction of the campsite. Mabel had wandered a little further away from the area. The mountains started around the place where she was now. The terrain became more rocky. The longer she walked, the higher above the water she was. There was a straight drop downwards from where she stood.

Trees clung to the side of the little cliff, and grew in odd shapes. She at least had the common sense to stay away from the edge of the cliff that was forming. Occasionally, she would peer over, or throw a rock into the water, watching it splash below. Her pig seemed mysteriously missing, maybe she didn't realize that he was gone. Stanley looked away from the kid, and back at the beaver.

"Mabel? What does the kid have to do with anything?"

The beaver opened one eye, but quickly closed it again.

"She's not the reason why I'm angry!"

It rose slightly above the water, and gave a wide yawn. Then, it reached out a paw, and rested it on his knee. Stan reached for the beaver's mouth. It did not seem to mind as he moved his lips, making it look as if he were actually forming words.

"But Stan," said the beaver. "You know that you've been avoiding her."

"So?" Stan asked, crossing his arms and rolling his eyes. "That doesn't mean anything!"

"I think you're mad at yourself for yelling at her," the beaver said.

"What do you know? You're just a beaver!"

"You regret doing it because you like both of them."

"Ha! As if I could ever like two kids! I'm a stone-cold, heartless criminal mastermind!"

"You're still a human being Stan. You have feelings too."

"I don't like them!"

"You care about their safety Stanley, so you want to keep them at arm's length so they don't get hurt because of your lifestyle."

"Shut up beaver. You don't know what you're talking about."
"Don't be afraid to care about people Stanley."

"Its hard when everyone I care about ends up leaving me."

The beaver pulled away from his hands. It smacked its tail, splashing water everywhere. Stanley fell backwards from his crouching position, and landed in the marshy ground with a very loud squelch.

"Gah! Stupid beaver!" Stanley yelled, shaking a fist at the animal.

The beaver dove off into the lake, swimming off to do more beaver things. It created a small trail of water in the path it was going. Stan picked up a rock, and was planning on throwing it at the beaver, when his eyes landed on Mabel. The kid was on her hands and knees, and was curiously peering down at the water. There was something moving behind her, in the trees. At first he thought it was the pig, but it was too tall to be the kid's pet.

The shadow of the forest hid whatever was there from the light of day, and Stanley had to squint to get a better look at the thing. It moved closer, right behind his great-niece. Then, the thing stepped into the light. His blood ran cold as he first saw what it was. He would recognize those nerdy uniforms and unnecessary ascot anywhere.

It was the Boy Scout-life guard-nurse-thing from all the times before. And he did not look very happy. He was still dripping wet, and completely muddy. There was seaweed clinging to his arms and legs. The perma-grin he normally wore was now a scowl, and he looked ready to burn a hole through his great-niece with his eyes alone. Stanley felt a cold sweat break out all over, and his heart began to pound. Stanley started to run along the shallows of the lake, not caring that he was getting his shoes all wet.

"KID! LOOK OUT!"

Luckily, Mabel looked up when she heard him yelling. Stanley doubted she could actually make out what he was saying from her spot. He pointed to the Boy Scout.

"BEHIND YOU!"

She turned her head, but there was nothing that she could do. Stanley could only watch as his great-niece was pushed off the cliff.

"NO!"
Forty-Two Half Dollars

Chapter Notes

H-happy birthday to me! (And...)

H-h-happy... Birthday to m-me. (And J-J-...)

We're seventeen thousand and three...

Birthday... Mine and- sob- Jason Ritter's. The... *continues to sniffl-* voice of... Dipper from... G-G-...

I can't even bring myself to use the same old birthday song when I've used it every year...

Somehow, the finale was both the best and worst early birthday present I have ever had...

So, here's my little generic spiel on everything ending now that I've had some time to mentally recover. Cute... Mysterious. Funny. Dark... EVERYTHING CHANGED WHEN THE FIRE NATION ATTACKED! Ah haha, whoops, spilled that joke too soon. My first episode of Gravity Falls was Fight Fighters. Everything changed when the Fire Na- I mean, I met my waifu- I mean, I saw Rumble McSkirmish and was like, I like, like of these characters, and the stories, the humour, the animation...

The episode that really got me hooked was Carpet Diem. When I saw those glasses and the secret room, like a million other people, I knew then and there that Stanley had a twin, and decided to share the theory with the fanbase... Only to quickly discover that it had literally been speculated from since the second episode. Of course, that didn't stop all the other, different theories that went on in my head after that, and have continued since that summer's day in 2013. Theories turned into fics, and art. Crack ships turned into serious ships, and then back into crack ships... This epic show helped keep me company through a pretty big transitional period in my life, and I'll always be grateful for that. Looking back, I cringe. Only at my younger self of course. I cringe anytime I think about myself. Euh, cringing now. But I'm getting off track.

This show and its great fanbase have always been there, and it really makes me feel less... Alone. I'm going through yet another one of those transitional periods now, but this time, I know I can handle it, and learn from my past experiences. Bottom line, this show was great, and I never ever never had a crush on Rumble McSkirmish and/or Agent Trigger. You can guarantee that I'll be sticking around this fandom for the rest of eternity! Axolotls have miraculous regeneration abilities you know, much better than humans.

-Evil-Ekat

...How old am I now?

How old am I now?

That's none of your business.
"I hate this."

Stanford and Dipper looked at each other, realizing that they had spoken in union. Stanford might have grinned at the boy if not for the circumstances. But the chairs were uncomfortable, the smell of disinfectant seemed to cling to the air, and the constant sounds of people coughing and sniffling, never seeming to end.

There was a woman and her gurgling baby sitting behind them. The infant seemed fascinated by Ford's hair; she constantly grabbed tufts of it in her little fists. Ford was patiently tolerating it, but he was not sure how many more times he could stomach losing extra hair before it was too much. It wasn't like he was growing a lot at this age, and he was not so sure about going bald. Although, it could prove to give some benefits. No hair hygiene to worry about, saving him time in the mornings, it could no longer get in his eyes...

These thoughts were all petty distractions. Even those could not keep him focused for very long. He hated being in the hospital. Every time a nurse entered the emergency room, he nearly jumped out of his seat. His hairs constantly stood on end, as he anticipated a different nurse to suddenly reappear. He had not shown up yet. But that didn't mean he wasn't expecting him to try something after Mabel...

The baby was patting his hair with her slobber-covered fingers now. Oh how he just wanted to go home. He wanted out of the emergency room, he wanted to be away from his crazy brother, and he wanted to jump in Lake Gravity Falls. Maybe that would finally get rid of the disgusting hospital feeling that never seemed to leave him. He would bathe in tomato juice if it meant that it would go away.

"Grunkle Stan, you can let go of me," Mabel said.

"No," Stan sharply answered.

His nibling was wrapped up in exactly six blankets, and two towels. Stanley had not let go of the girl since he had retrieved her from the lake, so she was still in her soaking wet clothing. The girl was already tiny to begin with, but when cocooned in so many colourful layers, she looked even smaller. Stanley was holding her in what appeared to be a mixture between a death-grip and a hug. His hands were trembling, and his gaze was focused on the girl's head.

Despite that, there was a vacant, far-off look in his eyes. Stanley's face was devoid of emotion. Somehow, it was much more terrifying than any of his diabolical smiles. He could always tell what his brother was thinking before. Whether it be planning crimes, or lying at inopportune times, he knew better than anyone else what was going on in his head. Seeing nothing at all was just somehow worse to look at. Was he planning something? Was he angry? Annoyed? There was no way to tell, and no way to predict what he might do next.

"Really guys, I'm fine. We don't have to waste our time in the hospital."

"Mabel, you need to rest," Fiddleford replied. "If you truly do have a concussion, which I can guarantee because Ford has twelve PhDs, and I have medical training, it would be better if you took it easy."
"Yeah dude, you've really gotta' chill," Soos said. "It's not healthy to stress out when your head's all banged up."

"If you know I have a con- concus-"

"Concussion."

"That. Then why do we need to be here? Hospitals are so-" she wrinkled her nose and made a face. "Blech."

"While hospitals are indeed blech, we need a real doctor to check. The water may have been deep enough to catch you, but there were many rocks in there too. We need to make sure that there's no internal bleeding, or-"

"Internal bleeding?!" Mabel nervously asked.

"Stanford! What he meant to say was extra damage," Fiddleford corrected, patting her shoulder. "There's no need to worry about any kind of internal bleeding. You just close your eyes and rest."

"But-"

Just then, another nurse entered the room. She glanced down at her clipboard, and then called out," One, Mabel Pines?"

Stanley rose, as did the rest of the group. The nurse eyed them critically.

"Are you all named Mabel Pines?"

"No, but-"

"And is the current Mabel Pines capable of walking?"

"Yes but-"

"Which one of you was her great-uncle again?"

"I am," three voices simultaneously chimed in.

"Alright," she sighed, pressing a hand to her head. "Which one of you is not her great-uncle?"

"We are."

"The two children. Of course."

"Hey, I'm an adult!" Soos protested.

Shifting Mabel to one arm, Stanley fished around in his pocket. He slapped a wad of cash in the nurse's hand. Then, he pushed past her, and started to walk down the hall. The nurse was dumbstruck for a moment, but recovered. She tailed after the group, feebly trying to protest that the doctor would not tolerate it, but she made no effort to return the cash Stanley had given her. However, the doctor did. At least, only somewhat. Stanley wound up staying, mainly because he was the one with the cash. Dipper did too, because he refused to leave the room so long as Stanley was there with her. Stanford couldn't really blame the boy after everything that Stanley had done to them.

"What do we do now?" Stanford asked.
"Gifts dude, we totally gotta’ find her the most radical, tubular thing that’s out there."

"Young people still use those words?" Stanford asked.

"Nope! Just me!"

"Soos does have a point," Fiddleford responded. "We should find something nice, to help cheer her up."

"Stuffies dudes. Giant. Stuffies."

"Mabel already has plenty of stuffed animals," Fiddleford sighed. "She must have sweater for every single one that she owns."

"That is true. Let's scout out there area first, see what stores are available."

It was more of an excuse to get out of the hospital than anything, but no one was arguing with him. They skipped past the hospital gift shop, knowing that everything within it would be overpriced and not worth it anyways. They could find better gifts elsewhere. It was evening outside, and the city streets were illuminated in multi-coloured lights. On the road, traffic whizzed by, loudly blaring at the world.

The sky was clouded over, and the slight rumbling of thunder could be heard over the traffic. In the distance, the clouds were occasionally lit up with a bright white flash of light. The air felt laden with the scents of the city and the coming rainstorm. A strange sort of pressure weighed upon all of their shoulders, almost as if the skyscrapers above were pressing down on them. Ford felt his arm twitch slightly, and a brief wave of stinging pain passed through his wound. Fiddleford glanced at his watch, and then announced, "They'll probably be in there for a good hour, and it looks like it might rain soon. Do we see anything close by? I really don't want to go to that horrible gift shop in the hospital. It would feel like we weren't even trying."

"Agreed. Mabel deserves better than that!"

Stanford thought back to the hand-made card the girl had designed for him, and the junk food she had constantly brought along on her visits. Those had practically been keeping him alive. The food that was, even if the cards were sweet. Hospital food was disgusting, and if she was admitted overnight, then he should find something not awful for her to eat. And he couldn't very well buy her a card when she had made one of her own, by hand. The mere thought of doing such a thing... He needed some quality art materials if he was going to make a card. Oh, that was another idea, art supplies for the girl...

"I say we look for some yarn, or something she could put to good use, but still enjoy," Stanford suggested.

"I doubt that many places will be open, it is almost closing time after all."

"We should split up," Soos suggested. "We'll cover more ground that way."

"Sounds good. Will you be fine on your own Ford?"

"I've regained most of my strength!"

"Of course, how silly of me to ask."

Fiddleford did not press the matter any further, even if he did sound slightly unconvinced. They
synchronized watches, and all departed in separate directions. The man-child jay-walked across the street, halting traffic in his wake. Fiddleford shook his head disapprovingly at the man-child, before continuing on his own way. Stanford started to look for any kind of decent store that was still open.

The street was mainly restaurants, with only the occasional, seedy-looking gift store located next to them. They all looked the same: crammed full with wacky knick-knacks, overpriced, and suspicious. The businesses looked like something that his brother might try to run.

Overhead, the thunder grew louder, and the pauses between them became less frequent. In the sky above, a forked tongue of lightning flickered across the sky. The jagged crisscross it formed hung eerily in the sky. It seemed to burn into his eyes. When Stanford closed them, he could still see the light. With a final jarring crack, the rain began. Fat droplets of water splashed down on the pavement.

Stanford took shelter under a near-by awning. There was a small table, with bunches of flowers set up around it. They were contained in pails, brimming with water. The store's windows were filled with arrangements. The inside of the store was dark however. The torrent of rain turned more intense, Stanford could barely see a foot in front of him. Steam curled up from the concrete. It clung to his glasses, small droplets of water obscured his line of sight further. He backed closer to the flower stand, wondering if he should brave the rain, or wait it out. He still needed to find a gift for his nibling...

Above the pattering of the rain and the sounds of the city, the first few strains of a song floated towards him.

"Daisy..."

Stanford turned his head. He realized that the store door was slightly open. The singing was coming from inside.

"Daisy..."

Just then, the awning buckled, and all the water it had been catching poured through. Stanford did not hesitate to enter the store to escape getting soaked.

The inside was dimly lit. Blue and yellow fairy lights were strung from the ceiling and draped over the walls. The store was small, and cramped on the inside. Most of the space was devoted to different flower arrangements. They blocked most of what there was to see in the area, practically towering above him while he was chair-bound.

From between the aisles, he could hear the voice half singing-half humming to himself. The rest of the world may have not existed as he heard the singing. It all simply died out. The pattering of the rain, the screaming sounds of city life, his own breathing... He felt compelled to get closer to the voice, and he drew nearer to its almost hypnotic source.

"Give me your answer do..."

The shuffling of footsteps and rustling of plants came to his left.

"I'm half crazy. All for the love of."

The singer rounded the corner, his voice rising in volume with each note. The trance was broken, and the sadly familiar sense of dread struck him again. Stanford knew he should have been used to it by this point. The guy had no originality what so ever. Yet somehow, every time he still wound up feeling shocked, and worried about what might happen. He had pushed his nibling off a cliff. She
was in the hospital, and could very well be bleeding internally. What if the damage was permanent? What if it was all his fault? That he hadn't done something sooner to be rid of him?

"YOU!"

Flower petals were tossed in front of his face. Daisies. Stuttering and spitting, Stanford brushed them off himself.

"It won't be a stylish-"

Something was tossed at him. Flat, coniferous green leaves. Arborvitae.

"Why are you back here?!"

An intense, pink, frond-like flowers were next. They felt strangely soft, and creepy to the touch. They made his skin crawl as they were shoved into his hands as well. He recognized these specimen. Love lies bleeding.

"-marriage-"

"I can't afford-

"Was that supposed to be a pun? Well it wasn't funny!"

Smaller, round yellow and orange flowers. They were tightly bunched together, the flowers' bright faces shining upwards. Marigolds.

"a carriage-"

"Stop-

Lotus corniculatus.

"But you'll look sweet-"

Impatiens.

"Upon the seat-"

And finally, daisies.

"Of a bicycle built for two-went yfive bucks for the flowers!"

"W-what?"

"I accept credit too. Of course, this just adds to all the things that you now owe me."

He was pushed backwards out of the store, freshly-made bouquet and all. Stanford stared at the entrance, dumbstruck, wondering if he had really just seen what he had. Every encounter felt as if he were waking up from some strange sort of dream. The store looked as dark as before. However, the entrance was now sealed shut.

Shaking himself, he went back in the direction of the hospital. His shoulder had greatly improved, and he was glad that he could get along on his own now. Even if the rain was a hindrance. Luckily, it had toned down since he had entered the store, transforming into a lighter shower.
As much as he hated the hospital, it at least kept him safe from the rain outside. The lobby was nowhere near as terrible as the actual rooms, and sick areas. It was warm, and inviting. The furniture was new, the front desk was neat, and the magazines were actually up to date. Warm and inviting or not, Stanford still chose to remain as close to the doors as possible. He was never going to let himself get locked up in one of these horrid places again. And he'd break out his great-niece too if it ever came to that.

His attention was drawn to the flowers in his hands. It was the oddest rag-tag mixture of plants that he had ever seen. Combining something like marigolds and impatiens together just seemed ridiculous. The colour scheme and styles did not go well either. Yellow and orange, hot pink, white... What had that guy been thinking? They definitely looked better in the dark.

Soos was the first to arrive back. In his arms was the largest stuffed axolotl that he had ever seen. He shook off the rain that clung to his shirt.

"You purchased her, a stuffed toy?"

"They were on sale!"

He was the last to return, and just as amused as Ford was when he saw the giant, stuffed axolotl that Soos had purchased for Mabel. Soos had not been the one to search for one of her supposedly missing stuffed toys during their last departure. The girl had so many things, she shouldn't miss any of them. Yet, somehow, they still wound up looking for the girl's missing in action toy.

Well, at least the stuffed animal was too large for Mabel to possibly loose. It was almost as tall as Soos, and just as wide. How he had carried it through the rain was a mystery to him. However, Ford supposed that he could not be too critical of the man-child when he only had the mismatched bunch of flowers. Fiddleford had absolutely nothing, but that did not stop him from skeptically looking at the bouquet.

"Please don't tell me you purchased those because they were on sale."

"I did not! They were," he felt his face heat up. "The only things left!"

"I can see why."

"Definitely! Those are uuugly!"

"Not helping Soos."

"There's not much else we can do I'm afraid. She should be more or less finished with the scans by this point. Maybe we should simply toss the flowers-"

"Or burn them."

"Burn the flowers, and return the- uh, what exactly is that? Some kind of albino dragon-lizard?"

"It's an axolotl dude! You know, Mexican salamander?"

"Whatever it is, you need to return it. That girl does not need any more stuffed animals. We'll just have to find her something later. I'm sure she won't-"

"GIANT STUFFED TOY!"

Mabel's squealing was loud enough to startle Stan into dropping her. She ran over to Soos, who
handed her the toy. She gave a muffled scream into its back. As she held the toy in a strangle-hold, Stanley glared at the other men, silently asking why they had gotten the girl another stuffed animal, especially after what had happened the last time they had tried to depart. Her brother picked up the tail of the toy, and, which was nearly the length of his own arm.

"You got her, an axolotl?"

"Yup!"

"It's so cute! And-" she managed to tear her attention away from the toy. "Are those flowers for me?"

"Er, well if you want them-"

"OF COURSE I DO GIVE THEM TO ME!"

She took them from his startled hands.

"They're. So. Beautiful!" she threw her arms around his neck, and gave him a sloppy kiss on the cheek. "THANK-YOU!"

"Uh, you're welcome, niece."

"I suppose this means good news from the doctor?"

"Yup! I'm just a little bruised up and stuff!"

"She's got a thick skull," Stanley replied. "Just like you."

She was oblivious to the argument, too happy with all of the gifts that she now had. Stanford did not miss the jab at their heads though.

"If a thick skull is going to stop her from getting brain damage, then I'm all for it."

"Do you need to do anything special?" Fiddleford asked.

"No, no."

"She needs to rest." Stanley replied, picking the girl up again. "So no more walking, and especially no more screaming. Dipper, you carry her uh, whatever that think is-"

"Mexican salamander!"

"That."

"Grunkle Stan that thing is even larger than I am!"

"Soos, help him."

"Yes sir!"

At last, they were finally able to leave the hospital behind. Relief had never felt so wonderful as they left the building. Even though it was pouring rain outside, he did not mind. The rain soaked them all to the bone, before they could reach the RV. The only one who was somewhat shielded was Mabel, who still had her many layers of towels and blankets to keep her safe from the elements outside.
Despite the instructions to take it easy, she was still half-slung over her great-uncle's shoulder. She was holding the bouquet tightly in her hands, and eagerly chattering with her brother, as if nothing were wrong. Dipper looked more worried than she was for her own health, now that they were out of the hospital. Or perhaps the strain on his face was due to how heavy the stuffed toy he was carrying. Even with Soos' help, he was still wobbling slightly as he carried it.

"These flowers are so pretty! Why did you pick them?"

He hadn't. But there was no way he could tell that to the girl. Not only would she think he was crazy, it would ruin the sentimental moment.

"I, well, you see… Daisies symbolize innocent youth! I thought they fit well! Since you're youth! And uh, innocent. Yes, that!"

"Do the leaves mean anything?" Mabel asked. "They're almost like pine needles, but flat!"

"They're related to the cedar family yes. Arborvitae I believe. Typically, their meaning is related to…” It took a great deal of self-control to stop Stanford from swearing in front of the children. "Eternal friendship."

"What do the yellow and orange ones mean?"

"Those are marigolds. They symbolize grief, and pai-" Stanford stopped short. "Well, grief, because we were grieving over you being hurt! Luckily you seem all better and there is absolutely nothing to worry about!"

"How about these pink do-dads?"

"Those are, love lies bleeding."

"They're really called that?"

"Yes."

"What do they mean?"

_Hopelessness._

"I don't know," he lied.

"These ones?"

"Those are impatiens."

_Impatience._

"Ok, how about those yellow ones?"

"Lotus corniculatus. They're very nice."

_Revenge."

"Thank-you!"

"It was nothing my girl. Absolutely nothing..."
The rain seemed to stalk them as they continued their journey, all the way to the Wyoming-Idaho borders. It grew so dense that it was impossible so see more than a foot of road. The high beams could not pierce through the sheets of rain, and the wipers furiously moved back and forth. The windows were starting to cloud up as the summer heat was doused by the rain. It was easy to leave their past adventures in other states far behind, especially when they appeared to be driving through the middle of nowhere.

There was nothing but grassy, green pastures spreading out on either side of the road. Some were filled with sheep, clustered together in an attempt to escape the downpour. Most were empty however. The tall fields stood out a brilliant viridian against the cloudy dark grey skies. It was impossible to see what was beyond the fields with the rain coming down so hard, and there were no road signs to guide them on their way out of the state.

Then, out of the darkness, a large, open gate appeared. A long driveway lead down the field, and there was a sign next to it. It was so brightly lit, that it was visible through all of the rain. It was a hotel, smack-dab in the middle of nowhere.

"Maybe we should stop there. At least until this rain clears up," Fiddleford suggested.

"Who's paying?" Stanley gruffly asked.

Fiddleford rolled his eyes, and huffed in annoyance.

"I will."

"Great idea!" Stanford chimed in. "Er, the hotel part, not you paying Fiddleford. I'll give you whatever I owe later. But I'm sure we're all tired of camping out in this dingy old RV!"

"Definitely," Dipper said, looking up from his book. "Between people slashing its tires and the number of times we've been pulled over for safety issues-"
"Those are optional! Optional I'm telling you!"

"Hotel it is!" Soos said, twisting the steering wheel in the opposite direction.

Everyone fell out of their seats as they made a sharp U-turn. Soos continued down the driveway, oblivious to everyone else's reaction. Dipper helped Ford back up, despite the protests that he did not need help. He went to go pick up his book, but it slid underneath the seats as Soos made another turn.

It was as good as lost now, he couldn't even see it. Not that he would want to reach underneath the seat. There was gum and mysterious mold spots growing there. Something might try to eat his hand if he dared to reach for it. It was a lost cause, and Dipper wound up sitting next to his sister. Mabel was sitting on her knees, staring out the window with Waddles in her arms.

"Two-hundred twenty-one, two-hundred twenty-two, two-hundred twenty-three-"

"Uh, Mabel, what are you counting?"

There was nothing truly countable in the area they were passing. Just more of the same, green grass. It was neatly trimmed however, and there appeared to be sprinklers set up along the edges of the lawn. But those weren't exactly worth counting either. Had that hit to the head done something to her? Was their internal damage that the doctor and his great-uncles had missed?

"We're- two-hundred twenty-four- counting the- two-hundred twenty-five- raindrops!"

"Oh."

Well that was a less dramatic answer than he had been expecting. His sister went back to pointing out each droplet of water on the window. Waddles looked like he was starting to fall asleep in his owner's arms. Occasionally, the pig would close his eyes, only to be jerked awake again as she moved in some way or the other. Mabel did not seem to notice that her pig was dozing off, and continued to give each raindrop a number with the pig. At least she was cheerful, and not worried about her fall. Dipper didn't know what he would do if his sister went back to hiding in bed, like she had done when Stan...

He turned away from his sister, feeling his hands curl into fists at the memory. Dipper knew that he shouldn't be expecting an apology from the old man, directed at either him or his sister, but thinking back to it still made him mad. How hard was it for Stan to say sorry? He had tried to be the better person at first, and had apologized for accusing him of murder, but that had just gotten him yelled at. When Mabel, who hadn't done so much as provoked him tried to bring it up...

The train of thought was not making him feel any more calm. He just wanted to let go of the whole thing. But it was hard when Stan hadn't even tried to act like he regretted it. As he sighed, the inside of the window fogged up too. However, there were little spots in the glass that were still clear, as if someone had drawn across them with their hand before. Mabel probably. The fog vanished as quickly as it had appeared. He blew for a second time, and quickly started to make a brief drawing of Stan's face. Albeit, it was a Stan with larger horns than usual, and eyes that were crossed. His tongue was also sticking out, he had a mustache and matching, pointed goatee. He fogged up the window one more time, planning on writing Stan's name- along with a few bad words- above the drawing. However, something was already there.

A triangle? With appendages, an eye, and formal clothing? Had his sister been sneaking Mabel juice while he wasn't paying attention? What kind of a drawing was that? He was about to ask his sister why she had doodled something so weird when they came to a stop. They were just out front of the
hotel, and an overhang was shielding them from the rain. The sudden disappearance of the pattering was strange. However, outside of the shelter, it was near-impossible to see the surroundings, just as it had been before.

"Kids, grab your bags," Stanley commanded. "I'll go in and talk with the front desk."

"I'll go too, since I'm the one that's paying," Fiddleford added.

"Whatever. Soos, get a luggage cart."

"Yes sir!"

The hotel lobby was large, and impressive. The walls were all made of a dark brown brick, and the tiled floors were polished like a mirror. Mabel wiped her feet on the mat, and practically dragged her pig to the nearest planter to sniff the flowers that were growing within. They were spread all along the wall, with things as large as trees growing in the soil. The plants were so green and vibrant the appeared almost artificial.

The lobby was a rough capital L-shape, with the entrance being right between the two merging lines. To the right, was the front desk. The hall continued on past the desk, dividing even further beyond that point. To the left, there was a small sitting area, complete with a fireplace.

Luggage carts were stored right next to it, and Soos was there trying to wrangle one. There was a gift shop by the sitting area too. It had floor-to-ceiling walls, and it was possible to see all of the colourful goods inside. The hall also branched off past that point, leading elsewhere in the hotel.

"Hey Soos," Dipper began, approaching the man-child.

"It's just Soos dude."

"Wha-?"

"Oooh! You said hey Soos!" He said with a chuckle. "I always get the two mixed up! You know, Jésus and hey Soos sound really similar."

"Uh, right. I was just thinking you should maybe rescue Grunkle Ford. He looks a bit lonely."

The man-child's smile from before faded. He looked out the window. They could see Ford staring at them from the steps of RV, with a less-than pleased look on his face. Typically, Soos was the one to help him down, but he seemed to have forgotten this time. Or perhaps it had been a little more deliberate than he was letting on. His tone seemed to say it all.

"Yeah, I guess so."

"I can handle the luggage," Dipper replied, grabbing the cart.

"I dunno' dude. You're kind of-"

"What? I'm kind of what?"

"Not strong enough to push a hundred plus pounds of luggage?"

Dipper felt himself starting to blush.

"I am more than capable of pushing this. It's on wheels after all."
"Right. Anyway-"

"Grunkle Ford needs rescuing."

"I'm on it."

Soos left to help Ford. Dipper tried to push the luggage cart over to his sister -who was eagerly staring at the stuffed toys in the gift shop window with her pig- but quickly discovered that maybe it was too heavy for him to push on his own. Well, he would be able to move the darn thing if the wheels weren't sticky! Plus, that giant stuffed axolotl toy she had gotten probably made up like, most of the weight on that thing! Besides, it just needed to build up some momentum, then he wouldn't have any trouble! It was just the... Breaking out part that he needed help with.

"Hey Mabel, could you come help me push this?" Dipper asked.

"No can do Bro-Bro."

"What? Mabel I need to move this luggage before Soos-"

"Back dude."

"Whelp, that's embarrassing," Dipper muttered under his breath.

"Totally," Soos agreed. "Mister Pines probably has the room keys now, so I'll go follow him."

Dipper joined his sister by the gift shop window, wanting to see what she was staring at now. (And maybe he was trying to hide his embarrassment. But only a little!) Her hands and face were pressed against the window, and her eyes were wide. She looked like she wanted to burn a hole through the window, and take whatever had her sudden, devout attention. Dipper didn't have to ask.

As soon as he looked to where she was staring, he saw it. The thing that she clearly wanted was none other than another stuffed axolotl. It was clearly the same brand of toy, for it was the exact size and shape as the one she had. The only difference was that this one was black, and had yellow eyes. The other one was white, and had pale blue eyes.

"They're matching," she whispered. "Matching Dipper."

"I can see that."

He was shaken back and forth.

"MATCHING TOYS DIPPER! DO YOU EVEN KNOW WHAT THIS MEANS?!"

"You should be happy to have one of them?"

"No! I need both of them! They're destined to be together Dipper! I have to have it!"

"Mabel, you already have one, plus a million other stuffed animals."

"But that's the other half! They have to be together Dipper! They could be twins! Or dating!"

"Hopefully it's not both at the same time."

"I can't take it anymore! I have to have it!"

Mabel ran into the gift shop. Her excitement seemed to be infectious, as Waddles trailed hot on her
heels. Dipper followed, not wanting his sister to knock over anything, or Waddles to eat something. The inside was just as full as it appeared on the outside. Shelves were chock-full of all sorts of things. T-shirts advertising the hotel, glasses, mugs, candy bars, bags of chips, colouring books, and much more. There were also basic toiletries for sale too. With the price grossly raised naturally.

Wind chimes, and wire mobiles were strung from the ceiling. They all quietly tinkled as a ceiling fan spun. At the back of the small store, there was an employee. He was playing one of the scratch-to-win lottery cards that were available at the register. But this was disturbed when Mabel placed the enormous stuffed axolotl in front of him.

"How much?"

"You need a parent's permission to purchase anything from this store."

"Look Mister, I need this stuffy! It's a matter of destiny!"

"Well in that case if you win five hundred tickets at this hotel's arcade, you can have it. Deal?"

"Deal!"

The employee offered her his hand. Mabel grabbed it, and viciously shook his hand. He grew visibly uncomfortable with this, as she refused to let go of him.

"You can, uh, let go now."

"If this toy isn't here when I get back with those five hundred tickets, you're toast!"

"Whoa, take it easy there kid," he replied, finally wrenching his hand from hers. "I'm not a criminal."

Dipper and Mabel exited the gift shop. Everything seemed to be in order. Waddles had been passed off as a rare, hairless dog, and thus had permission to be in the hotel, they had their room keys, and Soos still had the luggage. Stanford and Fiddleford were joking about something quietly, while Stanley pocketed all the free coupons that the front desk had to offer.

"There you kids are! Ready for some lunch?"

"I want to go down to the arcade first!" Mabel said.

"They have one of those?" Soos asked. "Sweet!"

"Yes, in fact-" Fiddleford took a brochure from Stan and started to look at the list of attractions. "There's a pool, gym, tennis courts, a 30-hole, indoor mini-putt-"

Dipper did not fail to notice that his sister's eyes lit up in delight when she heard this. He wondered which urge would win out: her love for mini-putt, or the need to win a giant stuffed animal from the arcade.

"-bar, not for children of course, two restaurants, a buffet-"

"We get it." Stanley replied, grabbing the brochure back.

"What's a place with so many great things doing in the middle of nowhere?" Dipper asked.

"Who knows? I vote we go to the buffet for lunch though."

Everyone else was in agreement, except for Mabel, who wanted to go to the arcade, and win a giant
stuffed toy. But, she was left with no choice. The buffet was just past the front desk. In the hall where everything divided, there were several paths to take. A set of stairs lead down to a basement level, and one of the restaurants was to the left. To the right, there was a short set of stairs, opening up into another room. That was the point where some of the hotel rooms started to appear. The buffet was straight ahead, at the end of the hall. Stan breezed by the person working there, flashing the room card at her as they all walked by.

The group took seats at the very end of the room, right by the windows. These too offered a floor-to-ceiling view of the world outside. Only the ceiling stretched much higher than the lobby. Large blinds covered them nearly half-way, but they still didn't reach the height of their heads. There was a small valley between them, and another hill. The raining had slowed down, and it was easier to see.

A river twisted in the bottom of the valley, there were two bridges at different points, leading over it. The hotel was built on the hill, at least partly. The back half was hanging off of the hill, so they were very high up. As soon as Stanley saw this, he took the furthest seat from the window.

Mabel looked out the window, and felt a slight prickle of discomfort when she saw how high up they were. She took her seat across from Stan, and looked away from the windows. The buffet was all but abandoned, except for them. Dipper was right about this place. No one was going to visit a place in the middle of nowhere, even if it was very nice-looking.

Everyone grabbed what they wanted. Mabel found the dessert section, and piled her plate high with every sugary thing that she could find. There was at least ten different flavours of ice cream available, she wound up mixing three of those flavours, for taste-testing science. They were topped with rainbow sprinkles and the edible glitter she had stashed in her sweater sleeve. There were countless different cake slices and cookies available as well.

She grabbed a handful of cookies. A few nicely decorated shortbread, along with some chocolate chip, and the maple ones. Those were never sold at the store, and she just had to have them now! She also fixed Waddles a small lunch, from the salad bar, something she chose to avoid with her own plate. Then, she carried her plate back to the stop she had claimed across from Stan. He had skipped the lunch part of lunch as well, and seemed to have gone back in time, to breakfast.

"You got a waffle?"

"Not just any kind of waffle," Stan replied, his mouth full of food. "Belgian. The best kind there is! Still hot too."

Fiddleford completely overlooked the fact that she had an entire plate filled with desserts. He was busy talking about something or the other with Ford. It sounded like a lot of boring nerd stuff to her, some sort of Grand Unified Theory of Boring and how it affected the town where Ford lived. Fiddleford was more interested in that, than whether or not she was actually behaving. Dipper had picked up some real food however. He sat down next to her. She could tell that he was silently wondering why she had skipped straight to dessert, and if that was good for her teeth. But, he didn't mention it aloud.

She finished her food before everyone else. Mabel wished that she could have enjoyed the food more, but it all ended up tasting the same as she scarfed it down: very sugary, and chocolaty. But the arcade was calling her name. Wherever that was. She needed to win that giant, stuffed axolotl if it was the last thing that she ever did.

The girl impatiently fidgeted in her seat as she waited for everyone else. They were so slow! Was it even possible to eat more slowly than that? Even Waddles was still munching on the fruits and veggies she had gotten for him! This must have been a guy thing! They were taking forever on
purpose, they all knew that she wanted to visit the arcade and win big time!

"Can we go to the arcade now?"

"Mabel, dude, when you're at a buffet, you have to go back for like, seconds, and thirds," Soos said. "You know, main course, desert, a mixture of both. You can't just pass up the opportunity to have tri-coloured Jell-O dude. Tri-coloured. three different, wondrous rainbows of flavour, all smashed into one!"

"Do you actually have any money to pay for tokens with?" Ford asked.

"Well," Mabel sheepishly hung her head. "Grunkle Fiddleford?"

"Stanley's paying this time," he declared, folding his arms.

"What? Me?"

"Yes, you. You're the only other one who's finished. You can walk her down to the arcade, and pay. Unless you're not capable of the responsibility?"

Mabel hadn't even noticed that her other great-uncle had finished, and he was sitting right across from her. Then again, she tended not to look at him. His plate was clean too.

"You don't even have to watch her," Stanford added. "Just make sure she gets there safely, and give her some money."

"Why can't you do it?"

"Because we're still eating."

Just as enthusiastic as Stan when it came to the idea, Mabel asked;

"And what about Waddles?"

"I'm sure we're all more than capable of taking care of your pig for a little while."

"Fine. But if I go, you and Poindexter are splitting a bed."

"I don't think either of us were planning on doing otherwise," Fiddleford replied.

"Whatever. Let's go kid."

Reluctantly, she got up from her spot. She followed a few paces behind the man, who would occasionally look to see if she was still there. The arcade was on the other side of the L. There was a small, yet steep flight of stairs just past the gift shop. A short walk down the following hall, and another trip up a flight of steps lead them where they wanted to be. A thrill of excitement ran through her as she saw the flashing lights and heard the arcade games.

There was a small desk area, just outside of the arcade. This was the border between the darkness, and flashing game lights, and the normal neutrals of the hotel. There were elevators, and another set of stairs in this spot too. She went up to a sign by the desk to read it. The arrows on it pointed in all different directions. The pool, exercise room, and tennis courts were down the stairs. A gymnasium was above it.

The mini-put was just before the arcade, and she could see that it was rainforest-themed. Artificial plants were everywhere, and fake leaves seemed to have sprouted from the ceiling in the area above
the mini-putt course. The walls were also painted to look like a rainforest as well, filled with trees and wild animals. Well she would definitely have to try that out once she won her new arcade prize...

There was an employee sitting at behind the desk. He was twirling a putter and swiveling around in the chair. The desk was a little too high for her to see over top of when she stood in front of it. So, Mabel jumped up, clinging on to the desk with her arms. Her feet dangled slightly off the floor, but she could still feel the tips of her toes brush them occasionally.

"Hey there!"

"Ack!" The worker fell out of his chair, but scrambled to fix himself.

"Where do I get arcade tokens?"

"What kind of a person-" he stopped short when he heard this. Slowly, the employee turned around. It was him, the guy from earlier, in the gift shop! Instantly, his demeanour changed. "Well if it isn't the little girl from before! And... what are you, her grandpa or something?"

"Great-uncle," Stan corrected. "We're barely even related."

"You don't need tokens to play at this arcade. Just convert your cash to quarters at that machine over there, and you're good to go!"

Somehow, this seemed ominous coming from... Mabel looked at the worker's name tag. Alex... Well that was a nice name! Somehow, the way Alex had phrased that was strange. Stan seemed to think so as well. He gave her the money to convert into quarters, but he chose to stick around the arcade. There was a small sitting area next to a pool table and some Ping-Pong tables. Stan grabbed one of the hotel's complementary newspapers, and sat down at a table.

With a cup full of quarters, she went in search of a game that could earn her the most tickets in an instant. The kind that had enormous jackpots set on them if you won. The arcade was intensely bright. From every direction, lights flashed at her. Much like the rest of the hotel, it was devoid of cute boys. And other people too. Mabel's search for a ticket-winning game took longer than she expected. In fact, none of the games seemed to give out tickets.

They were all old-style arcade games. They were dusty, and the display screens were fuzzy with age. It was a miracle that some of these things were still working! She recognized some of the titles, but not all of them; Mrs. Cap-Man, Nort, Formula Onety-One Racing, Fight Fighters (Dipper's favourite), Dig-Doug... There were also many different pinball machines, that were all near the back of the arcade. They sat on rickety legs, and some of them had missing buttons.

Mabel started to wonder if she had been duped. She returned to the desk, where the employee still sat. He was quietly humming to himself, lost in thought. He twirled the golf club between his fingers, like a baton.

"Hey Alex-"

The putter few out of his hands. Mabel dodged out of the way just on time, as the golf club spun through the air, and smashed into the coin converter.

"Whoops! Sorry about that!"

"That's," Mabel rubbed her head, thinking back to her fall, and what the doctor had told her about any additional head trauma. If she hadn't ducked out of the way there... "Ok. Accidents happen!"
"What was it you needed?"

"So, Alex."

"Just All," He corrected

"Don't you mean, Al, as in, A L?"

"Well you see, normally it would be said like that, but my last name is Wright. Like the Wright Brothers. So it then becomes alright! As in everything is alright and you definitely have nothing to be worrying your little twelve-year-old head about!"

"How did you-"

"So what kind of problems are you having with the arcade?"

"Well, where are the games that give tickets?"

"Oh, silly me! I guess I should have shown you!"

Mabel followed the employee back to the arcade. He lead her to the dustiest, darkest corner of the arcade, where a lone game was tucked away. It must have been the oldest thing in the entire hotel. Mabel had her doubts on whether or not the thing was actually a game. The light in it barely functioned, and Mabel was surprised that the game ran on electricity. The, game, appeared rather simple.

There was a raggedy clown puppet, attached to strings inside of the game. Its clothes were faded, and the white, painted face was somehow chipped. In peeling, neon letters, the words "Bobo the Clown" were spelled out. There were several buttons to press, but she was not sure what any of them did. The worker proudly knocked on the side of the glass.

"This, is the only game in the entire arcade that gives out tickets."

"What do I have to do?" She asked.

"Put in a quarter, and make him dance!"

"Er, ok."

He put a quarter of his own into the game. The most horrifying, twisted carnival sound track she had ever heard began to play. The game's feeble speakers sounded as if they would burst at any moment, as static clouded over the dying music. The light inside of the game grew a little brighter. The employee press a few buttons. The puppet jerked to life, as its strings were pulled with each push of the buttons. Little tapping noises began, as the clown's feet touched the floor. After a terrifying, minute of silence between them, the music finally ended. The clown puppet went limp once again, with no one there to pull the strings.

"See? It's easy! Happy ticket gathering!"

Ripping out the tickets that he had earned, the man went on his way. Mabel hesitantly tried the game for herself, but she couldn't help but feel uncomfortable with it. Watching the poor clown-guy dance was a little too much for her. She was glad when it finished. However, there was a problem. She only got one ticket from the entire game.

Mabel tried for a second time, not pressing any of the buttons. All she got was a single ticket. She
tried for a third time, pressing as many of the buttons as possible, as quickly as she could. All while looking away. It yielded the same result. There was probably just something that she was doing wrong. She should just as the guy! So, for a second time, she returned to the desk.

"Hey uh, how do I earn tickets from the game?"

"You put in a quarter, and-"

"No, I mean, more than one ticket at a time!"

"Oh! I see!" he laughed. "You don't."

"I- but- what?!"

"It's a one ticket-machine," he explained.

"But I saw you win more than one!"

"No you didn't."

"I can't just play the game a four hundred and ninety-seven more times! I don't have enough money."

"Just ask for more. You've already gotten what? A hundred quarters for twenty-five bucks? Just ask him for another hundred dollars and you'll have that wonderful axolotl you seem to want so much."

"But-"

She looked behind her, to the table where Stan was flipping through the news. She didn't want to ask him for money. Especially not a hundred dollars! She didn't even want to bother him!

"There's not much else you can do without that money kid."

He was right. She needed to have that toy. It was the other half of a matched set! Without it, her other toy would be lonely and sad! She couldn't put it through that! Not for all the money in the world! Well, it certainly felt like she needed all the money in the world to win it... Maybe she could just, sneak up on Stan, while he started to fall asleep! Old people did that all the time! Then she could just grab his wallet and "borrow" a hundred dollars...

As soon as she had thought about it, she rejected the idea, horrified at even thinking about stealing money. A lot of it at that. Mints from the hotel and French fries off her brother's plate were different. This was the kind of thing that got you sent to jail if you were caught! Jail! With prison bars, and no Dipper, and sweaters. Why had she thought-?

"You'd do the same..."

Why was she thinking about all of this now? It wasn't important. She wasn't anything like Stan with all his crazy criminal ways! She didn't need the money that much, she wasn't desperate.

"Hey kid," a hand was waved before her face. "You still there? Kid!"

Mabel blinked, she stepped back from Stan. He had left his spot at the table, newspaper tucked underneath his arm.

"You alright there kid? You sort of, froze up."

"I'm fine! I guess the problem with winning tickets just got to me."
"The what now?"

Mabel timidly shuffled on the spot.

"I need more quarters if I want to win the grand prize. Except the only game that gives out tickets is creepy and does it one quarter at a time."

"Sounds like a scam to me. How much is this prize?"

"Five hundred tickets."

"Yeesh that's a lot. But tell ya' what? I'll give you the money."

"Y-you will? Why?"

"I believe the polite word is, thank- th- ugh, can't say that without feeling sick to my stomach. You know what? Never mind. Let's just get you that money."

They went over the converter. However, it was not willing to accept Stan's money, even though he was paying in genuine legal tender, and not his forgeries.

"Hey buddy! I think this machine's broken!" Stan yelled at the worker.

"Having a putter fly into it at high speed will do that," The man grinned, still twirling the club in hand. "I guess that means you won't be winning that stuffed toy today!"

Just as quickly as her hopes had been lifted, they were smashed into pieces. Stan started to walk back to the arcade, and she went with him.

"Sorry kid, there isn't much I can do about that," Stan shrugged, shoving his wallet back in his pocket.

"It's..."

"Keep the change. Go play games with it anyways."

Turning back to the arcade, she entered it again. Mabel went in search of something interesting to play, and she was not disappointed. Her hopes rose again, as she saw exactly what she needed. It was a claw machine. And sitting right in the middle of those wonderful stuffed animals was the one that she wanted: a yellow-eyed, black-bodied, ultra-sized axolotl. And she had to have it.

This game took four quarters, and she was willing to spend them all. Her first try at the claw machine was a failure. She had moved the claw a little too far to the left for it to grab. The next time, she managed to get a hold of its head. But with how heavy the toy was, it slipped through the claws of the game.

She tried going for the body the next time. It was actually lifted up slightly, before the machine dropped it once more. Now, it was war. Quarter after quarter, she plugged them all into the machine. Every try got her no closer to victory than from when she had started. Soon, the cup of quarters started to fall low, she was running out. But maybe, with a few more tries...

"Hey! Have you been wasting my money by playing the exact same- never mind."

Stan had come to stand next to her. Now he was watching her failed attempts to reach the toy. With each new try at the game, he barked out little instructions on what to do.
"Move it to the left, no, your other left, and then down a little. And-

Finally, she came down to the last, four quarters. They ominously jingled with each movement, clanking loudly as they joined the rest in the machine. Mabel watched as the digital counter said she had earned enough. The claw started to move again. She followed every one of Stan's commands, hoping that now would be the time that she finally won.

Together, they watched as the claw slowly descended, and gripped the toy. Slowly, it started to rise, the toy coming with it. It was making it! It was actually making it! The claw made it all the way to the exit, and dropped the toy. It got stuck. Unable to fit through the tiny exit that had been put in place for the game. Mabel wailed in agony, and Stan cursed under his breath.

"Aw come on! Boo! Boo!"

"I didn't pay twenty-five bucks just for that to happen!"

"Let's go kid," Stan said, jerking his head in the direction of the exit. "There's gotta' be an ATM around here somewhere. I'll pay those stupid fees if it means we get that toy!"

As they left the arcade, the employee smiled at them.

"Oh, too bad! You'll just have to try winning next time! If someone doesn't beat cha' to it!"

Stan froze. Mabel crashed into his leg, not expecting his sudden stop.

"Kid, I just remembered that I have more change in my pocket," he growled. "You've still got a couple tries left."

Having her hopes picked up and dropped so many times in that day, Mabel couldn't bring herself to accept.

"Grunkle Stan, it's fine."

She continued to walk, but he grabbed her shoulder.

"I said, you've still got a couple a' tries left."

He... Wasn't letting go of her. Mabel had no choice but to walk with her great-uncle back to the arcade. Alex trailed behind, amused with their pitiful attempts to win the toy. They both watched as Stan started to fish around his inside pockets, looking for loose change. He came up with four quarters, and placed them into the machine.

Crack!

Out of nowhere, he brought his other fist through the machine. He punched a hole straight through the glass, but his fingers went unscathed. He had donned a set of brass knuckles. He reached for the toy, and pulled it out of the machine. Then, he punched the game for a second time. Quarters spilled everywhere. Stan scooped up as many as he could carry.

"Security! Oh wait, we don't have that here. So I guess you've won! Congratulations!"

Stan didn't respond. He shoved the worker out of the way, and started towards the exit with his arms full of money.

"Grunkle Stan, I don't think I can just take a stolen toy."
"It's not stolen. You heard the guy! We won fair and square!"

"Yeah, but-

"Take it or leave it kid. Take it or leave it..."

Mabel looked down at the enormous, stuffed axolotl. Staring into its brilliant amber eyes, she knew that there was no way she could return something that rightfully belonged with her other toy. She hugged it tighter to her chest, and quietly mumbled, "Take it."
Twenty Three Hundred Pennies

Chapter Notes

Wow, I'm glad that so many of you actually like the hotel setting! It was sort of a weird thing to get response to, but I'm that that you guys do like it. The place is actually based off of a hotel that I enjoy going to with my family. It's always completely abandoned, freaking gorgeous on the inside, and huge. Every detail mentioned about it is completely true, and that includes the Bobo the Clown/Puppet Video Game. It is a real thing, that exists somewhere in the middle of nowhere in Canada. And in my nightmares. The only difference that I can think of is the ticket thing. The arcade didn't give out any tickets.

I've been putting stuff like this from my own childhood into the story, because of Alex Hirsch doing the same with Gravity Falls. Not too much, but just some things, like the ghost stories, children falling from dangerous heights into water and surviving with little trauma, and the nurse. Nah, jk, that last one is relatively fake...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Soos, I'm not the only one that thinks it's weird a fancy hotel is in the middle of nowhere. Right?"

"Of course not dude! It is pretty weird that this nameless hotel has many different accommodations such as a spa, a wedding garden, a skating rink, a regular thirty-two hole golf course, a penthouse suite, a chapel, a nature trail around the property, a second, smaller bar that overlooks the indoor swimming pool and hot tub, a-

"Give me that."

Dipper took the brochure from Soos, who had been avidly reading it up until this point. He tucked it in his vest, far out of the man-child's reach. After lunch, both Fords had gone off to do "adult stuff." They wouldn't let him tag along, even though he was totally mature for his age, so he stuck with Soos instead. The entire hotel was weird, really weird, and they were curiously exploring the area.

The staircase by the buffet lead down to some sort of basement level. There were washrooms right at the end of the stairs, followed by a long hallway. As they walked along it, there was a slight incline, as if they were walking further downhill. The dark red carpet was incredibly plush, it muffled all the sounds their feet normally would have made. The walls too seemed to absorb the sound, giving an almost claustrophobic feel to the place.

There were large, double doors on either side of the hall, but most of them were closed. What could possibly be inside? The plaques beside them said they were all ballrooms, but Dipper was not so sure if he believed that. Why would a hotel, with no people staying in it, need so many ballrooms? They must have been storing something else inside of them.

"I wonder what could be in these," Dipper mumbled.

"Well it says on the brochure that the hotel puts on a lot of shows," Soos said, pulling out a new one from his hat. "They have weekly entertainment that comes in. Magicians, animal shows, and it looks like tonight, there's going to be a special visit from a performer named-"
"Where did you even get that from?!"

"I just, had it dude."

With a sigh, he shook his head, and continued walking. They reached the end of the hall sooner than he was expecting. The hall broke off into another room. The trickling sound of water filled the area, and natural light streamed through windows built into the far right. They appeared to be on the ground level. And if that view was correct, then they were at the back of he hotel, which explained why it felt like they were walking downwards. Directly to the left, there was a pair of elevators. There was another ballroom, straight across from the way they had walked in.

To the right of the entrance, there was what appeared to be a small waterfall, and pond. Oddly enough, it was elevated, contained within a brick pool, rather than dug into the ground. Dipper walked up to the artificial waterfall, wondering what kind of a hotel built one of those inside. The wall the water source was coming from was covered in bright green plants, as was the area surrounding the pond. Dipper had to stand on his toes to see the water, there was nothing inside. At least until Soos tossed a penny in.

"Make a wish dude!"

Dipper flicked the penny into the water.

"I wish Grunkle Stan would apologize to Mabel already."

"What did you wish for?"

"It won't come true if you tell."

By the windows, there were couches arranged in a strange, almost circular formation. Soos flopped down on one, kicking off his shoes, and taking out the hotel pamphlet again. Dipper tried to sit down, but he practically sank into the couch. His feet couldn't reach the ground. Not wanting to be eaten by the couch, he got up, and walked to the centre of the couch arrangement, and began surveying the area again.

There were more plants growing by the windows, and a small, steep staircase began. It was made of a wiry, black metal, and it spiralled upwards, to a place he couldn't see. There were hanging baskets attached underneath the stairs. There was also a small sign, pointing towards the stairs.

"The Shooting Starlight Lounge?"

"It's a bar dude. No minors allowed."

It had gotten to the point where Dipper was not going to question Soos' new-found knowledge on the hotel. Apparently that brochure had a lot of content in it.

"Huh, that's..." Dipper paused, as the oddest compulsion to look up, came over him. "Weird."

The ceiling above the sitting area was made of mirrored panels, positioned in a triangular shape. The couches, and their strange position- an eye-shape, he now realized- were in the middle of the mirrors' reflection. But not only that: he was standing in the centre of the pattern. Something about it made him fell uncomfortable, like he was being watched. Dipper left the mirrored area, returning to where the waterfall was.

He idly watched the rippling water, and the two pennies sitting in the bottom of it. Soos remained on the couch, reading the hotel brochure. Which was really fine with him. On the one hand, he liked the
man-child, and all his goofy antics, but Soos was still dead-loyal to Stan. A person that he couldn't
trust. Even after all the things he had done, after what he had said to Mabel, he still put up with Stan.
Couldn't he do, better than that? Stan wasn't even that good of a boss! He ordered him around, and
he was always threatening to cut his pay... Dipper just didn't get why Soos would continue to listen
to Stan, and he knew that he couldn't trust the man-child too much.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw movement. Had the door to the ballroom just, opened? Dipper
looked back at the couches, where Soos was reading, and quietly joking about all the cool things the
hotel had. Then, he looked at the nearest door, which was most definitely open a crack. He walked
around the pond, to the other side. Curiously, he peeked his head into the ballroom.

It was smaller than he had been expecting, but still reasonably sized. The same deep red carpet
continued in here, only a mustard-yellow pattern was on top of it. The ballroom was positioned so
that the long end was to his right, rather than straight across from him. And at this end, there were
things that probably didn't belong in a ballroom: a stage, white balloons, banners... Alright, so those
belonged in a ballroom, but it was still strange. The ceiling was covered in baby-blue streamers, and
there appeared to be silver glitter in the carpet. For all accounts, it seemed like a perfectly normal
place. Naturally, anything that was perfectly normal was actually weird.

"Hey! What are you doing in here?"

Dipper nearly jumped out of his shoes. He hadn't heard anyone approaching. It was probably due to
the carpet, it drowned out all sounds. There was a middle-aged man in a pink floral shirt standing
there. He was holding a large carton in his arms.

"Sorry man! I was just exploring! I mean, the room was open and I didn't think there was anything
important-"

"Anything important? These are the props for tonight show!"

"Show?"

"Why yes! Didn't you read the brochure? Every Saturday night, the west coast's delightful-"  
The man did not seem to be interested in shutting up. He rambled about the show that would be put
on tonight, whatever that was about. Dipper slowly inched his way towards the door, not wanting to
listen to that guy for much longer.

"Er, I'll just be going then."

Dipper ran out of the ballroom, and back to Soos.

"Soos let's go."

"Aw what? I was just getting comfy! I got a couch dent together and everything!"

"I mean, I guess you can stay here if you want," Dipper suggested. "I'll go exploring on my own."

"You should explore the bouncy castle they have set up in the gymnasium" Soos responded. "Or the
play park they have in the-"

"I'll... Keep that in mind."

Dipper decided to take the elevators up, wanting to know where they went. He was slowly drawing
up a mental map of the hotel, and he had a hunch on where they would go. The elevators only went
up, so that meant he was on the true bottom floor. So, that probably meant the floor he was searching for was the second one.

Sure enough, his hunch was right. He was back near the lobby, on the gift shop side. The outdoor pool, and patio were on the other side of the elevators. The hotel rooms also started down a separate, more narrow hall, and a staircase leading to the pool, mini-putt, arcade, exercise room and- Dipper shook his head. Soos had been brainwashing him with all that random hotel knowledge. He thought about going to see what the arcade was like, but he didn't want to get involved in his sister's win tickets for a new stuffed toy scheme. For some reason, the gift shop caught his eye. He hadn't really looked around the place much before, had he?

There was no one to be seen at the register. Dipper walked around, looking at the all the tourist-y things that were available. Snow globes, maps, plates, more t-shirts... Why would anyone want to remember this hotel anyways? As he turned down another aisle, he crashed into someone.

"Yikes. Sorry about that man."

The employee picked up Dipper's hat from his head, and dropped it behind him.

"Oh no. Your hat seems to have fallen into a paper shredder," he said in a fake-dramatic voice. "And I accidentally turned it on! Oh nooo!"

There was a shredding sound, and Dipper saw bits of his beloved hat fly everywhere.

"Hey! What the heck?! You can't just shred my hat because I ran into you!"

"Yes I can."

"What am I supposed to wear now?!"

"Here. It suits you."

Something covered his eyes, a new baseball cap. The employee returned to the register, and picked up another bingo card. He resumed playing. Dipper glared at the man, and then turned to leave the gift shop. What was even up with this weird hotel?! There was a mirror in the clothing section, he paused, to see what the hat looked like. He sure as heck wasn't going to keep it if it was ugly.

The cap was blue and white, a strange change from the green one he had worn before. In the place of a star, was an embroidered pine tree. Dipper was about to tell the employee that the joke was not funny, when he remembered that the guy had no way of knowing his last name. It was probably just a coincidence. Besides, he actually kind of liked the new hat.

"Huh, not bad..."

As he left the gift shop, the employee smiled.

Unsurprisingly, like the rest of the hotel, the Shooting Starlight Lounge was beautiful, yet abandoned by all. Given that it was now nighttime, that was rather strange. Shouldn't there at least be someone other than him and Fiddleford? Not that he really minded. People always seemed to feel the need to ask what had happened to his shoulder and leg. After dinner, the children had been left in the care of Soos. (Or perhaps, given the man-child's maturity, it was the other way around.)

Stanley had gone off to do who knew what. He was probably out stealing gas from other cars or causing the hotel workers agony. Stanford didn't really want to know, so long as his brother was out
of the way. At least the bar was the perfect escape from the twins, who seemed to run into no shortage of trouble. No matter how adorable and related to each other they all were, he still needed some space.

The lounge was at the top of the hotel, apparently only sharing with the penthouse suite for space. The large, floor-to-ceiling windows that seemed to be a characteristic of the hotel were present here too. Not that there was much to see, given how dark and rainy it still was outside. However, the occasional flash of lightening in the distance would illuminate the valley. It made him glad to be inside, where it was dry.

It was darkly lit inside, and all the furniture was darkly-coloured too. The walls were a navy-blue, and the carpet was pitch-black. Probably to hide all of the questionable stains on them. The ceiling however, was a work of art. Someone had painted the clear night sky, filled with constellations and planets, in a glowing, white paint. It seemed to provide more light than the actual lights at the bar did. The small room was cozy, even more so with no one crowding it. Just the two of them.

"I can't believe this is actually included in the price of the rooms," Fiddleford muttered, swirling around the contents of his glass. "It's quite the bargain."

"I'll pay you back just as soon as I cancel all my credit cards. I think that nurse might have stolen my wallet."

"Might have?"

"Best friends share financial information Ford!" Stanford said, mocking the nurse's high-pitched, nasally voice.

They both wrinkled their noses at the memory of the nurse.

"It's true," the employee working the bar said.

"Fiddleford, can I see your credit cards?"

"Certainly not! Do you have any idea what disclosing my financial information could do to this country?"

Fiddleford had spoken out before he could even stop.

"My point," Stanford replied, gesturing to the worker. "Really though, as soon as I make sure that, if you could even call him a man, hasn't stolen all my money, I'll pay you back."

"Really Stanford? You don't have to worry about that. I know you're working with what you get from the grants. It's fine if I pay."

"You've been paying for most of Stanley's idea because he kidnapped you!"

"I'm not even going to press charges on that. Really, it's fine," The drinks seemed to have made him more willing to speak his mind. "Although I do wonder why you would even volunteer to take care of those children if you've mostly got that little bit of- Oh, 'cuse me. That was rather insensitive. I-"

"No, it's alright."

"You called?" the bartender asked.

"Don't you have a job to be doing?" Fiddleford asked, sounding a little more irate than usual. "Stop
eavesdropping!"

Stanford sighed, and took a sip of his own drink.

"I suppose the prospect of caring for them then outweighed the thought of well, money. I was excited to meet them. The board's been wanting to see more results than I've been getting. You know, where's that Grand Unified Theory of Weirdness Stanford? Whatever happened to that portal of yours Stanford? Shouldn't you study one anomaly species instead of all of them?"

"That bad, huh?"

"And now with this first month being practically wasted, no findings on anything."

"Oh I'm sure things'll be alright!"

"Did I hear my name?"

"No! Get back to work!"

"Yeesh, sorry for having a name that sounds so similar. Next time I'll just stick with plain old B-"

"Honestly," Fiddleford said, rolling his eyes. "Let's talk about something more cheerful!"

The two men started at each other, trying to think of something happy to say. Stanford came up pretty much blank. In the distance, the rumbling of the thunder grew closer. Pellets of hail were starting to clink against the window.

"Dipper seems to be over his hero-worship."

"Oh, yes, that's nice. He couldn't keep fainting and foaming at the mouth like that," Ford replied. "So, how's the family?"

"Wondering when I'll get back to Oregon."

"Soon enough I hope."

"I wonder when this rain will clear up?"

"Forecast said it should be all gone by tomorrow. But I have to say, I will miss this place. Especially when compared to that RV."

"Yes, it is rather nice."

"Are you two always this boring when you're alone together?"

They both turned around, to see that Stanley had just entered the room.

"What are you doing here?"

"It's a free country," Stanley replied, folding his arms over his chest.

"Why don't you be free elsewhere in the country?" Fiddleford asked. "Like Alaska."

"Ha, ha, very funny. Stanley took a seat at the bar. "I'll have the exact opposite of whatever these two nerds ordered."

"One warm chocolate milk, coming up," The bartender replied.
Stanley looked back at them, not bothering to hide the skepticism on his face

"You're actually drinking? As in, stuff that contains alcohol?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I am," Fiddleford said, getting to his feet. "Wanna' make somethin' of it?"

It seemed his friend had a little too much to drink. His face was flushed, and he was trying to push up his sagging sweater sleeves.

"Sit down," Ford hissed, tugging on his sweater.

"I'm sick of having to deal with your constant attitude on this trip."

"Oh yeah?" Stanley asked, rising to his feet. "Well I'm sick of having to deal with your constant whining!"

"Oh yeah?!

"Yeah?!

"Oh yeah!"

Stanford desperately looked around the room, wondering why the bartender was not helping intervene. Where was the annoying eavesdropping stranger when they need him?! Stanford tried to stop Fiddleford from doing anything rash, but he was practically dragged over to the bar. His friend was much stronger than he had given him credit for. Stanley poked a finger in his chest, and snarled, "You wanna' fight?!"

"Yes I want to fight! Right here and now!"

"You bruise when the wind touches your skin!"

"Thems' is fighin' words Stanley Pines. I'll shove you straight out that window and straight to your doom!"

"Just try and do it! Try me nerd!"

"Mister Pines! No!"

Soos grabbed his boss and restrained him before he could do anything rash. Stanford watched in awe as the man-child ignored what Stanley was saying, so he could pin the man's arms behind his back. He had never seen Soos do anything than exactly what his brother told him to do. Where had that gone now? And why?

"Soos! Let go of me!"

"No way dude, it isn't worth it."

Stanley was held for a few more seconds, and then he caved.

"Fine. Let go of me."

"Here's your chocolate milk sir!" the bartender said, having mysteriously returned.

"Soos can have it," Stanley grumbled, crossing his arms.
"Oh boy! Thanks Mister Pines!"

An awkward silence set over the group.

Then, Stanford realized something.

"Wait a minute. If Fiddleford and I are here, and Stanley isn't a responsible adult, and you're here now too, then where are the kids?!"

"Them?" Soos questioned. "Pfft! Don't worry about that! They're totally safe!"

"How do you know?" Fiddleford asked, seeming to get over his anger from before.

"It was in the brochure dudes! Like, you can take your kids to one of those performances they have every night, and pick them up afterwards!"

"Oh."

Everyone instantly relaxed again.

"So, what kind of a performance is it?"

"It's the cutest thing. Not even a lie. There's this kid right? Named Gideon! He sings and dances and does all sorts of cute little performances! It's like, cuteness overload! He's going tonight."

"Ah, that sounds nice."

"I'm sure it will keep them entertained."

"Good thinking Soos!"

Chapter End Notes

Yes, even the thing with the mirrors and the name of the Shooting Starlight Lounge are real things. The next time I visit I'll take pictures. And post them on tumblr. Which you should totally follow. At (evil-ekat).tumblr.com. Ha, anyways, that's enough shamless plugging.
Four Hundred Eighty Nickels

Was it really necessary to turn off all the ceiling lights in the room, when there were a million blue and white stage-lights in every corner of the place? The glitter in the carpet was starting to make his legs itch too. Dipper was not so sure if he could sit on it much longer, especially while listening to that... Child, sing. Mabel seemed fairly in to the songs, clapping along and grinning, but to Dipper, it just sounded... Lame. He didn't know why Soos that thought they needed something to occupy them at twelve at night, but they didn't. Maybe that hotel brochure had brainwashed him with suggestions.

It felt like they had spent hours at the "concert." Not only was the show incredibly dragged out, it was awkward. Really awkward. He and Mabel were the only ones there, not that this was really surprising. He almost felt bad for the little guy on stage. He really was putting a lot of effort into what he was doing. From his experience, wearing a suit typically restricted one's movement.

He hadn't thought that it was actually possible to dance in one. The existence of Stan should have disproved that thought, seeing as the old man could commit multiple felonies without a scratch, but somehow, seeing a person actually dance in a suit was impressive. Those little cow boy boots didn't look like they were very good for dancing in either. Dipper wondered why the kid, Gideon, hadn't yet broken one of his heels.

"-and thanks for visitin', lil' ol'-

Gideon turned on his heel, and struck a pose. He held it for a moment, cheeks red, huffing and puffing. The man in the pink shirt (Who was apparently his father) held the final notes on the organ a few seconds longer, and then let go. Mabel jumped to her feet, clapping and smiling at the little performer.

"Yay! Bravo!"

"Why thank you!" Gideon grinned, sweeping down in a bow. "I'm here every Saturday evenin'!"

"Encore! Encore!"

A tiny smirk appeared on the boy's lips.

"Well if you insist," Gideon snapped his fingers. "From the top!"

"Gideon are you sure? My fingers are awful tired, and I know that you-"

Neither Dipper nor Mabel was able to see it, but the boy's smile became more twitchy, and his gaze hardened.

"I said, from the top."

"Well if you insist-"

Another chord was struck, and the show started all over again. Dipper sighed in disgust. He stood up, trying to brush the glitter off his legs. It only stuck to his hands, and the itchy feeling spread to his palms. Another sigh escaped him, but if quickly morphed into a yawn. It was late, and he was ready for bed. His head was starting to feel a little funny, and his vision was turning blurry. Each blink felt more like a battle to keep his eyes awake than before.

He really wanted to get back to the hotel room. Soos was supposed to pick them up after the show
was done. And he had told him not to leave his sister alone. However, she didn't seem to be going anywhere, she was listening— no, she was up on stage and singing along with the encore now. She...  She'd probably be fine. He'd take a quick break outside of the ballroom, and then return. Dipper turned, and exited the area.

The music was barely muffled by the sound of the door, despite how heavy it looked. Light was visible from between the cracks in the entrance. The waterfall next to it rushed on, loud as ever. The unpleasant feeling in his mind turned into more of a headache than an annoyance. He had to be somewhere quiet for a while. With the halls being so soundproof, it was not difficult. He walked up the hall he had ventured down with Soos earlier in the day. He eventually came to the staircase that lead to the second floor. The music seemed just as loud here.

So his next idea was to go in the washroom. There, the sound was much more muffled. The door, like most in the hotel, was old, and heavy. It was suspiciously clean for a guys washroom though. The tiled floor was polished well, and there were no mysterious substances in the sink. Dipper would have thought it strange that the washroom was clean (and smelled like oranges) if not for the fact that no one was ever in the hotel. At least until now.

There was a guy who didn't look much older than himself, standing at the sinks. The boy was staring at his reflection in the mirror. He was shaking slightly, and was quietly mumbling to himself. Dipper wondered if he should say something. Then he wondered if it was socially acceptable to go up and ask a person questions in a hotel washroom. He had to be... Subtle about this. He went over to the sinks, and stood next to the boy, he started to wash the glitter off his hands. The sound of running water caused the boy to jump, and look his way. He was sweating all over, and his were dripping wet.

"Uh, hey."

"O-oh uh, h-h-h-hey."

"Nice hotel."

"Er, yeah, it is nice. Clean bathrooms, no suspicious portals or tape-measurers..."

"Wait, what?"

"Nothing!"

The boy hastily wiped his hands off on his yellow shirt.

"So," Dipper's eyes stayed back to the mirror. "Not many people around."

"Yeah. I-I noticed that. Weird right?"

Just then, one of the stalls behind them was kicked open. An elderly man zipped up his pants, and grabbed on to the boy's shirt.

"Geeze are you actually trying to befriend that glittering Christmas tree?"

"Aw come on! I-I-"

"Don't worry about 'bout making friends with him, you're not missing much. We've gotta' find a new bar anyways. The one here's filled with scientific morons I thought were dead and their idiot brothers."
"But I-

The boy was dragged out by the back of his shirt before they could even finish their conversation. That was... Really weird. Dipper splashed some water on his face, trying to keep awake. He instantly regretted the choice, realizing that he had not gotten all of the glitter out of his eyes. It stung, really bad. He rubbed them, trying to fight back the burning tears that got in his way. Stupid glitter, stupid weird hotel and its weird employees and weird visitors.

Dipper looked back at his reflection. In the light of the bathroom, his skin had a sickly, yellow parlour to it. Even his eyes looked yellow, and his face seemed more gaunt than it actually was. He made a face, and his reflection stuck his tongue out at him. He managed to get most of the glitter off, and returned to the ballroom. Mabel was sitting on the brick wall that contained the waterfall's run-off. She was kicking her legs, and laughing about something with Gideon. He had to stop himself from rolling his eyes. When was this going to be over?

"Hey Dipper!" Mabel greeted. "Where'd you go? You missed the encore!"

"Washroom."

"Well you sure missed out on a great show! Gideon here's a master at performing!"

Gideon blushed, and batted a hand.

"Oh stop it you!"

Dipper skeptically looked at his sparkle-covered sister. How were her eyes not watering? Didn't she mind the fact that there was glitter in her hair, and her teeth? Alright, there was normally some form of glitter in her hair, she did keep reserve pockets of it on her at all times, but wasn't this a little, excessive? Dipper didn't get how she was so happy and energetic when he felt like collapsing on the ground and falling asleep. Seeing that weirdly bright marshmallow kid was not making him feel any better either.

"When's Soos getting here?" Dipper asked. "I'm ready to leave."

"Hopefully not any time soon!" Gideon said. "Mabel and I were just talking about-"

"Yeah, I'm sure that's great," Dipper waved off, yawning. "I'm just gonna' crash on that couch over there until someone picks us up."

True to his word, Dipper did exactly that. Someone had rearranged the couches for some reason. They were still in an oval shape, only now, there was a large, round bench that had been added to the mix. It was in the centre of the sitting area. Dipper fell backwards on to this, and stared at his reflection in the mirrored surface. His reflection looked just as thrilled as he was to be there. It must have been just a trick of the light, but for a moment, he could have sworn that he was in the yellow light of the bathroom again.

Dipper turned on his side, and then on to his stomach. He stared at Gideon and his sister. Not only was she sitting high up, Gideon was really short. He must have been breaking his neck to look up at her. That was, if he even had a neck. It was actually a bit hard to tell. Soon, he felt his eyes starting to close.

The next morning, Mabel knocked at the door. For a moment, there was no response. Then, there was a slight stirring. She heard the barely concealed whispers of the adults. There was more rustling, and she heard footsteps. It was Soos who answered the door. He was in his flannel pyjamas, and
squinting in the bright light of the hallway. He only opened the door a crack, not letting her see anything of the hotel bedroom. She didn't let that faze her though.

"Hey Soos!"

"Ah! Dude!" The man-child clutched his head in pain. "Shhh!"

"What? Why?"

"Who's there?" Ford asked.

"If it's maid service, tell 'em to shut up," Stan added.

"I need more ice," McGucket whined.

"Make that a double," Stan said.

"Triple," Ford chimed in.

The door was slammed shut in her face. But Soos quickly returned with the ice bucket, which was handed off to her.

"Here. If you could fill that up for us, that would be like, waaay appreciated."

"Er, alright."

The ice machine was just short walk down the hall. There was a small station with two vending machines. One for drinks, and one for snacks. Ice was free however, and Mabel filled the ice bucket to the brim. She returned back to the adult's room, and knocked on the door. This time, it was opened much more quickly. Soos grabbed the ice bucket and gave a short thanks. She tried to peer around the man-child's shoulder, but the entire room was dark as it could be. The heavy blinds were drawn, and not a single light was on.

"What's going on?"

"Shhh!"

"What's going on?" Mabel repeated, lowering her voice. "I thought we were going to have breakfast!"

"Just the thought of eating makes me wanna'- Ugh, t-too late-" "No! Stanley not on the-"

"Mister Pineses-"

"Don't you Mister Pineses me! This is all your fault!"

Soos' already strained smile faded. He let go of the door, and turned his head back to the darkness.

"My fault?!"

"Yes your fault! If you had just let Stanley and Fiddleford beat the cr- Ack! headache. Headache!"

"Ugh! That is it man! I'm not helping you!"

Before Mabel even knew what was happening, her great-uncle had been shoved out of the room, his
key-card yanked from his arms. Ford hissed in pain, shielding his eyes from the light. Soos tossed the man's glasses on the floor, and the door was slammed without so much as an explanation. Mabel picked up her grunkle's glasses, and handed them to him. Ford put them on, but he was still squinting in the light of the hallway. His hair was a ragged mess, and he really needed to shave. At least he was dressed. Or maybe he had never been in pyjamas to begin with. His shirt was wrinkled, and there were a couple mysterious stains on it that she did not want to know the origin of.

"Grunkle Ford is everything ok?"

"I think I may have pushed him too far," Ford mumbled to himself. "I- We'll all be fine dear niece. Stanley, Fiddleford and I may have... Perhaps... Gotten a little carried away last night."

"What happened?"

"We got into a fight. But Rick started it! He just had to show up out of nowhere! And Fiddleford was already in the mood to fight after Stanley showed up and-"

"Who's Rick?"

"Not important. Where's Dipper?"

"He's tired," Mabel said. "So I went to get you guys for breakfast, and then I was going to go back for him."

"Smart thinking. Shall we get him?"

"What about the others?"

"They're-"

A yelp of pain, followed by some words Mabel shouldn't have heard occurred.

"Going to be a while."

Dipper was no more willing than Soos, or any of the other adults to leave the safety of the hotel room. But, Mabel had the key card, and she was able to drag him out of the room within minutes. He was just as disarmed as Ford, having fallen asleep after the previous night's adventure. Soos had carried him back to the room, and he was still in his clothes.

Both of them were blinking tiredly, and did not seem to fully grasp the concept of movement. Dipper slowly pushed Ford along, occasionally leaning too far forwards and tripping. Ford was already starting to fall back to sleep, and it was up to Mabel to keep both sleepy heads awake for breakfast.

"Mabel, you're shedding glitter all over the carpet."

Mabel shook her head, and a cloud of sparkles danced through the air.

"Yeah, I'm like a disco ball! Or a snow globe with this happening in it!"

Dipper sneezed.

"That's not a good thing Mabel. You've got to wash that stuff off."

"Why?"

"You're leaving a trail everywhere!"
There was a path of glitter on the carpet, leading down the hall. But she didn't see what was so wrong with that.

"Now we'll know how to find our way back!"

"Kids, could you talk a little quieter?" Ford asked. "I'm still mentally recovering from the night before."

"You and me both," Dipper grumbled.

The buffet was the easiest place to get breakfast from. It was easy to simply seat themselves, and then get the food that they wanted. No placing orders, no waiting in line, it was perfect. Since Mabel was the most awake out of all of them, she picked the seats this time. She chose ones that were next to a window, but not near the high-up view. To the side, the outdoor pool was visible, and there was a patio. Because it was still cloudy outside, it was not smart to sit on the deck.

However, that did not mean they couldn't enjoy the pool of the nice, ground-level, not high up in any way, outdoor pool. Dipper and Ford were merely glad that they did not have to go very far to reach the food. A waiter came up to take their orders, the same guy who seemed to be the only person working in the hotel.

"Morning everyone!"

"Morning!"

Two grumbled responses followed.

"What can I get you to drink?"

"Coffee."

"Orange juice."

"Grunkle Ford can I get a coffee too?" Dipper asked.

"Absolutely not. Don't you know it'll stunt your growth? You'll wind up short!"

"A small coffee can't hurt," The waiter chimed in. "Just so long as most of it's milk."

"Fine, get whatever you eavesdropper," Stanford growled, rubbing his eyes.

While she went to get her own food, their drinks were served. Dipper only had a bowl of cereal, and Stanford had picked up a sad, dry piece of toast. Neither of them had very exciting breakfasts. But she had pancakes, waffles, and French toast. All topped in whipped cream, chocolate chips, and maple syrup. They were hot off the presses, still steaming even as she started to eat them.

They burned her tongue, but she did not mind. The pancakes and waffles were fluffy, and cooked to a golden-brown perfection. The French toast was good too, the chefs had even cut off the crusts before making it! It was almost like they knew exactly what she wanted! There was no shortage of toppings on her food either, and she ate until her plate was scraped clean.

Her great-uncle merely poked at his toast suspiciously, occasionally taking a sip from his coffee. Dipper only drank his coffee when Ford did, and it didn't take a genius to realize that he was copying their grunkle's actions. Between bites of French toast she smiled at the realization. Stanford started to perk up after the coffee started to take affect. Dipper noticeably did as well. He actually put jam on
his toast, instead of leaving it boring and dry.

They were all just about finished with their breakfast when something unexpected happened. Gideon, the cute little kid from last night, showed up. He spotted them and walked right to their table.

"Mabel! What a surprise seeing you..." Gideon trailed off. "Why Stanford Pines!"

"Of course, here we go," Stanford sighed. "First the man-child comes back to haunt me and now you. I'm going to ask for more coffee."

Picking up his cup and saucer, Stanford left the children at the table.

"Mabel, you never brought up that you were related to the Stanford Pines!" Gideon said, sitting next to her. "Course, I should've guessed seeing as you all look alike and have the same last name!"

"I... Didn't think it was important?"

"Didn't think it was important? Stanford's research has been quite interesting if I do say so myself."

"Interesting how?" Dipper suspiciously asked.

"I suppose neither of you have been told about it. He's real secretive about it and stuff."

"Actually, he's talked about it to me," Dipper replied.

"It puts me to sleep," Mabel added. "Literally. The last time he told me a story about that shape-shifter he raised, I was out like a light!"

Dipper didn't know what it was for certain, but there was something about Gideon's reaction that made him feel uneasy. He looked around, trying to find his great-uncle, but he did not see him anywhere. Dipper turned back to Gideon, feeling the frustrating sense of something being off, but he couldn't dismiss it now.

"Shape-shifter you say?"

"Uh, Mabel, maybe you shouldn't be talking about his research," Dipper quietly said, poking her in the ribs.

"Why not?"

"Yes, do tell more."

"We're going down to the pool," Dipper suddenly said. "Like, right now."

"The pool?" Mabel asked with a frown. "But we just ate! If we swim now we'll get cramps!"

Just then, Ford rejoined them, a new cup of coffee in hand.

"That's a myth you know. A wives' tale, nothing more to it."

"You don't have to swim. You just have to get enough water to wash that glitter out," Dipper added.

Before she could really give proper goodbyes, she was practically dragged out of the dinning room by her twin. Gideon remained at the table, watching them with confusion as they left.
"Whoa, why are you acting so weird all of a sudden?" Mabel asked.

"There's something weird about that guy," Dipper said. "I don't like the way he talks, or looks at you."

"I'm with your brother on this one," Ford said. "I know Gideon, he's from Gravity Falls as well."

"Yeah, we kind of figured that out already."

"Well let me tell you, he's bad news. If I had been in a proper state of mind last night, I would've put the hints together and come to pick you up earlier. Of course, I only put it together when it was right in front of me, but-"

"He can't really be that bad of news!" Mabel said. "Gideon's like, nine! He wears tiny cowboy boots and does adorable dances."


"He does?"

"A different story for a different time."

"Now seems like a good time."

"Now is not a good time because we're going down to the pool."

"Down?"

"There's going to be another thunderstorm. So it'll have to be the indoor one."

Dipper looked out the window. The sky was no less lighter than yesterday. If anything, it was darker. The clouds stretched on endlessly, even though there was a steady breeze pushing them past the hills. The river below was twisting and bubbling, as if there was something alive beneath the murky waters. It appeared higher in level too, and it looked like it might start to claim some of the golf course. The sand traps were already filled with rainwater, and the bank of the river was no longer visible. So much for leaving when the weather cleared. It looked like they were spending another day in the hotel.
March break is coming up! So I should have more time to write, as I've been working my butt off so that I have a clear(er) schedule over my time off. At the current pace, I think the story will be over some time in mid-April, but we'll all see how that turns out.

Stanley was laying on his back, with a pillow over top of his head. The only light in the room came from the bathroom. Soos had turned on the light there just before he had left the place, trying to prompt him to get out of bed. McGucket was quietly mumbling to himself, haphazardly attempting to get dressed before the man-child dragged them out of bed like he had done with Stanford. Stanley was going to take his chances with getting dragged out, especially when his headache was not going away.

He'd taken two extra-strength aspirins, and it had done nothing to alleviate the pain. Dumb stuff was probably watered down with powdered sugar or something. He hardly remembered any of the night before. There had been a guy... With blue hair... Like some sort of old lady with a bad perm... And McGucket had actually threatened him... And told him to go to Alaska. Or maybe he was still a little delusional. Someone knocked at the door. Stanley groaned, and flipped on to his stomach.

"Get the door," he said.

"Why don't you get it?"

"Because you're already standing."

"Not anymore."

He felt someone collapse next to him on the bed. McGucket grabbed the pillow and covered his own face. There was more knocking, and the pounding in his head grew worse. It was probably just maid service, he could ignore this and sleep this whole headache thing off. Stanley took the pillow back from McGucket, who in turn attempted to steal it again. The pillow wound up on the floor, and they were both exposed to the brightness of the hotel room. Stanley hissed, and covered his eyes, the other man did the same. Little spots appeared in his line of sight, and a shrill ringing began in his head. The combined sound of knocking was not making him feel any better, and he could hear a muffled voice coming from the other side of the door.

"Grunkle Stan!"

"Go away."


"GRUNKLE STAN!"

Oh boy, she was getting even louder the more he ignored her. Unable to take it any more, Stanley got out of bed. He nearly fell over, and would have if not for the bed's convenient position. A wave of nausea washed over him. His stomach twisted into cold, slimy knots. It was already empty, there was nothing left to throw up. That didn't stop him from gagging.
His mouth was painfully dry, as if he had drunk the entire ocean instead of every available beverage in the bar. He needed water, something, anything to get rid of the awful parched feeling. There was a glass of water on the nightstand. Stanley didn't really care whose it was, he drank all of it. He felt a little less terrible after that, and was finally able to answer the door. His great-niece was there, twisting her hands around her hair and glancing down the hall nervously.

"Yeesh, where's the fire kid?" Stan asked.

"I met this kid, Gideon last night at the show Soos made us go to. And he was pretty cool at first, but when Dipper and Soos and Grunkle Ford went to the pool he found me again and everything turned creepy really quickly!"

"Why aren't you at the pool?" Stan asked.

"Because I didn't want to go swimming."

"Look kid, you've brought this upon yourself," Stan replied, slowly closing the door. "I don't know what you want me to do about this."

"No! Wait!"

"She does sound a little distressed," McGucket added.

"Quiet you. I was the one who answered the door, so I'm dealing with this."

At this point, it looked like he was not going to return to bed any time soon. The kid was going through some sort of preteen crisis and McGucket had stolen all the covers. Stanley rubbed his eyes, only now noticing that he was missing his glasses. He had figured the fuzzy vision went hand in hand with the hangover, but he hadn't actually considered the idea that he might be missing his glasses.

Stanley found them resting on the nightstand, right next to where he had found the glass of water. Only, when he put them on, things were still slightly warped. Oh Ford... The knucklehead had taken his glasses by accident. These would have to be the ones he dealt with for now. Some sight was better than no sight, and he could still see how nervous his great-niece was.

"He's really creepy when no one else is around! His dad was there the last time we talked, but this time he was just there, outside of my room!"

That actually sounded pretty bad. Stanley suddenly recalled what had happened the last time his great-niece was left alone with a suspicious, creepy boy, she wound up with head trauma. Stanley thought back to what the doctor had said, the dangers that could come with her getting another bad concussion... Sure the kid probably wasn't the same one before, but he knew that there was no way this little weirdo would be spending too much time around the kid. Especially if he was making her uncomfortable.

"How old is this kid?"

"I don't know? Like eight, nine? He's sort of like Soos, it's really hard to tell!"

"Where is he now? I thought you said he was in front of your room or something like two seconds ago."

"He is! But I lied and told him I had to ask for permission before I could go play mini-putt! Which he somehow found out I really liked! What do I say?"
Stanley turned back to McGucket.
"Gimme' a reason why she can't play with the kid."
"Not enough money," McGucket suggested.
"You literally run a multi-billion dollar company, and I'm a professional criminal!"
"Good point."

Of course, it had to be now that the guy was unable to come up with some sort of nagging reason to prevent her from leaving. Fiddleford had pestered them and warned them about potential danger all the way from the hospital in Jersey to the outskirts of Idaho. Yet it was only at this point, when he needed a good excuse for the girl that neither of them could come up with a reasonable lie! He was a liar, he lied for a living. He was lying right now! Why was it so hard for him to think of a good story to keep that creep away from her now? What should he say? Arranged marriage? She was terminally ill?

"Have you considered telling him how you feel?" Fiddleford asked.
"That was my first choice! But when I said I didn't want to he got more creepy and wouldn't take no for an answer!"

"Well honey, the important thing is that you told the truth," he yawned.

Mabel was starting to look more panicked. Her face turned pale, and she was squeezing her hair between her fingers. Mabel's voice rose to a squeak as she said;

"He's coming down the hall now!"

"Where's the nearest body of water I can throw him in?" Stan asked.

"The river," Fiddleford helpfully chimed in. "Or I suppose we could do the outdoor pool if we wanted him to get hit by lightnin'."

"Well you're helping me carry him there," Stanley replied.

He grabbed the bedcovers and tugged on them so hard that McGucket was dragged too. He rolled out of bed and landed in a tangled heap of blankets and limbs on the floor. Stanley nudged the mess with his foot. McGucket sat up and dusted himself off, unamused with being literally dragged out of bed when he was suffering from a hangover. But before he could start to argue with Stanley, the little gremlin who seemed to be causing Mabel so much trouble showed up. He was ridiculously short, and pale to boot. What was he like, made of marshmallows or something? And what was going on with that hair of his? It was the most ridiculously styled thing he had ever seen, and it was glittering!

Stanley dragged McGucket over to the door. He needed someone to help him figure out a realistic lie that a responsible person would tell, and now would be a good time for him to think of one. Fiddleford haphazardly leaned against his shoulder, squinting in the even brighter light of the hallway. Stan used an arm to keep him propped up, not wanting the guy to fall over and break a hip. Actually, that would be a good excuse for Mabel to not go mini-putting. But he was certain that everyone in the place was sick of doctors and hospitals at this point in time. Maiming McGucket could wait a little longer.

"What do you want?" Stan asked, glaring at the kid.
"Well I uh," the child appeared briefly confused for a moment. "Stanford?"

"Stanley," he corrected.

"They're twins," Mabel added. "It's a family thing."

"But you're wearing the exact same glasses!"

"We swapped by accident."

"You did not!" Gideon snapped, stomping his foot. "I just saw you at breakfast!"

"Ugh, apparently Ford and I aren't the only ones who need glasses."

"If you're not Stanford then who are you?!"

"Stanley."

"His twin brother," Fiddleford said.

"But Stanford told me that he didn't have any direct family members!"

"Well you see, Stanford can't stand Stanley, and so because neither twin can stand being close by each other, Stanford often neglects to mention that he has a brother named Stanley. Which often results in identity problems. Dipper and Mabel's parents thought that Stanley was Stanford when in actuality, he was Stanley who was pretending to be Stanford because when he is Stanley there is often law enforcement after him, where as Stanley-"

Gideon started to go slightly cross-eyed as he tried to follow McGucket's tale of two Stans. He nodded along with what the man was saying, but it was clear that the kid had been lost since the first sentence. Stanley wasn't sure how it was possible, but Fiddleford managed to keep up his story about there being two Stan Pines that couldn't stand each other. There wasn't exactly much content to work with, but he was doing it. Mabel looked equally confused, but nevertheless relieved that they were trying to stall Gideon.

"-and so Stanley who was pretending to be Stanford who was pretending to be Stanley who was actually Stanford disguised as Stanley because his twin brother who he couldn't stand, Stanley was dressed like Stanford who was acting like Stanley so people would not be confused about two Stans, that is to say, Stanford and Stanley, who cannot stand each other by the way, were standing next to the ampersand band while holding tin cans and doing jazz hands."

"Understand?" Stanley asked.

"Guuuuh... I uh... Wow... That was real... Who-? Who are you again? Where am I? What am I doing here?"

The two men grinned.

"You were just leaving."
freezing set of perpetually dripping stairs to reach the top. Getting up the stairs was slightly nerve-wracking. It felt as if one could slip at any moment, and it was dangerous to look up when there was constant water falling from the top.

Along these walls, the sky started to appear, as if one had climbed above the canopy of rainforest. There were clouds painted here, and more birds soaring through the sky. From the top of the waterslide, it was possible to see everything in the area. The side of the building that was devoted to windows, the top of another fake waterfall (which was a part of the pool), the hot tub, and one bored-looking great-uncle. With two open wounds, it wasn't safe for him to be swimming in a pool. They could get infected, and would probably sting a lot in the water of the pool.

Dipper turned to Soos, who was stuck at the top of the slide. The lifeguard (Who was apparently also a bartender, desk worker, gift shop cashier, and waiter.) nudged Soos with his foot.

"We've gotta' push him man. He's stuck."

"Soos, you've got too many floaties on."

"Don't you dare try to take these pool ducks from me Dipper! They're important!"

"You can't go down the slide with all of those on," the lifeguard said. "Well you can, it's just going to happen very slowly, and I'm on break in five."

"Soos!"

"Not happening dude."

"Just help me push him."

Dipper did as he was told, but Soos did not budge from his spot. The floaties were taking up too much space. He had two water wings per limb, and had somehow fit one around his neck. Then there was the inner tube, and flippers he had over his middle, and the flippers on his feet. Dipper didn't know how Soos expected to swim with so much stuff on. He could barely move his arms. Heck, Soos could barely blink with those goggles over his eyes. Soos was so stuck in space, Dipper wasn't prepared for when he actually moved slightly forward.

Before he knew what was going on, he had tumbled over the man-child, and taken a very unpleasant face-first descent to the pool. Water got in his eyes and up his nose, and he accidentally inhaled after reaching the bottom. Dipper heaved himself out of the pool, dizzy, and hacking up water. When he looked back to the top of the slide, Soos was still stuck with a very unhappy lifeguard. Ford, who had watched Dipper's unexpected fall went over to him.

"Dipper! Are you alright?"

"I-I-" Dipper coughed again. "I'm good!"

Even as he said so, he didn't feel it. His entire front was scraped up, and his chin felt sore too. His chest ached after he had inhaled so much water, even though he had gotten rid of most of it. He felt short of breath, and had to crouch by the edge of the pool.

"What happened?"

"Soos got stuck."

"It figures he would be the one to endanger you."
"Er, it wasn't really Soos' fault. He just has too many floaties on."

"I'm not taking them off dude!" Soos yelled.

"I think I've had enough swimming for one day."

His shirt, hat and towel were resting at one of the tables. He put those on, and figured that he would shower and get dressed back in the room. He might need to patch up a few of the scrapes that he got too, and he wasn't interested in doing that in the public showers, even if there was never anyone in the hotel. Ford seemed happy that he didn't have to supervise anymore too. Whatever had been bothering him in the morning seemed to have left him, for the most part.

"How about we go for a walk?"

"A walk?"

Dipper couldn't keep the skepticism out of his voice. Normally Grunkle Ford wasn't that old in spirit. But, a walk? For fun? He wasn't a dog!

"Well yes! It's stopped raining, and I'm getting sick of being cooped up in this hotel. Aren't you?"

By the side with the windows, there was a door leading outside. The pool faced the back of the hotel, it was on a lower level of the already confusing building. There was a paved path twisting down the hill, leading to the outdoor golf course and the surrounding forested area. The sky was cloudy, and it looked like it was going to rain again, even if it had temporarily ceased.

It was always grey in this area, it had been like this as they were driving up to the hotel, and every day they remained. They had pushed back their schedule twice now, due to the bad weather. Wasn't it important for them to be leaving the hotel soon, rain or shine? There were supposedly enemies of Stan, chasing after them! If they traced their path to the hotel, there would be a shoot-out and they'd have to escape or go on another crazy road-trip before they could reach the west coast!

"I kind of thought I was the only one. Mabel and Soos are just really happy with the place in general, while you guys keep saying we should stay longer..."

"Have we? I don't recall saying that."

"But you booked us for another night, and yelled at the guy working the front desk."

"Hm, I have no recollection of that."

Now he was really starting to sound old. How could his great-uncle just forget that they were booked for another night in the place? He had gone up and done it himself, hotel brochure in hand, demanding that they extend their stay...

"What about Soos?"

"The lifeguard will figure something out."

"But."

"Come on Dipper. Do you want to get out of this hotel or not?"

"I guess, yeah, I do."

"Exactly. Now let's go."
Compared to the humid interior of the pool area, it was cold outside. Flecks of water still rained from the sky, due to the wind dislodging droplets from the trees. Dipper shivered slightly, and tucked his hands under his armpits. Maybe he should have gotten out of his wet swimming shorts. Or maybe it was a good thing that he didn’t, seeing as they were going to get wet outside in the rain anyways.

Being on a slight incline, Ford had no trouble going downhill. There was an untidy garden on either side of the path. Wooden beams kept the area contained, but there were long strands of grass peeking through the dirt. Ferns, beaten down by the rain, covered most of the area. Tiny brown and white mushrooms grew underneath the plans, almost as if they were taking refuge from the constant downpour.

Muddy trails of water flowed from the garden and down the path, all heading in the direction of the river. They walked down the trail, passing by one of the putting greens on their way. It was amazing that the grass was so well-kept. It was cut short to the ground, and there was no shortage of it growing. Closer to the river, there was a flock of white geese. They were pecking at the grass, and honking at each other. As they drew closer, some of the geese started to hiss at them. Stanford rolled his eyes, and made a shooing motion at the birds. They scattered.

"See? Isn't this better than nearly drowning in the hotel pool?" Stanford asked.

"It's a little cold."

"But isn't it better than being locked away in the hotel?"

Dipper looked back at the hotel. The building was barely visible through the cover of trees and the angle the hill created. What was most visible were the windows, which all glowed a bright gold in the miserable, grey afternoon. Compared to the weather outside, it seemed more like a refuge than before. He really wouldn't mind going back to get something to eat, or maybe he and Mabel could explore some of the place together. There were many interesting rooms in the place, it was practically overwhelming. They hadn't checked out the gym either, or the tennis courts, or the tiny child-friendly bar that looked over the indoor pool...

Ugh, he had really been listening to Soos and his talk with the brochure too much. None of those things sounded really exciting. What was he going to do at a tennis court? He hadn't exactly brought along a racket. Although, perhaps they were provided, much like the towels were for the spa and hot rocks therapy- Alright, he had seriously spent too much time around Soos. He was actually glad to be gone from the hotel. It was refreshing to be in the cold air, and away from the old hotel smell of the place. He felt like he could think a little more clearly.

"The grounds are nice."

The riverbanks were overflowing, the rising water had reached the grass, and the water that had been falling downhill was collecting in puddles. Dipper had to dodge the puddles to avoid getting his sneakers muddy and wet. Ford didn't seem to mind though, so they continued their walk, down to one of the bridges. Here, his great-uncle needed a little help to get over the incline, but once they reached the middle, he was fine. Dipper leaned against the railing, and looked over the side.

"Do you think Soos' still stuck?"

Ford snorted at the question.

"I wouldn't be surprised."

Dipper frowned slightly.
"I mean, shouldn't we go back and help him then?"

"He'll be fine. He always seems to escape trouble in the end."

"Maybe we should go check?"

"All he needs to do it take off those ridiculous inner tubes Dipper, he'll be fine."

The river water was a swirling brown-yellow. A layer of dirt and debris had turned the river opaque. Tree branches occasionally bobbed to the surface of the water, before being pulled back down. He should see his own, distorted reflection twisting below. One of the geese from before disturbed it further, but it could not swim against the current, and had to fly to escape the strength of the water.

"Grunkle Ford?"

"Yes?"

"How come you and Soos don't get along? Like, Soos told me that he lived in Gravity Falls, and it's a small town, so you obviously know each other..."

"Oh did he now?"

"He kind of called you a jerk?" Dipper winced. "And said you only care about yourself?"

"Well in that case you can tell him that he is an irresponsible man-child who is incapable of separating his personal life from the work environment-"

Stanford's phone rang, interrupting his rant. He dismissed the call however, and went back to listing mean things until his face was red.

"What if that call was important?"

"It probably wasn't."

"But what if it was?"

The phone was tossed to him.

"Goodness Dipper! If it bothers you so much, call whoever it was back!"

Hearing his great-uncle rant about Soos, and Soos doing visa-versa made him uncomfortable. He didn't want to pic a side on this fight, but he did want to know why they seemed to get along so badly. As Mabel-ish as it sounded, there had to be some way to make them get along again. He liked Grunkle Ford, and he liked Soos, and he didn't really want to listen to one complain about the other whenever he was with them.

Dipper redialed the number that had just called, and waited for someone to pick up. It was better than listening to Ford get worked up. The most inhuman, high-pitched voice he had ever heard answered. Dipper wondered if the guy was in a place where his voice was echoing, or if he had some sort of sound effect to go along with it as he talked.

"Ford if you don't start answering my texts I swear to-"

"Who is this?"

"Who are you?!"
"I don't know! Er, I mean, who are you?"

"Is Ford there?"

"Yeah, he is."

"Is he busy?"

Dipper looked at Ford, who was snarling something however his breath.

"Tell him go get his as-"

"Who are you talking to?" Stanford asked.

Dipper covered the receiver.

"I have no idea."

"I can hear what you're saying you know!"

"Don't question it Dipper. Just give me the line."

"Finally! Ford you've gotta' get out of that ho-"

Stanford ended the call before the voice could finish. He tossed it back to Dipper.

"See? Look at all those texts the weirdo has been sending me!"

Dipper scrolled through some of them. It made up most of his messaging, all of them unread. The rest was from some Rick Sanchez guy, and it was all written in a language he didn't understand. Just then, another text, from the caller, arrived.

That hotel is brainwashing you!

"Uh, Grunkle Ford, I think you might want to see-"

"Don't even bother Dipper. He's always trying to get my attention."

Don't touch the brochures, they're reinforcing the spell.

"Really Grunkle Ford, this actually seems kind of serious."

"All of them do Dipper. He's a scam artist."

It won't let you leave.

"Grunkle Ford-"

"If you're just going to keep talking then you can give me back my phone."

Dipper looked back at the warnings, and then at his great-uncle's outstretched hand. With a shrug, he returned the phone. The texts were just lies, scams. The guy was just trying to trick his great-uncle. Maybe he was some kind of telemarketer that had been taking things too far. Either way, it probably didn't matter. They'd leave the hotel once the weather cleared...
Chapter Notes

It's time for shameless advertising again, for reasons. So I suggest you check out Kindred Spirits. There's 618% more triangles, and weird family bonding.

"Dipper! Dipper! Look at how high I'm jumping!"
"Yeah, I see you," he sighed, looking up from his sudoku puzzle.
"I'm flying!"
"I can see that."

Fiddleford nudged him in the ribs.

"Why don't you go join your sister?"
"She's on a bouncy castle. Isn't that sort of, childish?"

The neon-orange bouncy castle was set up in the hotel's gym. It was shaped like a large tiger. It had black stripes running along its back, and a ridiculously wide smile. His sister was happily jumping around the inside, kicking her legs, bouncing on her back, and running up the walls. The smile she wore could rival that of the bouncy castle's, and her hair flew wildly through the air with every leap that she took.

There were folding chairs available for use in the gym. He and the adults had picked them up, and dragged them over to the entrance of the castle. Stan was reading one of the hotel's complementary newspapers. Ford had taken the politics section from his twin. With every flip of the page, his eyebrows sunk further, and he muttered something about plant people propaganda. Whatever that meant.

Fiddleford and the bouncy castle operator were left supervising Mabel as she bounced around the interior of the castle. Once or twice her jumps flew out of control, and she briefly became visible over the top of the bouncy castle. There were also a few occasions where she smacked into a wall. The first few times, Dipper had thought his sister had hurt herself, and got to his feet. But every time, she got up with a grin, and continued to jump around.

Dipper had taken up solving a book of assorted puzzles (Provided by the hotel, much like the newspaper the Stans were reading.) to keep his boredom at bay. He was practically a teenager, and totally mature for his age! Plus, teenagers didn't go on bouncy castles. In fact, he and Mabel were above the height limit for entry. It was specified by the cardboard cut-out of a tiger, which held a copy of the rules. They were both way above the height of its outstretched hand.

Of course, all it took was a little bribe from Stan for the worker to let her go. The guy must have been desperate for money or something, seeing as he worked multiple jobs around the hotel. He had a folding chair of his own, and reminded them of the rules every five minutes. Apparently that was all his job consisted of. Well, that and ignoring the rules. His sister was very clearly breaking all of them, despite his legally-mandated reminders.
"Why sit around here all bored when you could be having fun?"

"I am having fun!"

"You've only got one number in that box," McGucket replied. "The rest is the word bored."

Dipper looked down at the sudoku puzzle, and realized that he was telling the truth. He snapped the book shut, and tucked it underneath his seat.

"That doesn't mean anything! Besides, shouldn't we be leaving here soon?"

"Yeesh, McGucket's right, you are bored."

"Grunkle Stan you're the one with criminals after you!"

"They'll never be able to find us in this weather!" Stan scoffed.

"We'll never be able to leave either," he retorted.

"Dipper, relax," Ford said, flipping to the next page. "This paper says the weather will clear tomorrow."

"It said that yesterday too!"

"Did it now?"

"Yes! And so did the news on TV, and the lady on the radio! They've said that the entire time we've been here, but the rain hasn't gone anywhere!"

"The forecast has been known to be wrong from time to time. What can you expect when all forms of media are being controlled by those plant-people?"

"Come on! What's the worst a little rain can do?"

"Dipper, if you're so bored, and unwilling to go on the bouncy castle, then maybe you should find something else to do."

"Here! Take my brochure!" Stanford said, handing it to the boy. "Find something in there, and then tell us where you're going. Soos can take you!"

*Don't touch the brochures, they're reinforcing the spell.*

Nervously laughing, Dipper inched away from his great-uncle. Sure that guy sending those texts was probably crazy, but where was the harm in listening to him for a little bit? If the thing was a perfectly normal piece of paper and he was being paranoid, then he wasn't missing out on anything. But if it truly was something he wanted to avoid, then he would know soon enough. Dipper glanced around the area, trying to find something to convince the adults that he was not being weird, or bored. There was nothing beyond the bouncy castle, and the little area of chairs that the adults had set up for themselves.

"Where even is Soos?" Dipper asked. "You know, we never found out if he escaped that slide or not. And come to think of it, I don't remember seeing him at dinner last night."

"Well the hotel's only employee is here," Ford said. "So I'm sure he's unstuck by this point. After all, the guy couldn't just leave him trapped there!"
"But where is he?"

"You don't need Soos to go with you Dipper," Fiddleford said. "You're responsible enough to walk around the hotel on your own. Here, take this pamphlet and look for something to do."

With two people holding the cursed brochures up at him, Dipper didn't know what to do. He couldn't really talk himself out of this one. The only solution looked like the bouncy castle. Fate seemed to agree with him. Gideon, that weird little kid who liked his sister, entered the gym. Didn't he have like, a life or something? Why was he even allowed in the hotel when he wasn't putting on shows?

Gideon took off his shoes. He was too short to reach the bouncy castle by himself, so the employee lifted him up. Mabel's smile faded, and she stopped bouncing momentarily. This was the perfect reason to get away from the adults. Dipper took several more steps away from the adults, and tried to keep a smile on his face.

"You know, I think Mabel might need help," Dipper said. "So I'm just going to not be bored on the bouncy castle with her and Gideon now!"

Stan wrinkled his nose at this.

"Ugh, watch out for her. We had to drive him off yesterday."

Dipper took off before they could try to offer the brochure to him again. He pulled off his shoes, and climbed into the bouncy castle. Mabel was jumping around in circles, clearly trying to avoid Gideon, without looking like she was avoiding him. A relieved smile appeared on her face when she saw him.

It took a moment for him to gain his footing, but within a moment, he had sent Gideon flying through the air when he got too close to his sister. He then timed his jumps so that the kid could not stand up, no matter how hard he tried. Mabel's grin spread even wider when he did this. Dipper purposely turned his back to the kid, so he could claim that he was unaware of what was happening.

"Ready to go?"

"Definitely. I mean, I really like this hotel, but he keeps being... Creepy. I'd totally stay if he wasn't though!"

So his sister was pretty much brainwashed, like the rest of his family then. The only thing that made her want to leave was Gideon. Maybe if she talked to him a little more, and was creeped out enough, they would leave. After all, Stan (as strange as it seemed) wasn't going to let her stay in a place where she was constantly stalked. They'd leave, and escape this place for good! Just... He didn't want to leave his sister in an uncomfortable position like this. He knew it would be wrong to just throw her to the wolves after she had already been through so much this summer.

Just then, Mabel took an enormous jump. When she landed, he was sent soaring through the air. Dipper saw above the walls, and for one paralysing moment, he thought that he might land on the other, very hard, side. With a yelp, he clung on to the wall of the bouncy castle before he could go any further. There was definitely a height limit on this thing for a very good reason. From behind him, he could hear his sister's laughter. That was enough for him to change his decision about leaving her and Gideon.

"Alright, it's for the good of the family."

With the walls constantly shaking, it was impossible to hold on for long. Dipper slowly slid down the edge, coming to a rest on the floor. But instead of getting back up like she expected, her brother got
out of the bouncy castle. Mabel tried to follow her brother, but she was blocked from leaving, by Gideon. He leaned against one of the walls casually, but she knew that the little creep was doing it so that she couldn't get through the exit without pushing him.

"Why howdy there Mabel! Who would've expected to see you here?"

"Y-yeah. It is a pretty big hotel," she replied, looking over his shoulders. "Er, do you mind-"

"I'm real sorry if I did somethin' to hurt your feelings Mabel."

"It's fine," she brusquely said. "Now could you please-"

When she tried to gently push him to the side, Gideon grabbed her hand.

"It's just, things get so lonely bein' all alone in this big ol' hotel. So, so lonely."

Mabel yanked her hand away from Gideon.

"Seriously, quit it."

"You're the first person to ever ask for an encore at any of my shows."

"Gideon, if you don't let me leave this bouncy castle, I'm going to push you."

"Please Mabel! Just give me a chance to make up whatever I did to you! Let me right my wrongs!"

"Gideon, I-"

"Come on! Pweease?" The boy widened his eyes, and fluttered his eyelashes. "If it doesn't work, I pwomise that I'll leave you alone!"

"You promise?"

"Pwomise!"

"Just say promise."

Gideon placed one hand over his heart.

"I promise."

"Fine, I'll do something with you."

The boy squealed, and hugged her around the middle.

"Mabel Gleeful, you have just made me the happiest boy in the universe!"

"Did... Did you just call me Gleeful?!"

"What?! No! I uh, meet me at the pond in an hour!"

Gideon jumped off the bouncy castle and grabbed his shoes. The little guy ran off as fast as his feet could carry him. The door slammed loudly as he left the gymnasium. Mabel groaned, and fell to her feet. Why had this happened? How come Dipper had just left her hanging like that? It felt like the entire world was sinking around her. In fact, the entire world was sinking around her! It was deflating! The motor that had been running before was turned off. Mabel got out of the bouncy castle before the walls and floor could collapse on top of her.
"What's happening?"

"I gotta' new job as a boat guide to take up," he replied, closing his folding chair. "It pays a lot better than this old gig!"

The man started to roll up the bouncy castle into a neat pile, cheerfully whistling to himself. Mabel made her way back to the group of chairs, where everyone (except for Soos) was sitting. Dipper seemed suspiciously absorbed in his copy of *Assorted Puzzles for that One Buzzkill on Vacations.* Mabel tore it from her brother's hands, and glared at him.

"Hey! What the heck Mabel? I was in the middle of that!"

"It was upside-down," she growled.

Dipper knew that he was caught, and did not try to hide the fact that he was blushing.

"I can explain."

"I have to meet him at a pond Dipper! A pond! What if he's going to dump my body in there?! I don't even know where that is if I do get murdered!"

"Here, I'm sure it's in the brochure," Fiddleford said.

"Mabel wait-"

She took the pamphlet and flipped through the pages. Sure enough, there was a tiny bit of text on a pond. Apparently there was one in the wedding gardens. She was about to mention this to Dipper, when the pictures of the garden caught her attention. It was beautiful! Filled with countless, colourful flowers, and even a water-wheel! Plus, there were swans swimming there in the water! Swans! And, a gazebo! It was so amazing!

Somehow seeing such beautiful scenery was enough to soothe her. She definitely needed to check this place out for herself. It was a good thing she had agreed to go with Gideon on that... Was it a date? The panic returned. She couldn't go out on a date with him! He was like, nine! Also, who could forget the fact that he was totally creepy? He wouldn't let her leave that bouncy castle! She didn't want to be friends with him let alone go on a date!

Mabel looked back down at the brochure. Wait, were those, ducklings? There were baby ducklings in the pond?! She needed to see it, right now! This hotel had everything! Farm animals were the greatest! Just like... Where was Waddles? She... She couldn't remember the last time she had seen her pig... She always remembered to feed him and give him daily snuggles. Why could she not recall now? Wait, was that a tea party in the picture? You could have a fancy tea party at the wedding gardens? She needed to do a total makeover if she was going to be eating somewhere so fancy!

With a strange sort of terror, Dipper watched the drastically changing expressions appear upon his sister's face. First, it was annoyance, which turned into interest, and then nervousness... What was going on in her head?! What was that awful brochure doing to her?! It was messing with her mind or something, but she looked like she was trying to fight it.

Eventually, Mabel gave the pamphlet back to Fiddleford, seemingly having read enough. She was not angry anymore. She seemed to have completely forgotten that she was mad at him, or that Gideon had asked her to meet him by some sort of pond. His plan wasn't working. He had left her sister with that creep for nothing, and now she was going to... No, there was still Stan. He would have to do something about this! None of his great-uncles would let her go for that matter!
"Grunkle Stan, did you hear that?"

Clearly he hadn't, because the man said, "Huh, what?"

"Mabel got asked out on a date, by that Gideon you really don't like."

Stan tore the newspaper he was holding in half.

"What?! Where is that little brat?! Lemme' at him!"

"He left. But you could still I dunno', throw him into the pond. Maybe the Fords could help you with that."

"You're completely right," Ford said, closing his newspaper as well. "I say we get something to scare that child off!"

"The brochure says that they sell knives in the gift shop," Fiddleford said.

Dipper just had to groan as the two Stans looked over Fiddleford's shoulder to see what he was pointing at. This was not working! It was like the hotel knew what to do to keep everyone trapped in here! There had to be some way out of it! He couldn't be the only one who saw what was going on. Mabel had snapped out of it for a moment, and he knew that there must be other people in the hotel aware of what was going on! They could just be faking, like he was trying to do!

"Oooh, there's also ammunition," Stanford said. "Stanley don't you keep a gun on you?"

"Three at all times."

"While I don't condone gun violence, I think we should stock up on ammo,'" Fiddleford said.

"Then it's settled! Let's go!"

"No! Wait!"

Before he could even try to argue with the adults, they had left the room, discussing threatening plans together. He had never seen the three of them get along so well before! This hotel must have really been messing with people's heads, and not just preventing them from leaving.

How could they all be friendly with each other, when just a couple of days before, they- primarily Stan against the other two- were constantly at each others' throats? It made no sense! Unless this hotel really did know what people wanted, and tried to keep them here. Did that mean, both of the Stans secretly wanted to start getting along again? No, that was ridiculous, they hated each other. The brainwashing probably just had bad side-effects to go with it or something.

Dipper followed his great-uncles out of the gymnasium, planning on chasing after them so he could try to get rid of the hotel booklet. He was stopped though, because Soos was just outside of the place. But for some reason, he had a mop, and he was cleaning the floor. Had he spilled something and gotten in trouble? Then, why was he in an employee uniform?

"Soos? What happened to you? And what are you wearing?"

"Oh! Dipper!" the man-child stopped cleaning the floor, and leaned against his mop. "You see, after I got unstuck from that water slide, Alex, what a guy, that I should take up a job here!"

"Soos, that doesn't make any sense!"
"Sure it does! Just because I work for Mister Pines, it doesn't mean I can't have a spare one on the side! Gotta' make that cash money you know?"

"That's not the part that doesn't make sense."

Of course the one-man hotel worker would suggest that Soos should get two jobs. What didn't make sense was why Soos would get a job offer, and why Soos would ever accept it.

"You know, they've got more openings here Dipper! You should get a summer job! You need to make money if you want to take girls out."

Dipper would have blushed if not for the fact that he realized what was going on.

"It won't let you leave..."

"They give a listing of available jobs in the brochure you know! Here! Check it out!"

Dipper high-tailed it out of there before things could escalate any farther.

Even on a foggy day, the wedding gardens were nice. A little creepy, but still nice. There were just as many flowers as promised in the brochure. And she even saw little ducklings wadding along one of the paths through the garden. The mother duck wouldn't let her get near though, and she had been chased off by the bird. Paths faded in and out from between the fog. Occasionally, she thought that there was someone in the area with her.

Most of the time, it turned out to just be a tree, or a shrub. There were lots of those around. The mist was very thick, she felt lost within the white clouds. They were almost tangible. But, when she reached out a hand towards the mist, it filtered between her fingers. She had trouble finding the pond. Every cobblestone pathway seemed to lead her in some sort of confusing circle. Trails separated, only to join up again, quickly becoming a messy labyrinth she did not know how to escape from.

Thunder rumbled overhead, sounding ominous as ever. She couldn't see the lightning through the fog however, she wondered how far it actually was. The air was stiflingly humid, her hair was sticking to her neck in places. She almost wanted to take off her sweater it was so hot! If only it could rain, that would cool things down. It never seemed to rain when she went outside though. Just when she was in the hotel. She stumbled around in the mist for what seemed like an eternity. The sickly sweet smell of the flowers started to drive her crazy. It seemed to linger in her nose, and cling to her clothes.

Eventually, she reached the gazebo. There was no relief from the smell there, but she had at least found the pond. It was artificial, and she could hear running water. There was a fountain shaped like a lotus in the middle of the pond, but she couldn't see it due to the weather. However, she knew it was there because of the pictures she had seen.

Mabel leaned against the gazebo railing, looking into the water. Her reflection stared back. A creepy, chilled feeling started to crawl underneath her skin. Mabel felt her hairs stand on end. When she moved away from the water, it left. Eventually, she heard the clicking sound of someone's shoe heels. Gideon appeared out of the fog.

"Mabel! Why you're quite the punctual one!"

"Ah. Haha... Yeah..."

Rubbing her neck, Mabel looked to the side. She really didn't know why this was happening, or why
she had agreed to it in the first place. When she had looked at the brochure, and the nice pictures, all her doubts had just seemed to vanish. Things had looked so nice, but now that she was actually here, she really didn't want to be. They were going to leave the hotel as soon as the weather cleared, and she would never, ever have to put up with Gideon again! It was silly of her to agree to this when either way, they would not meet for the rest of their lives. At least, as far as she was concerned.

"So, what are we doing?"

"I'm sorry I had to send you all the way here, but I didn't want to ruin the surprise!"

"What surprise?"

"This way!"

There was no choice but to follow him through some other mysterious path in the garden, to whatever he had planned. Much to her indignation, they reached the front of the hotel again. She had spent forever trying to get through that place, only to be lead back here?! What the heck?! There was a golf cart in the parking lot, waiting for them. Gideon hopped into the driver's seat (which also had a little car seat attached) and strapped what appeared to be miniature stilts on to his shoes. Then, he revved the engine.

"Well, what are you waiting for?"

"Er, don't you have to be thirteen to legally drive one of those?"

"Why of course not! Don't be silly!"

Mabel reluctantly look a seat next to him. Then, they were off. There was a road along the side of the hotel, leading back down into the valley. She saw some lines along the paved path, marking it the outdoor golf trail. The hill here was steep, and Gideon could barely reach the brakes, even with those silly little stilt extensions strapped to his shoes. Mabel clung to the side for dear life as they went flying down the hill. Every encroaching figure seemed like something they could hit, or run over as they made their speedy descent.

To the side she was on, there was nothing but a steep drop downwards. She could do nothing but lean closer to him as she saw how high in the air they were. The wind whipped through her hair, and got it in her mouth. Her eyes started to sting, and her heart pounded wildly as she wondered which move would be her last. By the time they reached the end of the hill she was shaking all over.

Of course, that didn't mean they were done driving. There was still a longer trip to follow after that. They drove upriver, and did not stop until the trail ended. There, Mabel discovered what the bouncy-castle operator's new, better paying job was. He had taken up the dignified profession of canoe-paddler.

"Isn't is a little dangerous to go on a boat when the river is like this?" Mabel asked, gesturing to the overflowing banks.

Gideon laughed at her question.

"Mabel Pines you are such a comedian! Of course it's safe! I asked a professional's opinion before doing any of this."

Having a sneaking suspicion on who the "professional" was, Mabel looked at the man. The employee gave her a sheepish grin and shrugged.
"Gotta’ pay off those student loans somehow."

"Are you even qualified?"

"Of course! I graduated from the one and only Cal Arts!"

"Arts as in, the art school?"

"Ah... Ah ha ha... That is a very good question. But you see, while I am qualified to tell if a river is dangerous, I am not qualified to answer that question."

The rushing water was impossible to see through, much like the fog. It was dark and muddy, churning violently. Much like her stomach. Suddenly, all she could remember was being pushed off the cliff, and all the sharp pain in her head. This was just like before, it was exactly like before. Creepy boy flirts with her, only for her to reject them. Which resulted in her being thrown, headfirst, into a body of water. She couldn't do this. She didn't care if that meant Gideon could continue to pester her, and she had to put up with his weirdness. She wasn't going to-

"Up we go!"

The professional qualified river surveyor picked her up, and placed her in the canoe, right next to Gideon.

"I-I-i don't t-t-think I-I want t-to-"

"And we're off!"

"Oh b-boy."

Dipper ran out of the gift shop. It was hopeless. His great-uncles were not going to stop being brainwashed any time soon. He ran to the stairs, and took a leap of faith. His feet buzzed in pain, but he didn't care. He had to get away from them before he lost his mind as well. He sprinted down the hall towards the pool, and proceeded to take another dangerous jump down the stairs leading to the pool. He tore through the change room, and did not stop until he had reached outside of the hotel.

There, the ground was slick with water. He slowed down to a fast-paced walk, not wanting to slide down the hill. It was incredibly foggy outside. So dense that he could practically feel it weighing down upon him. The bridge soon came into sight, and from that point, he could only see the glowing, yellow windows of the hotel through the mist. Dipper crossed over it. There was a bench on the other side. This was where he sat down. He took a few heaving breaths, trying to let his heart catch up with the rest of his body.

That had been close. Every encounter had been too close. They were just getting worse as the day went on and nothing he did could solve it! He kept messing up! First he had gotten his sister stuck going on a date with that creepy kid, and now... He pressed the palms of his hands against his forehead. He felt like a headache was starting to come on. He couldn't tell if he was feeling warm because it was gross and humid outside, or if all that running had been bad for his system.

How was he supposed to get out of this? His family needed him to do something, but he couldn't! He was just one kid! He didn't know what to think of weird supernatural mind control, this was something Grunkle Ford would have to explain! If only there was someone else who knew what to do. Someone who was stronger than him, a responsible adult. He was sick of the Stans and their irresponsibility. He was sick of the impractical responsibility of McGucket. That couldn't save him from what was happening right now. He needed someone who knew what they were doing for
Just then, he was tapped on the shoulder. Dipper yelped, and fell off the bench, trying to get away from whatever crazy thing the hotel had sent after him.

"Yeesh, calm down there kid."

Dipper dropped the arm he had shielding his eyes, as he recognized the voice.

"You're the guy who's been stalking my great-uncle!"

He rolled his eyes, and helped him to his feet. Dipper cautiously put some distance between them. This guy could be some sort of trick that the hotel was playing on him. He smiled in return, which was not making him feel any less nervous. The guy felt the need to show all his teeth when grinning for some reason, and it made him feel... Uncomfortable... Not many people were actually capable of doing something like that.

"It's called human friendship. Look it up."

"What are you doing here? And, who are you exactly?"

"Ah... Haha... Good question," he fished through the pockets of his coat, and held out a card. "I am a certified, responsible adult-like person. I'm here to help you with that hotel brainwashing your family into staying forever problem!"

"This card says you're a destroyer of universes, thrower of eternal birthday parties, and master of minds."

"That's a side-job," he hastily tucked the card back in his jacket. "So, your trip to Gravity Falls has been delayed! You're trapped inside of a hotel! That's... Like a thing I guess."

"What do you even get out of this?"

"Stanford is a-" he man looked at something on his hand. "-lo-ve a-bill, hyo-man who I caramel deep-ly for."

Greatly unconvinced by this, Dipper crossed his arms.

"And?"

"He needs to get back to his research before he falls another thirty years behind."

"Riiight."

"Walk with me kid."

The man started to walk over the bridge, but he stopped at the half-way point, curiously peering over the edge. He spit in the river, and watched as it hit the water. Then, he pulled out a tape measure from... somewhere, and started to measure the boards of the bridge in comparison to the top of the railing. Dipper suddenly found himself being measured too. His arms, his legs, and even his head.

"How much do you weigh? One hundred? One oh five?"

"I-" Dipper blushed at the question. "I'm more muscle than that."

"Yeah, yeah, you're the same as your sister."
"Are you going to save my family or not?"

"I will," he replied, peering through the boards of the bridge. "I just need to check some things first."

"Well, is there anything I can do? What's the plan?"

"I have an idea, but you're going to have to do what I say."

"Is this one of those kidnapping situations? Because-"

"Kid, your family's being held hostage in a hotel. Having your organs sold on the black market should be the least of your worries. Besides, I only do that Thursdays, it's when you get the best prices because it's just after the Wednesday rodeo."

"What?"

"Nothing."

"So, I do what you say, and you promise to save my family, and not get hypnotized by those brochures?"

The man grabbed a pen, and started to mark something along the bridge railing.

"'Course. Do we have a deal?"

"I guess."

They shook hands. The man smiled at him again. Dipper was grabbed by the shoulders, and pushed to a spot by the railing.

"I had to get a new cell number just to do this."

"Do what?"

"THIS!"

Dipper was hoisted above the railing, and dangled above the water. It was at least a three meter drop into the deep river below. If he fell in there, the chances of resurfacing were zero. There was debris, he could hit his head on a log or a rock and get knocked out. The river was overflowing, and there was no Stan this time to save him. The current was strong enough to stop him from fighting. Right away, he knew that he had made a bad decision. He was going to die. He was going to drown horribly and his family was going to be stuck in a cursed hotel because he had trusted a stranger.

"Hey! Let go of me!"

"Save it for the phone call."

For a brief, terrifying moment, the man was only holding on to him with one arm. He screamed, trying to reach for anything that he could hold on to. Something was handed to him, a cellphone.

"Call Ford and tell him to get out here."

"What?! Why?!"

"I'm threatening your life! He'll come! Dial up already! You're actually kinda' heavy!"
With shaking hands, Dipper tried to reach for the cellphone. But the man's grip on him was slipping. Dipper grabbed his arm instead of the phone, which was sent tumbling into the water. The man cried out, and for another second, Dipper thought that they were both going to fall into the river.

"DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA HOW MUCH THAT PHONE PLAN COST ME?! THAT WAS LIKE, TWELVE KIDNEYS, A PANCREAS, AND A HUMAN HEART RIGHT THERE! AND I JUST GOT THAT TOO! WHY I OUGHTTA'!"

"Please don't drop me! I'll buy you a new one! J-just p-please-"

"TOO LATE!"

"No! Don't-"

Just as Dipper was about to be dropped, he grabbed the man's other arm. He cried out again, and this time, they both got dangerously close to falling. The man was stuck in a precarious balance now. He was trapped, leaning too far against the railing. He tried to shake the grip Dipper had on his arms, but that only resulted in him leaning closer towards the water.

"Let go of me you brat!"

"No way! Pull me up!"

"Do my feet look like they're on the ground?! Let go so I can save myself!"

"N-no!"

"There's a fifteen to eighty-five chance you'll survive! That's pretty good!"

"Do something!"

"My stick legs can't hold us much longer! I have no lower body strength! Or upper body strength! Or really any at all!!"

"Just hold on!"

"What do you think I'm doing?!"

"There's people in a boat up ahead!"

He looked up the river, where sure enough, there was a canoe with three people on it. It was too misty to see who was on it through.

"Alright. The story is that you were going to jump, so I, the hero of this story, jumped in and tried to save you. But tragically-"

"Mabel's not going to believe that!"

"Ugh it's your sister? Why is she on a boat? Shouldn't she have like, a paralysing fear of water now?"

"MABEL HELP! THERE'S A CRAZY GUY TRYING TO DROWN ME!"

"Kid stop doing that! I'm gonna'-"

Neither of them got to finish yelling at each other as they fell into the river.
Fifty Two Half Dollars

Chapter Notes

This chapter was despicably difficult to write. I don't know what it was, but this thing just did not want to be written, even though I knew exactly what I wanted. But, I finished it, eventually, and proofed it, so its all worth it in the end. I might need a few more Tylenols though.

Dipper groaned, and rubbed his forehead. Everything hurt, like, a ton. He had a splitting headache, and he was shivering all over. In the distance, he could hear his sister calling his name, but the sound of rushing water seemed to drown it out. He was on solid ground, even though it felt like he was still bobbing around in the river. He turned on to his stomach, and coughed up a lungful of water. Dipper wiped the water out of his eyes, and blinked a few times, attempting to gain his bearings. He was on the bank of the river, laying in a gigantic mud puddle.

Mabel's crying caught his attention again, it was coming to the right. Dipper tried to stand, but he slipped in the mud. Gritting his teeth, he tried for a second time. He managed to stand, but his legs felt weak, like he could collapse at any moment. Why was he so... Heavy? Mabel was crouched on the ground, leaning over... A body? As he got closer, Dipper realized that it was his body.

"M-Mabel?"

Dipper was not expecting to suddenly see his sister glaring at him like that.

"You! You're the guy who dropped Dipper into the river!"

She kicked him in the shins, and started to tug at his hair.

"What? No Mabel it's me!"

"How do you even know my name?! Have you been stalking us?!"

Dipper, no, was he Dipper? He was Dipper, but that was his body laying on the river bank. His body, it was still breathing, even though he wasn't in it. He spat out water as well, and rubbed his eyes. His body then somehow stood up on its own, and started a weak, wobbling walk towards them.

"What?" he winced. "Where's my-?"

"YOU STOLE MY BODY!" Dipper yelled.

"Only because you stole mine. Try not to injure it by the way, I promised no internal bleeding to the guy I rented it from."

Dipper looked down at his hands. He suddenly noticed that there was a large height difference between him and his sister. Also his teeth really needed to be brushed? They really needed to be brushed. His entire mouth tasted terrible. Like rubbing alcohol and lake water. River water actually, in this case. He felt so gross, and old. He had back pains and facial hair which was incredibly itchy. He had thought it would be a lot more... Less awful than his awkward and sweaty self. This was just
awkward without the sweaty!

"What's-?" Mabel stepped back, looking at the two of them. "What's going on?"

"Yeah! You almost killed me!"

Dipper, the body, the guy who had invaded his body, rolled his now yellow eyes.

"Hey, I warned you that there was a fifteen to eighty-five chance of surviving. It just so happened that in the fifteen percent, there was a ninety-nine to one chance of this-"

"What is, this, exactly?"

"Accidental body swap, just don't think about it too hard. Anywho, we've gotta' rescue your great-uncles so they can go back to Gravity Falls-"

"You stole my body!" Dipper repeated.

Being in an adult's body, he had thought that his voice would be a lot deeper than his currently was. But with this guy, it was somehow higher pitched than before? Shouldn't his voice have broken like, twenty years ago? How did that even work? What was going on?

"Look kid, we're on a tight schedule here. I'm already thirty years behind as it is and these noodle arms are just going to make things harder."

Dipper (Was he Dipper? Was the other guy Dipper? Did he have a name to go by?) His body cackled to himself, and began to run back up the hill.

"Hey wait! Give me back my body!"

His sister looked between the two of them, clearly just as confused as him on the matter.

"So you're, Dipper?"

"Yes! That's what I was trying to tell you!"

"Oh, sorry for kicking you in the shins Bro-Bro. And..." Mabel unclenched one of her fists, revealing a handful of hair. "That."

Before she had attacked him, he was already hurting from falling into the river. But he couldn't really be mad at his sister, seeing as he didn't look like himself. Dipper figured that he probably deserved it too, since he had sort of tried to use her date with Gideon to break them out of the hotel... Come to think of it, where was the little creep now? He was nowhere in sight, nor was the canoe they had taken to get down the river. He turned his attention back to his sister, and gave her a weak smile.

"Don't worry about it."

They started to walk up the hill, following the guy in his body. Once or twice, he would trip, and roll part way down the side before he could catch himself. The guy would laugh, get back up, and start the process all over again. Dipper winced as he watched this. He was going to be a total mess by the time he got his body back.

"Are you ok? After falling into and all?"

"Yeah, just, everything hurts."
"I... I guess I can't call you the Little Dipper anymore."

"What? Boo!" he shoved his sister. "I can't believe you seriously made that joke!"

Mabel stumbled back, he caught his sister before she could roll down the hill, much like his... Body was currently doing. Wasn't that guy able to simply walk, like a normal person would?

"You'd better watch it Dip-Dots. You're not used to having so much upper body strength."

She squeezed one of his arms. It was a step up from what he had before, but that wasn't really saying much.

"Actually, I mostly feel the same," he admitted. "I don't think this guy is very strong. I mean, he did end up dropping me into a river by accident."

"I know, I was there on that boat," she replied.

"Where is Gideon? And that weird hotel employee? You guys were on that boat together."

"I told them to get a doctor. According to the hotel brochure he gave me-"

As soon as he heard this, Dipper snatched the pamphlet from her hands, crumpled it into a ball, and threw it down the hill. It fell into the river, and was swept away.

"Hey! What the heck?!"

"Mabel, this is going to sound crazy-"

"Dipper I just saw you fall into a river and return with a new body. I think I can handle whatever you're going to say."

"Mabel this hotel is evil, and brainwashing people through the brochures so they can't escape!"

As great as it felt to finally say so, he heart sank when Mabel laughed. She didn't believe him. All he had was the crazy guy who had stolen his body and was destroying it now. Which practically meant nothing. Mabel continued to laugh, and slapped him on the back.

"It's not funny Mabel!"

"Dipper, you didn't seriously think I couldn't tell that people were being brainwashed, right?"

"Wait, you knew all along? You were just pretending?"

"Of course I knew! It says so right here in the hotel brochure that people who stay won't want to leave because-"

The pamphlet was torn to shreds before his sister could make him read it. Mabel seemed to get over her laughter, frowning instead.

"Yeesh, this place really is brainwashing people. I mean, why did I have two brochures on me?"

Dipper sighed in relief when he heard this. So she did believe him. Mabel was still a little out of it was all.

"You should be fine so long as you don't read them."
"So this hotel is actually stopping people from leaving?"

"Yeah, it's weird."

"I know Grunkle Ford said he was researching supernatural stuff, but I didn't think the hotel was actually... Like that."

"You'd think he would recognize something like that when he saw it."

"Well he and Grunkle Stan are still wearing each other's glasses," she joked.

They reached the top of the hill, where the other person was waiting for them. He was impatiently tapping his foot, and staring down at his watch. When they arrived, he ran up to them.

"Boy you guys are slow! Hurry up! Let's go!"

"Go where?"

"See for yourself!" he pulled something out of his vest. "I was looking through one of the hotel brochures when-"

Dipper and Mabel jumped away from him and simultaneously yelled, "NO!"

"Ha! Gottcha'!" he revealed that it was just a blank piece of paper. "Well that was fun. Now back to saving your family."

They entered the hotel through the pool's exit. When they got to the level with the arcade, and mini-putt, they encountered the hotel Ford. Who for some reason was wearing a stethoscope and a white lab coat.

"Grunkle Ford what are you wearing?" Mabel asked.

"Well the hotel hired me on as a doctor."

"Just because you have a doctorate, it doesn't make you a doctor."

"Who are you exactly?"

"Er," Dipper looked down at himself. "Are you qualified to be asking that question?"

"As a matter of fact, I am qualified. Just like I'm qualified to be a doctor you-"

"No you're not. Let's go."

The clipboard and brochure attached to it were smacked out of his hands. Ford was grabbed by the coat and dragged down the hall by "Dipper." Mabel pushed the wheelchair from behind.

"So the longer you stay here, the more jobs you'll get?" Mabel asked.

"That and it's one of those, it gives you everything you want before you even know you want it situations," he frowned, and started to mumble to himself. "An idea which I'm pretty sure was stolen from me, seeing as you were supposed to-"

"What should we do with Grunkle Ford?" Mabel interrupted.

"We can just lock him up in the RV," Dipper said. "I mean, he's not really going anywhere with an
injured leg."

"Kids, what are you doing?"

"It's for your own good."

They reached the parking lot. Despite the fact that there were no other vehicles in the entire area, they were parked at the very back of the lot. Right by the road. There were no cars passing along it, and there were no signs of life anywhere in the area. Ford was still protesting as "Dipper" picked the lock to the RV, and they carried him inside. They came up with an efficient plan after that, wanting to grab everyone one at a time so they were not fought against.

Stan was their next target. He was already waiting for them in the hotel lobby. Waiting might have been an exaggeration. He was there filling his pockets with the hotel's complementary mints and toothpicks. They told Stan that someone had slashed the RV's tires again, and he was outside, and then locked up with Ford, in no time.

Fiddleford was slightly harder to trick because he was used to the schemes that children often got up to, more so than either of the Stans. It didn't help that Dipper was trapped as a "suspicious adult" either. He had to pretend to kidnap his own sister to get the man to follow him. Mabel played the part very well, perhaps a little too well. She screamed at the top of her lungs and punched him more than once. His ears and ribs hurt even more after that. The headache he had before was turning into more of a migraine the longer he spent around his sister.

Neither of their great-uncles were happy when they returned to the RV. It was only the "threatening kidnap to Mabel" act that kept them from leaving. Soos was next, and this was where problems with their plan first started to arise. As they were leading Soos back to the RV (because there was a spill that only his hotel janitor skills could clean up) he babbled on about the hotel. They had all been ignoring it, knowing that it was just the hotel, trying to make them stay longer for its creepy purposes.

"Are you guys going to dress up for tonight's theme dinner?" Soos asked. "It's Hawaiian."

"I don't like pineapple," Mabel reminded,

"What about the show after dinner? You know, where you met the true love of your life, Gideon."

"This place has it the other way around."

"Stop encouraging him."

"Come on dudes! It's the animal one tonight! They've got birds, rabbits, pigs-"

Mabel's face started to grow pale as she heard this. She suddenly remembered what had been bothering her earlier that day. She had forgotten it completely, but now that she was free, and Soos had reminded her.

"P-pigs?"

"Yup!"

"Where's Waddles?"

"Oh no, not the pig," the fake Dipper sighed, pressing his hands to his face. "What ever will we do without poor Waggles?"
"It's Waddles."

"That guy."

"Funny coincidence," Soos laughed. "The hotel just recently hired a pig, named Waddles-"

"We have to go back!"

"But Mabel!"

"Have to!"

"Your brother's got a point there," said fake Dipper. "That thing's pretty replaceable."

"No! Waddles is not replaceable! He's the only pig I've got! And how would I explain it to Stan if I lost him?"

"Why would you care about explaining it to Stan?"

They had to go back, they just had to find her pig again. If they left him here she would feel guilty forever! Her poor little pig would be left alone with no one there to care for him, or give him treats! This called for level thirteen cuteness. Normally she was a ten, but this was practically a life or death emergency! She needed to persuade her brother to go back! Mabel widened her eyes and did not blink, letting the dry sensation cause her eyes to fill up with tears.

"It doesn't matter Dipper!" Mabel said, making sure to let her voice break. "I have to go back and find Waddles, we can't just leave him here! He's family! Family Dipper!"

"Whoa, do not look directly at the eyes," fake Dipper snorted, nudging him in the ribs. "Stare at those things and you'll have no choice but to-"

It was too late for the warning to sink in with Dipper. He had already looked at her eyes. Mabel recognized the tiny grimace he made when caving in, and she smiled.

"We have to go back."

Fake Dipper just sighed, but Mabel was already dragging her brother back towards the front of the hotel. Soos followed them, clearly confused as to what was going on, but not questioning it either. He became more excited as he realized that they were going to see one of the hotel's shows. Even if it wasn't for the reasons he was thinking.

One of the ballrooms was set up for the event. Straw covered the floor, and near the edge of the room, there were several cages, all filled with animals. There were multiple folding chairs set up, despite the fact that the room was almost entirely empty. There were only two other people in the room: Gideon, and the employee who worked multiple jobs around the hotel. Mabel ran up to the employee and was about to kick him in the shins, much like she had with Dipper. Unfortunately, Soos and Dipper restrained her before she could beat up the guy that was holding her pig prisoner.

"Where is he?!"

"Where is who?"

"Waddles! I know you've taken him you-"

"Why Mabel! I wasn't expecting to see you so-"
"Not now Gideon!"

"Now if you want to see Waddles, you'll have to sit through the show until it's his turn," the man smiled, patting her on the head. "There's an itinerary for the show in the hotel brochure. Here, take mine!"

"NO! GIVE ME BACK MY PIG!"

"Well, Mabel, I'm afraid that you'll just have to-"

Fake Dipper kicked the man in the shins for her.

"Hey! Being creepy and knowing things is my gimmick friend-o!"

"Your thing? What are you like twelve?"

As they started to argue with each other, Mabel slipped out of her brother's grip. He and Soos were more interested in the argument that was going on than the furious look on Mabel's face.

"Should we stop her?" Dipper asked, glancing at his sister.

"Nah, I sort of want to see where this is going."

She ran over to the cages, searching for her pig. There were just so many animals there. Bunnies, dogs, birds, snakes... Just then, Mabel heard a familiar oink. She turned around to face the sound. There, she saw her pig. Mabel screamed at the top of her lungs, and ran over to the cage. There was a locking device near the top of the door. She broke it, and practically tore open the door. Mabel scooped up Waddles in her arms, and hugged him to her chest. The pig gave a happy squeal in return, and snuggled into her chest.

"Waddles! Oh I'm so sorry I forgot about you! It won't ever happen again!"

"Am I, interrupting somethin'?"

Rather than feeling worried as she heard the voice, Mabel grew angry. It took all her strength not to sigh in disgust when she heard the question. Mabel twisted on her heel, and glared at Gideon. Could this creep not give her a break? They had just been on that disaster of a boat ride, and now this! Besides, she had just reunited with her pig, she was trying to have a heart-felt reunions with him! Now was not the time for Gideon to show up and makes things all gross and uncomfortable again!

"Yes."

"Oh, well in that case-"

"Why didn't you find a doctor?"

"You know the river was supposed to be perfectly safe after all. And even if your brother did get hurt you would-"

Mabel knew that she had caught him with some sort of lie, or story. He flushed a darker pink, and nervously started to tap his fingers together. Gideon looked from side to side, and then behind him, before he started to pace backwards. Her glare intensified, and she visualized burning a hole straight through his stupid, glittery hair. It would probably melt and turn black, like a marshmallow would. She didn't like the expression he was making, and knew that she would be willing to test that theory if necessary.
"What about Dipper getting hurt?"

"I uh, well you see the thing is Mabel, that your brother is comin' between us."

"Coming between us? Gideon there is no us!"

"See this is exactly what he's been doin'! He's been-"

"You realize if my brother did have to go to the hospital, I would spend more time there, than with you, right?"

"I just thought."

"Save it," she snapped. "Come on guys, let's go."

The arguing behind her had escalated while she had rescued her pig. The man and her not-brother looked like they were ready to break out into a fist fight. Given who's body the guy was in, it was obvious who would win that fight. Dipper and Soos were happy to watch as the two yelled at each other, but she was not.

"I've got Waddles! We can go now."

"Is my head really that big?" Dipper asked.

"Looks normal to me," Soos replied.

Reaching for her brother's sleeve, she tugged on it.

"Guys come on! We have to get out of here!"

Dipper sighed, and nodded. He grabbed fake Dipper's shoulder and pulled him away from the argument. They left the ballroom far behind them. Soos, unlike the other adults, was perfectly happy to follow them as they walked, even though they didn't have a good excuse for why he should be going with them. As they continued down the hall, a thought occurred to Mabel.

"Hey Dipper, how come you were the only one who wasn't hypnotized by the hotel?"

"He was paranoid, even before the weird stuff happened," fake Dipper answered. "Makes it harder to trick him when he's prepared for everything."

"Hey! I am not paranoid! Besides, what about great-uncle Ford? He's always worried that Stan is going to kill him! And Stan thinks that police are listening to him and criminals are out to get him! I mean, that last part is reasonable, but he's still worried about it."

"Don't question it."

"Don't question it? Like how I shouldn't question why you're in my body? Or how I shouldn't wonder about how I'm going to get it back?!"

"Re-lax. There's a perfectly logical solution to this."

Fake Dipper took the path that lead to the back of the hotel. They came to the basement room with the waterfall, and section of the ceiling that was covered in mirrors. There was a back door near the windows. The view was directly in front of the bridge that lead over the river. Dipper had a fair idea on where this was all going, and put on the breaks.
"Does it involve getting dropped off a bridge again?"

"What? No, no, no, no, no," fake Dipper shook his head, and he sat down on the wall that kept the pond contained. "You have to jump off voluntarily this time."

"What are you crazy?!" Mabel asked,

"That is pretty crazy-sounding." Soos said.

"Yeah! I'm not voluntarily jumping off a bridge!"

"Oh. Well that's too bad."

"What? Why is that bad?"

"I thought we should both go out with a splash!"

Fake Dipper grinned manically, and let go of the pond wall. For a moment, he seemed absolutely frozen, sitting on the wall. Then, he slowly tipped backwards. Fake Dipper fell into the water, hitting his head on a rock as he did so.

"No! Not again! That's my body!"

Dipper scaled the wall, and tried to figure out where his own body was. The top of the wall and the side touching the water were slick with green algae. When he tried to lean further forwards, he slipped.

Mabel watched anxiously as the pond water thrashed and stirred. Soos went over to the edge, and picked her up so she could see. After a few more tense seconds, she wondered if she should dive after them. But as she got closer to the edge of the pond, and heard the rushing sound of the water, her heart started to speed up.

She recalled being pushed into the lake, and hitting her head on rocks there. She remembered how not an hour before, her brother had been pushed off a bridge, and into the river. Gideon had forced her to go on that awful, awkward boat ride down the river with him, and she had to watch, unable to do anything as her brother and some crazy guy half-dangled off a bridge!

Now he had fallen into a shallow indoor pond, she could do something to help him, without worrying about currents or drowning! And yet, she still found herself freezing up at the thought of trying to save him. Not when there was so much water everywhere... Neither of them had actually surfaced though. What if they never did?

"Soos... I'm going to go in there and help them."

"Sure thing dude!"

He gently set her down in the water. Mabel shuddered in disgust. The water was cold, and it felt incredibly slimy with so many aquatic plants growing in it. She could feel strands of plants, the lotus flowers that grew, tangling around her ankles and trying to trip her up. Mud squished between her toes. It was so disgusting. She felt as if she could trip at any moment. Like the pond was trying to make her fall, and hit her head. She was going to get hurt, she was going to drown! She squeezed her eyes shut, and tried to take calming breaths. Dipper needed her help. She could do this, no one else was going to so it had to be her.

Gradually, she waded over to the spot where she had last seen him. Dipper's body was resting near
some plants, and even more rocks. He had managed to keep his head above the water, but he was clearly disoriented. Mabel grabbed her brother by the armpits, and dragged him over to the edge. Soos lifted him out of the pond. Then, she went back for the other guy. He was being beaten up by the waterfall. Every time he tried to rise, the weight of the water was enough to make him slip again. She offered the man her hand, which he gratefully accepted. Soos helped her out of the pond, but the man fell out face-first.

Mabel felt as if her heart would burst at any second. She had to sit on the ground, she felt like she couldn't breathe. Her throat was constricted and there was a dull aching sensation in her chest.

"So, are we all good?" Soos asked.

Dipper, who was crouched next to her, spat out a penny.

"Yeah, same old... Disappointing body. Oh geeze, what did that guy do to me?"

"A favour," the man wheezed, rubbing his side. "You sure as heck wouldn't have been able to save everyone yourself."

"You didn't have to throw me back into a pond. Once was enough."

"You're welcome. Anywho, I'm gonna' be off now."

"Off? Where?"

The man gave a half-hearted shrug.

"I've solved your problem, and now I've got places to be. Parties to prep, bodies to return, rifts to create. I should probably help that Gideon kid get outta' here too. There's so much potential evil he could do for the outside world. It'd be a shame if he had to waste it in here. Plus it'll help add a little closure, if you know what I mean."

"Don't let the door hit you on the way out," Dipper sarcastically replied.

"I won't. See ya later!"

For someone who had nearly drowned and been knocked out twice in one day, the man was surprisingly resilient. He sprung back to life, and gave one final deranged laugh. He ran down the hall, leaving a trail of water and plants in his wake. The man's voice echoed throughout the halls of the hotel, never seeming to fade. Mabel shook her head, and then went back to her brother. He needed help standing, and he winced as he felt his head.

"Let's... Get out of here," he croaked.

"Yeah, the adults are probably driving each other nuts by now."
Two Hundred Eighty Dimes

Stanford sat alone in the RV. Locked in, trapped. He rubbed his head in confusion and watched as his niblings, accompanied by an unfamiliar adult, crossed the hotel parking lot. A flash of white caught his attention, and Stanford realized that it was his own sleeve. He inspected the rest of himself in alarm. Why was he wearing a lab coat? He hadn't exactly packed any. There was a stethoscope resting around his neck. Stanford pulled off the lab coat.

As he did, something clattered to the floor. He hadn't realized it, but there was a clipboard on his lap previously. He stooped over, trying to pick it up, but he could not reach. Attached to the clipboard was a document, naming him the new hotel doctor! What? Just because he had several doctorates, it didn't make him a medical doctor! What was going on here? Who had done this to him? It was probably Stanley! This was some kind of practical joke! He must have gotten the kids in on it too!

This theory was proven wrong when Stanley was the next to be forcefully locked in the RV. Dipper jingled the keys at Stanley the moment the RV locked. The boy was grinning largely, and his yellow eyes... Oh no, not Dipper too. Any frustration and anger he had felt towards Stanley left, as a chilling sort of horror spread throughout him. Not even the muggy weather outside could warm the paralyzing, cold feeling. Why Dipper? What had he done to deserve that?

The trio who had locked them in retreated. Stanley yelled at them until they had entered the building once again. Then, he slumped into the passenger seat across from him, and gave an irate huff. Mints and individually packaged toothpicks, which the hotel gave on the house, tumbled out of his overstuffed pockets. Stanley was still grumbling curses under his breath, and glaring darkly at the floor.

"Can't believe it," he growled, running a hand through his hair. "I mean, I knew that the kid was growing good at thievery but this is just ridiculous! He grabbed my keys, and two of my three guns!"

This was the first time he had heard anything like that. From what he knew of the boy, he seemed to despise Stanley, and thus committing crime by extension. But then again, he had taken the keys to the- No, that was not Dipper. That was wrong. However, these comments from Stanley did nothing to prevent him from asking;

"Dipper is good at stealing things?"

"Stole the glasses right off my face this once time. He even managed to lift a pen outta' my back pocket without me noticing. And important financial papers. Heck, he was on a stealing spree, I thought it had kinda' died down but apparently not. You know that new hat he got, with the blue pine tree on it? Kid said he got it for free, but looking back on it..."

"Why would Dipper steal any of those things from you?"

"Well ah," Stanley grew visibly uncomfortable at the question and he fiddled with his collar. "Y'see this may have happened right after I, uh, you know."

"No, I don't know."

"Yes you do. Everyone knows."

"Stanley-"

"I blew up at her! Both of them! Dipper I don't think minds so much, but what does bother him is
that I did the same with his sister. Kid took it bad real bad. She wouldn't get out of her bed, didn't eat any of that sugary junk she and her brother bought. If it wasn't for those pigs, I don't even know if she would ever..."

Stanley's voice ebbed. The man seemed to realize that he had been going on a tangent, losing track of what he was trying to say. Stanley cleared his throat, an uncomfortable sound. Stanford knew that he was awaiting judgment, from himself. Yet Stanford did not know how he was supposed to reply to his brother's spiel.

He had harmed his great-niece by making that choice. For whatever messed up justification in that knucklehead's mind, he had done it. He hadn't exactly apologized either. There was remorse in his voice, but he could not bring himself to say two simple words. A bitter part of Stanford told him this was no surprise. Stanley wasn't exactly one for apologies, now was he?

"What does that have to do with Dipper stealing from you?"

"Kid made my life miserable for a day by stealing everything in sight. The only things I ever got back were my glasses and my dentures. And boy you do not want to know where I found those."

"You wear dentures?!"

Somehow, the knowledge of that was shocking. It was hard to picture Stanley, who was only pushing seventy, wearing dentures. How had he never noticed something like that

"'Course. I'm old Poindexter. That thing kind of happens when you grow up."

Silence set over them. Stanley rested his head on the palm of his hand. He stared out a window, in the opposite direction of the hotel, and him. So Stanford looked through the window across, where the hotel's front entrance was in sight. The weather, as always, was gloomy.

A layer of fog enveloped the entire hotel from the doors and above. Only the bright sign over top of the doors (which rested upon the shelter at the front) was able to pierce through it. Beads of water clung to the window. They would occasionally join together, and race to slide off the edge.

Stanford alternated between watching this, and the doors. It hadn't taken the children and the stranger very long to retrieve Stanley. If they were following a pattern, and either going after Fiddleford or the man-child, what was taking them so long this time? Surely if they could trick a master criminal into getting locked within his own RV, they could lead Soos or Fiddleford out here.

But no one came.

It was just him and Stanley, locked within the vehicle. Stanford supposed they could break a door or a window to get out, but that just might cause the entire thing to collapse. It had barely survived getting its tires slashed. Having a door ripped off might cause them more than a little trouble in the long run. But when his niblings did not return, he started to worry a little more.

Breaking out turned into a realistic option as he was reminded that Dipper wasn't exactly, himself. Mabel must have known that he wasn't acting right. She was a smart and resourceful girl, she would recognize his imposter as the same one who had pushed her into the lake. What if that caused her more harm? Could she be trying to get her brother back, right now? He had to get out there and do something before it was too late!

"Stanley we need to get out of here."

"They were smart enough to turn on the child lock," Stanley replied, tugging at the door. "Plus I
don't want to break anything else. Soos is all outta' duct tape and that gift shop doesn't sell any."

"What kind of reasonable gift shop sells duct tape Stanley?"

"A good one! That place sold ammunition, maple syrup, and a million other weird things, yet they don't have any duct tape?!!"

"I can't believe duct tape is your reason for not wanting to escape here! Those children are our relatives Stanley! We can't just sit here and do nothing when they could be in trouble!"

It was true: Stanford could not believe that Stanley was unwilling to lift so much as a finger to save the twins. Sure the man didn't act as if he liked them, most of the time, but the signs were still there. Stanley had humored Dipper whenever he was bored or trying to fan-worship Fiddleford. He was the one that made sure that Dipper actually showered and ate regular meals. He had stolen that ridiculous addition to Mabel's stuffed animal collection for her. Stanley had been the first one to reach the girl after she fell, even though he was furthest away. Also, it was hard to forget that he had been the one to wrap her up in every towel they owned, and carried her everywhere for the better part of a day.

Why he wanted to hide it was an entirely different matter, as Stanford did not buy the excuse of Stanley "being a terrible person." No one, not even Stanley, isolated themselves from their family for kicks. The idea of him doing so to protect them was a little more believable, and Stanley had denied it... But something about that sort of reasoning was off. Well, if he did know one thing for certain, it was that his brother had a soft spot for the kids.

"Why might they be in trouble?"

"Well because-" he didn't actually want to name his top reason on the list, Stanley would just think he was crazy. "There's that adult, with them. We have no idea who he is or what his motivations could be! What does he want with them? Why is he helping them do this?"

He could tell that his brother's resolve cracked a little when he said this. Stanley's shoulders sagged, and his fingers gave a little twitch, almost as if he wanted to ball them into fists.

"That guy was a real weirdo, yeah," he agreed. "But we don't have any proof that-"

"Proof? You want proof?! They could be in danger-"

"They are in danger."

Fiddleford's voice came from behind them, as the RV unlocked and he stepped on. The man glared out the window, watching the children and stranger leave for the hotel again. The brothers whirled around when they heard him. Stanley gave his eyes a slight roll, and he folded his arms over his chest.

"What is it?"

"That man-" he fought to keep his voice level, but it still trembled. "Said he was going to kidnap them if we didn't go along with his plans."

"Now do you believe that they're in danger?" Stanford asked.

"Ugh! You Pines!" Fiddleford threw his hands up in the air. "You're always finding trouble! How hard it it to simply drive across the country? All you need to do is sit in the RV, and stop every couple a' hours for breaks! Yet somehow, we've managed to anger a nurse, kidnap me-"
"Hey, hey! You said you weren't going to press charges on that."

"-nearly gotten fined by a lifeguard, have our tires slashed by a mysterious Boy Scout who was definitively not up to code, have one of the children under our care wind up with head trauma thanks to that same Boy Scout, and now these children are being forced to aid a potential kidnapper!"

With that, Fiddleford fell backwards into a seat. He buried his head in his hands, and gave one very long sigh.

"Fiddleford?"

The man had put up with so much from their crazy family. The fan-worship of Dipper, Mabel's match-making attempts (maybe in another life?), and the girl's trouble-seeking pig. Stanley had threatened his friend with death, too. That couldn't be very good for the already low view of Stanley that he possessed. Really, it was a miracle that Fiddleford was able to keep up with them, and not have a brain aneurysm at the same time.

"Why does this kind of stuff happen to you people?" he sniffled. "What could've Dipper and Mabel possibly done to-?"

How could he possibly ask for more loyal, and patient friend? It was more than he truly deserved, especially since he hadn't been doing much to stop his family from getting in trouble. Stanford couldn't blame Fiddleford for only cracking now, when the children were in danger for the umpteenth time.

"I'm as at much of a loss as you are," Stanford replied, patting the man on the back. "These things just, happen."

"And we can't even leave the RV to save them."

"I wouldn't worry. They're coming back," Stanley announced.

"What?!

Both men sprung from their places, sorrow forgotten. They looked through the window. Sure enough, Mabel and Dipper were walking towards them. They were accompanied by Soos, and the man who was using them. Well, more Mabel than Dipper. His nephew still wasn't himself, and he was practically dragging Soos towards the RV with Mabel. Why was the man-child wearing an employee's uniform?

Their journey stopped part-way to the RV. Mabel's eyes grew wide as saucers, and she yelled something. Dipper rolled his own eyes, and pushed her in the direction of the RV. She pushed him back, and turned to the man. She was saying something, desperately waving her arms, and then clasping her hands together.

Dipper laughed, he nudged the man in the ribs with his elbow. The man however, frowned. As he watched Mabel's animated actions, he appeared to be giving in to some sort of persuasion. Eventually the man caved. He nodded, and started to walk back to the hotel. Mabel ran ahead, her brother following not far behind.

"What happened there?"

"Looks like the kid put that adorable charm to good use."

"But why?"
"Who knows what goes on in that little girl's head? It's a mystery!"

"That much is for certain."

With that, they returned to their original places: sitting near the window, so they could wait for the children to return. Stanley continued to keep his distance from them, but something cued Stanford in on the fact that he did not want to be doing so. Stanley would glance over his shoulder, or peer in the large, rectangular rear-view mirrors. It seemed his brother was no less worried than they were about the children, only much better at hiding it than they were. Not that he or Fiddleford had any reason to hide their worry for Dipper and Mabel. Stanley on the other hand... It was difficult to understand what made that man tick.

Eventually, the twins, Soos, and even Mabel's pig returned to the RV. Stanford nearly wanted to cry in relief when he saw that Dipper was back to normal. If not a little soggy. The boy looked like a drowned cat, and he was walking with a pained limp in his step. There were leaves and mud stuck in his hair, but his clothing was at least dry, he must have changed it. Mabel looked happy, she was skipping along with her equally joyful pig. Soos was pushing a luggage cart, with all of their bags on it. The man from before was nowhere in sight.

When they arrived, he and Fiddleford rushed to the door. Fiddleford tumbled out as it was opened, because he was leaning on it so hard. Stanford had to wait for the children to climb up the RV stairs, for he could not get down on his own. However, he could still hear Fiddleford asking the twins a million questions. He spoke at a mile a minute, his voice steadily rising in volume, and his accent becoming stronger as he lost his composure yet again.

As Dipper boarded the RV, he tossed the keys to Stanley. Then, he limped over to the nearest seat, and collapsed.

"Dipper are you alright?"

"I'm fine. Just a little-" Dipper started to cough, he hacked up water onto the table. "Hurt."

"What on earth happened to you? Who was that man?!"

"I never should have trusted your friend."

"My who?"

"The one who was sending the texts," Dipper continued. "He was right about the evil hotel thing, but when he said that he would help-"

"What's that about the hotel?"

"It... It doesn't matter. We just need to get out of here."

Mabel bounded on to the RV, with an energetic skip in her step. Waddles climbed up the stairs shortly after.

"Kidnapper's orders!" she said. "We need to get out of here, ASAP!"

"Then what are we waiting around here for?" Fiddleford asked. "Floor it!"

A maniacal smile took up Stanley's face. He revved the engine twice, and they took off much faster than an old vehicle should have possibly been able to drive. Everyone slid around the RV. Stanford gripped on to a table, but the rotting wood splintered in his hands. Oh he was definitely going to miss
the lack of safety issues within the hotel. Despite this, none of them gave a second glance towards
the mysterious inn that resided in the middle of nowhere. They kept their eyes on the road before
them.

There was nothing but green pastures, and cloudless blue skies for the journey ahead. It seemed as
soon as they left the hotel, and continued to drive down the highway, the grey weather vanished. For
the first time in ages, they saw the sun in full. There were other people driving down the highway
with them. They were also blaring their horns at Stanley as he swerved between the two-lane road.

"I'm so glad both you kids are safe!" Stanford said.

"Did that man hurt you at all? Did he try anything?" Fiddleford asked.

"Oh no-"

"He dropped Dipper off a bridge." Mabel answered.

"And sort of stole his body and dropped it in a pond," Soos chimed in.

"He did what?!"

"Don't worry about it Grunkle Ford," Dipper waved off. "We're perfectly safe now."

Greatly unconvinced by this, he held the boy's gaze. They stared at each other, unblinking. His eyes
looked light they always did: wide, dark circles lined underneath them, and a distinct lack of yellow
taking up everything but his pupils. They were the same tired eyes Dipper had always possessed. He
eventually looked elsewhere, blinking and pulling a lily pad out of his hair.

"If you say so."
Two Thousand Nine Hundred Pennies

Chapter Notes

Oh my gosh this story is almost over. Where has all the time gone? This is just a little heads up for that. This story's got thirty-three chapters.

Review please!

Stanford could not quite believe it, but they made it back to Gravity Falls in one piece. They had survived psychopathic stalkers and their desires for eternal friendship, they had managed to elude the cops despite the numerous crimes (most of which were committed by Stanley) that had taken place, and no one was dead. It seemed like a miracle to him. Returning to his home felt like a dream. Correction, it felt like he was waking up from a nightmare. Or perhaps, the awful dream had ended, and a new, better one had taken its place inside of his head.

He had been shot at, hospitalized, harassed, pressured into talking about gateways to imaginable power with stunning regularity, and forced to deal with his twin brother and all of the crazy hair-brained schemes he had gotten up to. It was nothing like the summer he had planned out for himself, and the children in the beginning. The thought of Stanley and New Jersey had not so much as crossed his mind when he agreed to take care of Mabel and Dipper. Yet here he was, arriving back home, after nearly a month and a half's worth of misadventures.

There was a neatly-stacked pyramid of newspapers, barricading the front door. His mail-box was jam-packed with letters, coupons and junk mostly. The grass was in bad need of a trimming as well, it grew almost to his knees in height. In other words, the usual. Everything was just as how he had left it! The only thing that was missing was his car, but he knew Stanley had already taken care of that for him. He would have it back soon enough, even if he would not be in a fit state to drive for some time.

Stanford felt around for his keys, a small thrill of panic ran through him when he did not feel them in his pocket. But then he recalled he had not kept them on him since the accident. Stanley did, as strange as it was. But Stanley had been the one to claim (impersonating and bluffing his way out for him actually) and salvage his car of what few belongings remained within.

Stanley seemed to know what was going through his mind, and tossed him the keys. He caught them, and unlocked the door. His brother strode ahead, and he dropped the bags he had been carrying on the floor. He quickly turned on his heel and left, returning to the RV. Dipper cautiously stepped inside, surveying the area. Mabel crashed into him as she pushed her way through. She was cradling the pig in her arms. Both twins stood within the threshold of the front door, curiously looking around the foyer.

A brief feeling of insecurity flickered within. His house was quite modest in comparison to that of Fiddleford's. That had been one of his friend's smaller residences on the east coast too. And from what he knew, Stanley owned a mansion, that was on the coast. He had never actually been there himself, but the children had described it as "ridiculously large for one person." The man-child echoed these sentiments. He had no reason to think they were false, he knew how successful-rich, his brother was.
While exact sums were a little more sketchy and classified than that of Fiddleford's, he still knew he had to have made a lot of money. His home couldn't really compare to theirs. If didn't even hold a candle against the hotel room they had been in! It was somehow embarrassing, in a way that he couldn't quite explain.

"It's a bit of a mess, I left in a hurry," he hastily said. "Most of my research is out of the way, but there's still some lying around. So try not to touch anything."

The twins nodded along, silent. They followed him deeper into the house. He flipped on lights as they went. It was dusk just as they had arrived back home. Most of the house was dark. Only from the windows did orange light enter. It only made things in the house look darker in comparison, furniture and parts of his research cast twisted shadows across the floor and walls.

There wasn't much for him to show the children. Just most of the rooms on the ground floor, so they knew their way about. They took in everything silently, it was surprising to hear the twins being so quiet. He would have thought that his great-niece would have some sort of cheerful, upbeat Mabel-thing to say, just to make conversation. Or perhaps Dipper would ask a question about whatever one of his projects was nearest. He seemed to take interest in the dinosaur skull he had resting within a tank, but said nothing of it.

Were they judging his home, in comparison to the others? The sudden uncomfortable squirm of insecurity returned at the thought. He couldn't help but feel a little resentment, knowing that his own quality of life was... Inferior in comparison to the others they had gotten to know that summer. It wasn't easy stomaching the thought that his brother had made it rich, without so much as going to university, while he fought to pay off bills, and worked hard just to ensure that he had another grant to keep his research together. Getting those funds wasn't as easy as it had been thirty years ago.

"H-how about I show you your room?"

The change of subject did not work as well as he had been hoping it would. Stanford found himself faced with a problem when he came to the stairs... Why had he not thought to build a bungalow when first designing the house? Well, he would just have to innovate something so he was capable of getting up and down the stairs in his house. Perhaps some sort of nitrogen-powered rocket. It might be a bit of a fire hazard, and an explosive hazard, but that was a risk he was willing to take! Besides, it was not like he could keep relying on the man-child to carry him up and down the stairs!

"Let's just leave that for another time," he said, trying to laugh away the awkwardness. "We can go see if there are any more bags to unload."

There was nothing left to be unpacked. All of the childrens' things had been taken and placed by the front door. There was a small carry-on in addition this this, it contained his own things. Mainly bottles of painkillers, and the clothes his brother had given him. Stanley said he didn't want them back. (It had something to do about being afraid of catching his nerdiness, a typical Stanley fear.) The RV was idling on the drive.

Only Stanley and Soos remained, for they had dropped Fiddleford off at his own home. But he would be returning, his friend insisted that he was not strong enough to take care of the twins on his own. Stanford was not going to argue with that. The children were a handful, and confusing much of the time too. He knew that now, and didn't mind getting some aid. Even if he did not want to admit that he was not strong enough to watch Mabel and Dipper on his own. Finding it strange that Stanley had not yet parked the RV, he approached.

"What?"
"Aren't you going to park?"

"Nope. You were the last stop on the itinerary. Soos and I are going to distract those creeps all the way back to New Jersey now."

"I thought..." he went silent, finishing the rest in his thoughts. "You were going to stay."

"What?"

It was a stupid notion, Stanford did not know where it had originated from. Why would he want Stanley, the one who constantly bothered him, and was no doubt plotting revenge at this very moment, to remain in Gravity Falls? In his own house no less? He knew that Stanley surely didn't want to stick around, the man probably had much better things to be doing with his time. He would merely scoff at the idea, dismiss it and be off on his merry way.

Yet, parting ways now seemed almost, wrong, in a way that he couldn't quite explain. They had gone through so much this summer, they had spent so much time together that it was hard to imagine that they had ever been apart, not antagonizing each other. The idea was silly, there was no logic behind it, and he did the best he could to hide the conflicting emotions that ran through him.

"It was just, nothing. Don't worry about it."

"Whelp, later."

Later? That was all he was going to say? No final goodbye? No acknowledgement of the children? He had barely done so much as looked in their direction. He could tell that the twins were just as disheartened as he was. Mabel was frowning, and she kept her eyes to the ground, while her brother focused intently on the thin air ahead of them. There was anger bubbling just beneath the surface, Dipper looked ready to snap.

"Wait! You can't just leave!"

"Yes I can. Right Soos?"

"Actually, I was kinda' hoping to stop by an visit Abuelita," Soos confessed, tapping his fingers together. "It's not every day I get to go back home Mister Pines, and I think she would love the surprise! I mean, I know I would, especially since we've been far apart for so long.-"

"Alright!" Stanley crossed his arms, and he looked away from them. "Fine, we're staying here for a little bit!"

It took surprisingly little for Stanley to change his mind. It almost made Stanford wonder if he was waiting for an excuse to stick around. But never before had he been so grateful that the man-child was around to talk Stanley into something. He could have hugged Soos, if not for the fact that he was already embracing Stanley.

"Thank-you Mister Pines! You're the best!"

"Yeesh, I get it. Can you let go of me now?"

"Just a couple more seconds."

Stanley sighed, but did not try to fight the bear-hug. Soos eventually let go, and Stanley was all to happy to jump from the driver's seat.
"Soos, take the RV and visit your Abuelita. Just makes sure to get some duct tape on the way back. We’ve got some repairs to make."

"Will do Mister Pines!" the man-child gave him a funny salute. "See you in a bit!"

"Wait!"

"What now?"

"Don't you need to grab your things?"

"For what?"

"Well if you're staying here-"

"Staying, here? At your place?"

Where else could the man possibly go? Stanford supposed there might be some room available at Soos' Abuelita's home, or perhaps he planned to stay in the RV, but at the same time, Stanford knew that he couldn't leave his brother to fend for himself. At least, if he wanted to sleep at night with a clear conscious. There was still plenty of room in his house. Not as much as Stanley was no doubt used to, but it was still a room, and a solid bed to sleep on.

"I assumed that when you said you were going to remain in Gravity Falls for a bit..."

Rubbing the back of his neck, Stanley looked up at the night sky. Stanford stared at the ground. Neither of them realized it, but they were copying the exact same actions of the younger twins: Dipper and Mabel still stared off into space, trying not to get involved with their conversation, or listen in too much. The four remained looking in opposite directions mute and slightly embarrassed. Eventually, Stanley broke the tension.

"Geeze I uh, thanks. I'll just... Grab my things."

He hastily retreated back to the vehicle. For some reason, Stanford felt his face start to hurt as he watched this. It was almost like eating a candy that was too sower. His cheeks and fillings ached, as if he had just bitten into a sugary-sweet lemon drop. Then he realized the pain was his own fault, because he was grinning so widely. Stanford schooled his face back into a neutral expression. Dipper and Mabel were both looking away, their arms crossed. He was glad they hadn't seen his no doubt goofy smile.

There weren't many things that Stanley had brought along. There was a single duffel bag, which he recognized as the one that Stanley kept most of his belongings in. Then, there was a briefcase, it was locked tight a closed handcuff with the keys in it was attached to the handle. This, he knew contained a great deal of money. Probably more than he made in a year, perhaps even too. It was for any sort of emergency they ran into on the road, at least according to Stanley. Perhaps it was just an excuse to make Fiddleford pay for everything. Stanley hadn't exactly planned to bring his friend along for the ride, so he must of had a ready source of non-traceable cash to use.

The briefcase and the duffel bag were the two things that he brought along with him. Soos gave a little wave, and then he drove off. The man-child was no doubt enthusiastic to see his Abuelita again. It was that kindness which has persuaded Stanley to stick around longer, he was secretly grateful for this.

"Come on in! I'll show you around!"
Not much later that night, Dipper and Mabel lay in their new beds. Neither one of them was ready to sleep, despite feeling exhausted from their long journey across the country. It was a strange sort of sensation. No matter how hard Dipper tried to close his eyes, they remained open, he continued to yawn, but could not find a way to fall asleep. Maybe he just needed to get used to the bed, and the new setting. That hadn't stopped him from falling asleep in the past though.

The bed was perfectly fine, Mabel had proved that, by jumping back and forth between them with ease. He might have joined in too, just for a little bit, to makes sure things were structurally sound. In fact, they were nicer than the ones at Stan's house. There you just sort of sunk into the mattress and were nearly strangled to death in your sleep. This was an improvement.

It was warm inside, but not stifling. It would take some time for the air conditioning to kick in again. Even with the attic window closed, he could hear the sound of crickets chirping. Occasionally, an owl would hoot, and he could hear coyotes, or maybe they were wolves, howling in the distance. Their great-uncle's home was a thirty-second walk away from the forest. It surrounded them on all sides, isolating them from the rest of the town.

To him, it looked like everyone else lived in the town, together. All except for their great-uncle's house. There was something strange about the house, and all of the town actually. Dipper couldn't quite put his finger on what this was, but he knew the feeling was there, at the back of his mind. Perhaps that was the thing that kept him from falling asleep.

"Hey Dipper?" Mabel whispered.

"Yeah Mabel?" He whispered back.

"Can you asleep?"

"No. Can you?"

"No," she replied. "Do you think Grunkle Stan is going to stay for long?"

"How am I supposed to know what goes on in that guy's head?"

"I don't know. Why does he want to stay?"

"For Soos I guess."

"Then why doesn't he just buy a plane ticket and fly back? Unless, he actually wanted to be around Grunkle Ford and..."

"Hey, crazy theories are my area of expertise, not yours."

"It's just, I kind of want Stan to stay, but-"

"You actually want that?" Dipper skeptically asked.

His sister nodded. The moonlight from the window cast her face in the shadows, he could not see what her expression was.

"Why would you ever want to spend more time with that-"

"He's not totally bad Dipper."

"You're just saying that because he helped you win another giant stuffed toy."
Dipper pointedly looked at the axolotls. They took up more space than she did on the bed. It didn't help that she had all of her other toys, and a pig who enjoyed hogging the covers on the bed with her. No wonder why his sister couldn't sleep! At least he had a bed to himself, she was barely clinging on to the edge with so many other occupants to share space her space with.

"That's not true!" Mabel replied, hugging the toy. "Stan is-"

"A manipulative criminal who doesn't care about anyone but himself?"

"What! No! That's not true Dipper! I think Stan is just difficult! And grumpy! He's just not used to being surrounded by loving family!"

"Yeah," he snorted. "Loving."

"Really, I think he just needed some time to warm up. He changed!"

"Come on Mabel, he's not that versatile in his old age."

"He's not that what now?"

"If something is versatile, it can be turned, or changed."

"Well that's a dumb word! Stan changed! He-"

"Mabel don't you remember what he-"

"So he yelled at me one time! That was forever ago Dipping Sauce! I'm over it now! Stan's done tons of good things since then!"

"He's done tons of bad things too."

"It's probably a fifty-fifty split," she admitted. "But that's still something!"

"He hasn't even said sorry! Don't you think that you're being a-"

Mabel sat up in bed, staring directly at him now.

"You know what I think?" Mabel quietly asked. "I think you're mad at Stan because you started to like him, and when you found out he did really bad criminal stuff, and-"

"He scared you so bad you wouldn't get out of bed Mabel! That's bad! That's really bad!"

"I'm over it Dipper!" Mabel repeated. "But you're not."

"Why should I be when he-"

"Ugh, I'm not having this argument."

Mabel flopped back on her bed. She pulled the pillow over her face, and then lay perfectly still.

"Mabel?"

She snored in response. Not a fake one, like he had expected, but a real one. It was a little hard to believe, but Mabel had actually fallen asleep in the time that she covered her face. Dipper rolled his eyes, then he turned on his side. It didn't make the bed feel any more comfortable. He was sick of twisting and turning, and so he kicked off the bed covers. Then, he knocked over his pillow.
Unable to stand it any longer, Dipper got out of bed. There was a slight creak as he stood, the house's floorboards were rather noisy. That did little to wake his sister, who continued to sleep, with her head under the pillow, surrounded by a fortress of stuffed animals. It was just like... Before. Dipper felt his hands curl into fists, and he took in a shuddering breath. Why was she just so happy to forgive and forget? Had Stan... Had their great-uncle really done that much for them? Well, maybe just for her. Because it sure didn't feel like Stan had done anything to make up for snapping at him. When was the last time they had actually talked? On the road? When they were persuading Stan to get locked in the RV? Even then, Stan didn't exactly know it was him that he was talking to. He had been through that entire, body-swap with a weirdo situation.

Dipper did not understand why she was willing to give him so many chances, sure Mabel did it with most people, but this just seemed like a bit much. He had given Stan a second chance, and a third, but the moment he let his guard down... It just made him feel like such an idiot for trusting the guy to be a decent person.

Each step he took seemed to creak louder than the last. It was impossible for him to find sound footing in the house. He may as well have been crashing through with all his might for how loud he felt. The rest of the house was listen, the only noises he heard were coming from outside. That was just wildlife as usual, nothing out of the ordinary.

Dipper winced with every step he took down the attic stairs. Why was every board in this house so squeaky? He was going to wake all of Gravity Falls at this rate. Maybe he should just turn back and go to bed. He would have to fall asleep eventually. Just then, Mabel's snoring decided that it would grow in volume. That was enough to deter him from returning. At least, for now.

He continued to walk along the second floor. He wasn't quite sure of where he was going. Ford's house was huge, and really confusing. So many of the rooms were connected that it all became one endless labyrinth. It was difficult to remember where was where. Dipper could have sworn hat it shouldn't have been physically possible for some of the rooms to exist. The outside of the place was smaller-looking than the inside.

As he approached the next flight of stairs, Dipper froze. There was someone standing there, in the hall. He wasn't sure whether or not to approach or move further back. But then again, he supposed that whoever was there had heard him coming from a mile away.

"Er, hello?"

"What? Who's there?"

Instantly, he decided to turn back, and wait out Mabel's ridiculously loud snoring until the morning. Who needed a good night's sleep anyways? That kind of thing was over-rated!

"It's just me."

"Oh."

Stan sounded just as thrilled about this as he was. The man turned his back to him, he was looking at something on the wall. Dipper's eyes were still adjusting. There were no windows in this part of the hall, meaning that were was very little light. He had to squint to see in the darkness, and even then, his vision was not very clear. He could barely make out Stan, and he was barely three feet in front of him.

"I can't believe he actually kept them."
"Kept what?"

There was a small creak as Stan jumped in surprise.

"Yeesh, you're still here?"

"I'm leaving," he defensively replied, turning back in the direction he had come.

He started to walk back towards the attic stairs. Smaller squeaks followed his every footstep. They were inescapable in the house. It actually made Dipper wonder why he had never heard Stan walking around. But then again, he supposed that the guy was a criminal. He was probably adept at sneaking around places. Heck, Stan was probably stealing something of Ford's right now.

"The pictures."

The voice behind him was so quiet that he easily could have missed it. But Dipper was certain that he had heard his great-uncle speak.

"Huh?"

"It's uh," Stan cleared his throat. "That's what I was talking about."

"What about them?"

"These, I, I guess you can't see them in the dark, but they're all from the house we grew up in. Relatives and friends of the family and such. I would have thought that Sheremy'd claim everything. From what I learned, Ford didn't do that much visiting, even after our Pop was outta' the picture. Shermy was the one who stuck until the end."

"And you didn't visit at all?"

"Twice," he grudgingly admitted. "Once after I thought I'd made enough money, and then later in the evening, on the same day."

"How much was enough?"

A raspy laugh was his answer. It took Stan a moment to collect himself again.

"Nothing was ever enough for him. I ruined my entire life to be let back into this family. And in the end, it didn't even work. Money's brought me nothing but trouble. Getting it, having it, spending it... Now, I can't even leave it all behind, quit scamming people. If I do that, there'll be thirty people minimum turning me into the police, because they'll be off my payroll."

"Oh."

"Most of the time I'd just be better off de-" Stan seemed to realize what he was saying. "Ugh, probably shouldn't be talking about that kind of stuff in front of a kid. Go to bed you."

"Y-yes Grunkle Stan."

He didn't bother to dispute it, there was no point.
Stanley awoke at the crack of dawn. He hadn't really slept well. Nightmares plagued him, a guilty conscience. He knew that he should have refused to stick around in Gravity Falls. It was too dangerous. He would leave Soos behind if he had to, but one of them had to keep moving if they wanted to lead any followers on a wild goose chase. Soos could find his own way back home. He could get a plane ticket (Despite assisting him in numerous crimes, Soos was not banned from flying like was.), or take a bus back out to the east coast. He was just putting those kids, and everyone else, in danger by staying here. Stanley figured that he would just sneak away that morning, when he woke up. Everyone else was no doubt sleeping, the clock on the wall only read a little past six. He put himself together and got dressed. Then, he tip-toed towards the front door.

This was where Stanley encountered his first problem. The RV wasn't there. Stanley could have smacked himself in the face. Of course the dumb thing wasn't there! Soos had taken it so he could visit his grandma! Great, so he was pretty much trapped here. So long as Soos had the RV, he couldn't leave. That was the thing his enemies would no doubt be tracking, he couldn't leave without it to keep the façade going.

The second problem was on the other side of the front door, he was juggling plastic bags filled with groceries in his arms, and looked ready to drop them all. They were both handed off to him, and now Stanley was the one stumbling around. How that that skinny nerd managed to carry something so heavy? He turned back, and started to walk in the direction of the kitchen. There, he set down the grocery bags on the kitchen counter. It creaked in protest, obviously not liking the weight of the bags any more than he was.

When he went to leave, he ran into Fiddleford. His arms were laden with grocery bags once again, there was even one in his mouth. The man had his teeth clamped tight, and all he could manage to do was give a muffled noise. Stanley took the bag from his teeth, minding not to touch the guy's spit. He didn't want to catch his nerdiness after all.

Fiddleford heaved the remaining bags on the counter, next to the others. There was another groan of protest from the counter. That did not stop Fiddleford from leaning against it, and sighing in relief. He rubbed his wrists, there were red lines where the bags had been sitting on his arms.

"There any more?"

"There's a few more, I need to catch my breath."

"Where do you even buy groceries at six in the morning?" Stanley asked.

Fiddleford smiled at the question.

"Oh you'd be surprised. There are a lot of things you can do in Gravity Falls that you can't do elsewhere."
"Huh."

Once he had caught his breath, Fiddleford went out to get the remaining bags. Stanley figured he may as well be helpful, and he started to unpack things. The first time he opened the fridge, Stanley recoiled. It was filled with spoiled food, and the smell of rancid milk wafted through the air. Stanley gagged, and reached for the carton. He didn't bother to pour it down the drain, the scent was just going to linger if he did that. Instead he opened the window, and poured it out there. Then, he rinsed the carton, and threw it out. Nasty.

Unfortunately, the milk was the least of his problems when it came to the fridge situation. He started to empty things out, and it got to the point where he assumed that everything was way past its date. Why was Ford keeping cheese that had been expired for two years? What was he hoping that it would get better if he left it in the fridge? He tossed the mouldy stuff in the trash. It only grew worse when he worked his way to the back.

Apparently Ford's fridge doubled as a cold storage for some of his science experiments. Opening the freezer proved this further. There was some sort of jack-rabbit-antelope thing frozen in a block of ice. There were also samples of something labeled blood agar. It was sealed within a transparent petri dish. The red substance inside was speckled with colonies of bacteria and mold. Man that was just gross. It pained Stanley to know that he could not throw the thing out. He had to put the frozen goods right next to the blood agar. Did that thing actually contain real blood? He hoped not.

The sheer amount of smells that was coming from the thing was overpowering. Fiddleford's nose wrinkled the moment he entered the room.

"The baking soda's in that bag," he said, pointing with his chin. "I figured something like this would happen."

Stanley took the box and opened it. He filled a bowl with baking soda, and sat it down in the fridge. The window was already open, so he went over, and took a breath of fresh air. Only to be met with the smell of the expired milk he had poured on the grass. Stanley shut the window, and retreated from the general area of the kitchen. For a moment, both he and Fiddleford were standing in the threshold of the room. He was still holding shopping bags in his pencil arms, they were shaking. Stanley relieved him of some of the burden.

"I don't suppose you bought some air freshener as well?"

"As a matter of fact, I did!"

Rummaging through the bag, he came up with an aerosol can. Covering his nose with his shirt, the man started to spray it in the room. Stanley looked through the bag, and he found several car air fresheners as well. Sure they were for the inside of someone's vehicle, but Stanley figured they could still help in this situation. He stuck three of the pine trees in the fridge, one in the freezer, and the last on the window. Now he could open the thing without the smell of spoiled milk entering the house.

Stanley and Fiddleford sighed in relief, glad that the awful scents were gone. Together, they worked on putting away the rest of the groceries. With just the two of them, it did not take all that long. There were a few more things to throw out in the cupboards, but none of them smelled.

In addition to this, there were several mousetraps to empty. Some of them didn't have mice in them. Stanley didn't know what the hairy, black balls were, and he wasn't too interested in finding out either. Why did this town have to be so weird? Fiddleford seemed to notice his confusion as they were setting up more traps (both the glue and snapping kinds) as he said;
"They're soot gremlins. Relatively harmless unless you mind cleaning up trails of ash wherever you go."

"Oh, er, right."

Finally, they got the kitchen to a state which was deemed "acceptable" by Fiddleford. The man's work did not stop there however. He seemed familiar with the kitchen, which seemed like a given, seeing as he was friends with Stanford. The man started to rummage through drawers, pulling out cooking utensils. He took out the milk, flour, and eggs, so it was pancakes then. Stanley figured that he should just leave the guy to his cooking, not seeing why he had any reason to stick around. Everything changed though, when Fiddleford asked;

"Stanley could you grab the nutmeg for me?"

"Who puts nutmeg in pancakes?"

"Well what do you put in your pancakes?" he retorted, turning around.

There was a bowl in his arm, and he was whisking several eggs together in it. As he asked the question, his stirring grew faster.

"Not nutmeg," Stanley replied. "That stuff goes on doughnuts, not pancakes."

"If you don't like it, you can make your own."

"Challenge accepted!"

"Ha! Good luck tryin' to beat me Stanley Pines! I've been cookin' breakfast pancakes for seventy-five years!"

Stanley grabbed a bowl of his own, he filled it with the usual amount of flour, something practically instinctual to him at this point. After all, he had been cooking fantastic pancakes since he had been on his own! One of his first jobs had been working as a chef in a pancake house. As a matter of fact, he had been great at cooking them! The only problem was that he couldn't really make anything else... Which then proceeded to get him fired.

"Pfft! You're not a day over fifty-eight!"

"Well so are you!"

Their trash-talking died down as they started their own individual batches of pancake mix. He had to work fast to catch up with Fiddleford's progress. Stanley cracked eggs on the edge of the bowl with one hand, while he poured in a drop of vanilla extract after that. Then came to milk, and a little bit of sugar to sweeten things up. He added all the ingredients he needed, and carried his bowl over to the stove. He was still mixing all the items together, but he set the burner to low, and placed a frying pan on it.

There was a tense moment as he and Fiddleford fought over the canola oil. Being the stronger man, he won out. But not without a price: some of his batter splashed out of the bowl, getting on both their shirts in the struggle. Soon, he had his first few pancakes sitting in the pan, sizzling. Oil hissed and popped as they started to fry. Bubbles formed in the batter, he waited until most of them had burst before he flipped them. They were a nice golden-brown on the other side. He grinned widely, planning to show off to Fiddleford, but the man already had a first layer of pancakes sitting on a plate. Fiddleford sweetly smiled back, an expression he knew was a mirror image of his own.
How had he-?! Stanley realized why the cheater was ahead. He had the element set on medium! Stanley did the same, and he poured more batter on to the pan. He'd caught up quickly enough, by pouring a little extra oil into the pan. Sure the next few came out extra greasy, but he was able to keep in stride. Seeing this, Fiddleford's smile vanished. He started to work faster, pouring batter with one hand, while he flipped pancakes with the other. His frying pan rocked unsteadily without him to hold on to it. Mixture splattered across their glasses, and on top of the stove as they tried to finish first. It wasn't even a speed-based competition, yet still, they could not help but race.

Stanley then turned his burner up to high. He was not going to be defeated by that nerd and his stupid doughnut recipe for pancakes! He was going to kick this guy's butt, and then make him eat all of his own crummy pancakes to realize how bad they were! Fiddleford turned his element up to high as well. Pancakes cooked sooner than ever. They turned black faster too. They had to be quick when lifting and pouring, as the heat's radius grew. It was difficult to get close without the stove nearly burning them.

Stanley flipped stack upon stack of pancakes onto his plate, he had to reach for a second so that he would have enough room. Neither of them realized that they had accidentally switched places at the stove when they went to grab more plates. It took some time for the strange feeling of forgetting something to get over them. Stanley looked at Fiddleford, and Fiddleford looked back at Stanley.

They understood their mix-up simultaneously, as they saw their own batter in the hands of the enemy. Because they were coming to this realization, and were frozen in place, the smoke detector went off. It was only this, and the smell of the enemy burning their pancakes (no doubt on purpose, as some kind of elaborate cheater's scheme to win!) followed not a moment later. They screamed, and ran to save their own pancakes before they could lose.

By the time the smoke detector had been turned off, and they agreed never to cook on high setting again, everyone in the house had awoken. Stanford appeared first, because it was his house that was potentially on fire. Dipper and Mabel were next, they came downstairs together. They were blinking tiredly and rubbing their eyes as they sat at the kitchen table.

Mabel's pig, just to inconvenience them, decided to get underfoot when it smelled the food. Dumb thing weaved between their legs as they walked through the kitchen, trying to trip them up and see what was on the stove. It eventually settled under Mabel's seat, but not before it had caused them a near heart-attack two times.

And so, their early-morning cooking competition came to a close. They turned off the stove, and presented four towering plates of pancakes to the group. Mabel, Dipper, and Stanford all stared incredulously at them.

"You set off a smoke alarm at six-thirty in the morning to make a ridiculous amount of pancakes?!” Stanford asked.

Ford was a man who liked his sleep, so it was no surprise that he was the most vocal out of them.

"Stanley insulted my pancakes,” Fiddleford answered.

"And he uh, I just wanted to compete."

"Oh I can't believe you two! Messing up my kitchen and-"

They both guiltily looked at the cooking space. Stanley supposed that it was a little messy, on the stove and counters and such. Plus, it looked like most of his batter had winded up on Fiddleford. The same seemed to have occurred with himself. There were drops of the mixture on his glasses, and a
nice coating of it on his front. Perhaps they had taken things a bit too far. Not that he was going to admit that aloud to his brother. Fiddleford seemed to be thinking the same thing.

"As a matter of fact, we actually cleaned out your fridge before we made a mess of the kitchen. And not to mention the cupboards too."

"Oh, well ah," his face turned slightly red. "You've still undone all of the work that you put into cleaning."

"Re-lax! We'll deal with the mess," Fiddleford dismissed. "Just right after you decide whose cooking is better."

"Yeah," Stanley placed his hands on his hips. "Whose food is better?"

Sensing that there was only more messes to come if he did not defuse the situation, Stanford looked at Dipper and Mabel.

"Er, children? Maybe you would like to judge instead of-"

"Everyone at the table can have some."

"Right then, I'll just take some of both, and-"

They both watched intensely as the family ate breakfast. They were rather unnerved by it, and hesitated to reach for another pancake, not knowing whose was whose on the plates. Every time one of Stanley's was eaten, he would laugh, and nudge Fiddleford with his elbow. He did the same whenever he saw that someone had taken a pancake of his own. Despite the fact that two batches of pancakes, intended for at least six people (plus a pig), had been cooked, most of it was finished off.

Stanley and Fiddleford did not touch any of them, for fear of eating the enemy's own, no doubt horrible pancakes. In addition to that, they may have mixed in a few of the wrong kind on the plates by accident, during their stove-swap. Finally, the moment they were waiting for arrived, as everyone declared that they were full. Stanley grinned manically, knowing that he would definitely come out on top. There was no way he could lose to that loser!

"So, which ones did you like better?"

"Yes, tell us, Stanford."

"Children how about you go first?" Stanford hastily asked.

"Ok! Well I liked these ones better! They taste like doughnuts, so you don't need to put syrup on them! But I did anyways!"

"Ha! In your face Stanley Pines! She likes my pancakes better! You hear?!"

"Oh, I guess that means I like Stan's," Dipper chimed in.

Now Stanford's nervousness grew, as the attention was focused upon him. He was the one who would break the tie.

"So Stanford, whose is better?"

"Well you see, the thing about that is... I do not have the feeling of taste at the moment!" he declared. "Why yes, that's it! These painkillers I'm on destroy all sensation of taste when in full effect!"
"What? That's not true! Just yesterday you were complaining there wasn't enough sugar in your coffee!"

Stanley rattled the still very full pill-bottle. The seal had not been broken, despite the fact that Stanford had allegedly taken them to help get rid of the pain in his wounds.

"Yeah! You didn't even take any of these!"

"Yes, I, well, you see, the thing is-" Suddenly, Stanford grabbed the left side of his chest. "OH NO! MY FRAGILE OLD MAN HEART! IT'S BEING ATTACKED! BY A HEART ATTACK! IT SEEMS THAT I CANNOT JUDGE IN THIS CONDITION!"

Stanford vacated the room before anything else could happen.

"Hey! Faking old people problems is my shtick!" Stanley yelled after his brother.

"Fine! Let's just make the pig judge instead!"

"Good idea! I er, I mean, it'll know whose food's better! Right Wilber?"

"It's Waddles," Mabel corrected.

They picked up the remaining pancakes, and placed them on the floor, equal distance away from the pig. Waddles perked up when he heard his name, and when he saw the food, he scrambled to his feet. Both Stanley and Stanford started to call the pig's name in encouraging, friendly voices, wanting it to come over to their side of the room. Waddles looked indecisively between them, unsure of who he should walk towards.

Dipper rolled his eyes, and got up from his seat. He put his plate and cutlery in the sink. Mabel followed. It was probably best if they avoided the kitchen space until Stan and Fiddleford had gotten the competitiveness out of their system. So, they wound up outside, right near the edge of the property. The grass was in bad need of a cutting. It rose to almost their waists in height, and it made swishing sounds as they walked through it. Dipper pushed the grass aside with a stick, not wanting to step on a snake, or whatever else could be hiding in the tall grass.

The summer sun shone brightly above them. It was not too hot in the day yet, since they had been involuntarily woken up by a cooking contest. The sunshine caught in the drops of few on the grass, making them gleam brightly. His sister was happy to leap through the grass. She would take one large leap, only to trip on some hidden obstacle in her way. There would be another swish of grass, and she would seem to vanish between the foliage. But not a moment later, she would be skipping again. They stopped near the edge of the property. Dipper could have almost missed it, and his sister almost tripped again. He grabbed her by the sweater before she could fall in.

"Whoa! It's a bottomless pit!"

She got down on her hands and knees, and eagerly leaned over the edge of the enormous, dark hole before them. She yelled again, her voice echoed without end, all the way down the thing. As Dipper stared at the hole, he got the creeps. He shivered, and pulled his sister away from the edge. It wouldn't be hard for the ground to crumble if they got too close. What if they fell in there? What were the odds of even getting out of something so deep?

"Why does Grunkle Ford have a giant hole in the middle of his property?" Dipper asked aloud.

"Maybe he's going to build a pool!"
"Kind of seems like a safety hazard if you ask me."

Mabel grabbed the tree branch he was holding, and lobbed it into the pit. They listened out for any sort of crash, but there was none. Maybe they had missed it? Or maybe the stick was still falling down. They backed a little further from the seemingly bottomless pit.

"Oh trust me, that is definitely more than a safety hazard!" a voice from behind them said. "I lost like two guys down there the other day. They're still not back!"

Not knowing who the voice belonged to, the twins turned around. But the stranger was nowhere in sight.

"W-who said that?!"

"Maybe it was a vampire!" Mabel whispered. "Grunkle Ford told me that the cute available vampire to Mabel ratio was pretty high!"

"Gnope! Er, I mean, nope! I'm just a gnome!"

Right before them, a tiny man dressed in blue jean overalls emerged from the grass. There was a red, conical hat on top of his head, and he had a scruffy, brown beard. Dipper and Mabel screamed again.

"What the heck?! How is that- You're like-"

"A gnome! Yup! My name's Jeff!"

"Your name is, Jeff?" Mabel skeptically asked. "Shouldn't it be like, Leaf-Eater! Of the Southern Forest Tribe!"

"Southern?! I'll have you know that I am from the north side of the forest Missy! Goes back three hundred gnome-generations too!"

"Oh, sorry."

Dipper was still shocked. He knew that their great-uncle studied biological anomalies, but seeing it for himself was completely different! That guy was a gnome! He could speak English and appeared to be relatively intelligent and it walked upright... And it was even wearing a stereotypical pointy gnome-hat! How was this... This was just crazy.

"So," Jeff tapped his fingers together. "You guys are human children, right?"

"Of c-"

Regaining his senses, Dipper covered his sister's mouth. What if this was one of those Rumpelstiltskin-type situations?

"Who wants to know?"

"Yeesh, calm down there, I was just curious," Jeff replied. "Stanford said he had some kids coming by earlier this summer, you look like him is all."

Dipper uncovered his sister's mouth before she decided that she was going to lick his hand.

"Yup! That's us! Dipper and I are twins!"

"Oh that must be interesting. Gnomes don't really have twins. More like centuplets."
"Cent like, a hundred?"

"Yup!"

"So are you here to take us on some kind of magical quest?! Do we get to fly on eagles?! Oooh! Or get magical rings of power?! And is there a volcano around here by any chance?"

"Yes, no, no, and yes," he replied.

"Then what are you here for?"

"Oh just to kidnap both of you for my wife, nothing big!"

"Wait, what?!"

The tall grass around them started to shake. Suddenly, they were surrounded by pointy red hats.

"We're looking to adopt," he shrugged. "Get 'em fellas!"

Stanley and Fiddleford were just about finished cleaning up the mess they had made of the kitchen when Mabel ran into the house. She was screaming at the top of her lungs and running through the halls as she tried to get their attention. The girl's hair was a mess, and there were grass blades stuck in her clothes. Her knees were green too, and there were grass stains on her skirt. Mabel had several bites and claw-marks along her skin, her sweater was torn, the yarn loose in places.

"GRUNKLE FOOORD! GNOMES KIDNAPPED DIPPER AND THEY'RE GOING TO RAISE HIM AS THEIR OWN!"

From elsewhere in the house, a loud road met her, "WHAT?! I thought I told Jeff to look elsewhere for." Stanford's rant stopped short when he saw the girl's dishevelled state. "Never fear great-niece! I can take them! I know all their weaknesses!"

"Y-you do?"

"Of course! One doesn't live in Gravity Falls without knowing how to stop gnomes from eating your food! I find that kicking and punching are the most effective ways of-" Stanford looked at his legs, and then at his bandaged arm. Everyone came to the same understanding as him. "Luckily Stanley is good at both kicking and punching!"

"Wait, what? How'd I get roped into this magical quest?"

"Don't worry, Fiddleford can go with you! We have this all completely under control!"

"Stanford, I don't know if it's a good idea to send me and Stanley-"

"Nonsense! You know the forest just as well as I do Fiddleford! And with Stanley's brass knuckles, nothing can possibly go wrong!"

Fiddleford pinched the bridge of his nose and strode out of the room.

"You just had to say that Stanford Pines," he muttered under his breath. "Jinx us why don't you, just before we go to rescue someone."

Stanley looked like he was about to follow him out of the room. Instead, he stopped in front of Mabel.
"We'll get your brother back."

He gave her a quick pat on the head, and jogged after Fiddleford. Now, it was just the two of them. Mabel started to sniffle, she wiped her eyes with the tattered corner of her sweater sleeve. As she did so, he could see more of the cuts and scrapes she had gotten, no doubt from her struggle with the gnomes. They were still dripping places.

"Come on, let's go get you cleaned up."

There was a first aid kit in the kitchen, so he lead the girl there, and had her sit on one of the chairs. He took some cotton swabs and started to disinfect the cuts with hydrogen peroxide. Gnomes really had nasty bites, they easily brought along infection too. She would flinch every time he placed more on, it did sting after all, but she did not say anything else.

The poor child was covered head-to-toe in grass stains as well. He took some wet paper towel and handed it to her, she started to wipe the green stains off her skin. Mainly her palms, and knees. In the meantime, he started to patch her up with the band-aids. Once they had dealt with her wounds, he brushed the remaining grass off her clothing and hair. Mabel then stood up, and stiffly moved her arms. There were bandages circling all around them, slightly restricting her movement.

"There! You feeling alright now?"

"Y-yes, but-"

"But?"

"Could you hug it better?"

"Of course, c'mere you."

They embraced. He patted the girl on the back, and she squeezed him tight.

"Thanks Great-Uncle Ford."

"Ok, son, here is your own official gnome hat-"

"I am not your son!"

Jeff ruffled Dipper's hair.

"Don't worry, the stockholm syndrome will kick in soon enough," he placed a gnome-hat on top of Dipper's pine tree one. "Now before you can seek audience with our queen-"

"Why do you have to seek audience with your own wife?"

"Don't question it kid. Now stop trying to break out of gnome-prison will ya'? It's giving Carson and Steve a hard time-"

"No! I will not-!"

The gnome part of the forest was like something out of one of Mabel's weird fantasy romance novels. It sparkled more than one of the vampires she always talked about, and the way everything was brightly coloured reminded him of one of her art pieces. The place was just ridiculous!

Why did the trees and grass sparkle? Why did the enormous white-spotted mushrooms have little
doors and windows attached to them? Dipper supposed that he shouldn't find any of his surroundings all that surprising. He had been kidnapped by gnomes after all. They had him tied against a tree, and were still insistent on turning him into a genuine gnome. They had overalls made for him and everything.

"Now, since you're going to be my son, what do you want to be renamed?"

There was no point in disputing the guy's plans, he would just keep calling him "son" no matter what he said or did.

"What's wrong with Dipper?"

"Mmm, it's just gnot- not, gnome-y enough, you know?"

"But your name is Jeff! How is that any more gnome-y than Dipper?!"

"It just is ok? You've gotta' have something like Jason, or Alex!"

"Would Tyrone work?"

"Perfect! I love it! Tyrone and Maple-" 

"Her name is Mabel."

"Not any more. Once we find your sister she'll be renamed Maple!"

Dipper rolled his eyes. He was hoping that people would actually be capable of using their proper names by this point. First it was Ford Jr and Maple from Stan. Then it was Pepper and Bagel from Grunkle Ford. Sure he was sedated with many painkillers at the time, but Bagel was a far cry from Mabel! The same applied to Pepper. He knew Stan got their names wrong just to get their goats too, it wasn't because he honestly didn't know.

At least his new name was going to be something cool, he could live with being called Tyrone, gnome royalty... Dipper shook his head, trying to dismiss the thoughts. Why was he so accepting of this? Did gnomes have some sort of better way to create stockholm syndrome than humans?!

"Are you sure you're ready to become a parent?" he desperately asked.

"Nope! That's why I got this!" Jeff pulled a book out of his overalls pocket. "Ten Thousand and One Dad Jokes Sure to Embarrass your Children! Here, listen to this one: what did the traffic light, say to the car? Don't look, I'm changing!"

"Seriously man?"

"Why didn't the melons get married?"

"Why?" another gnome asked.

"Because they cantaloupe! You, you see its funny because cantaloupe sounds like can't elope, which means-"

"Ugh I can't believe I'm going through this."

"Hi, Going Through This, I'm Dad!"

"HEY, HEY! IF ANYONE SHOULD BE TELLING TERRIBLE JOKES TO CHILDREN, ITS
Jeff was punted, joke book and all. The gnome went soaring through the air. He flew so far that no one saw where he landed. They did hear the crash however. This caused the other gnomes to grow hostile, they hissed and leaped towards Stan. He seemed ready for this however, he punched one straight in the jaw, sending it soaring as well.

"Grunkle Stan!"

"Hey Pointy-Hats! What's brown and sticky?" Fiddleford smashed one gnome with a tree branch. "A stick!"

"Boo! That's terrible! And by that I mean good!" Stan yelled. "Here, listen to this one: why did the dentist become a brain-surgeon? Because his hand slipped!"

Stan's slip of the hand however involved throwing the snarling gnome over the trees. Dipper had to look away from the sight. Mostly because he couldn't bare to see the source of Stan and Fiddleford's awful jokes and one-liners. They were like every terrible fight from a movie, but worse, because there were two of them. Dipper wished that he could cover his ears, but it was impossible with his arms restrained to a tree.

Eventually, the fighting died down. Dipper could not quite believe it, but his great-uncles had fought a swarm of gnomes, and actually come out on top. They were breathing heavily, and their clothes were torn in many places, much like his were.

"Y-you guys... Saved me."

"'Course we did," Stan gruffly said, pulling the knots loose.

"Luckily Ford knew about the gnomes' weaknesses."

"What is it?"

"Punching and general violence."

"They didn't try to do anything strange to you did they?" McGucket asked. "When Jeff was a bachelor, he would kidnap people and try to make them get married."

"You say like you know this from experience," Stan said.

McGucket's face turned pink at this.

"Never mind that. Let's go home and get you all cleaned up."
Once more, Stanley found himself being the first person to rise. Stanley wondered if he should make breakfast before McGucket came along and tried to cheat him in a pancake-making contest. If he cooked first, then everyone would have no choice but to say that his food was the greatest! As quickly as the idea had come to him, Stanley dismissed it. He had totally won that competition anyways. So what if the pig hadn't eaten either of their pancakes? It looked at his last, right out of the corner of his eye! He had seen it! That meant his food was better!

If he wasn't going to do that again, then what else was there? The kids were still sleeping, Fiddleford was an insufferable nerd at best (although he might have a good arsenal of jokes, not that he would admit it out loud), and Ford... Out of the question. As if his brother would want to be woken up early in the morning for no reason. What was he even supposed to do then? It was odd being in the foreign house. He didn't quite feel comfortable going through things here, it was awkward. All of the stuff was, well, Ford's stuff. It was his research, it was his house, he felt strangely hesitant to touch anything, or wander around. He couldn't even bring himself to steal one measly piece of silverware.

Somehow, Stanley found himself pacing back and forth by the front door. He strode down the hall parallel to the stairs, and stopped when he reached the turn in the hall. That was where Ford's room was situated. He would glance down the hall, in the direction of where his room was, only to snap his attention back to the wall in front of him. Then he would turn around on his heels, and walked back across the length of the hall, only stopping when he reached the corner near the front door.

Stanley had long since figured out how to avoid all of the pressure points on the floor boards. He made no noise as he paced, not even the slightest scuffling of shoes. Stanley didn't quite know why he was pacing. He just... Didn't have anything better to do with his time right now.

It was only the sound of a quiet "thump" near the door that caught his attention. That did not break his habit of walking back, at least not for another two laps. His curiosity got the better of him, and he opened the front door. There was Stanford, army crawling across the porch with one elbow. The other, injured one was outstretched, evidently he had been trying to open the front door. His wheelchair was abandoned on the front lawn.

"Should I even ask?"

"No."

A small feeling of hurt flickered within when he heard this. Stanley knew that it was ridiculous, considering all the other things that his brother had called him, and said. He was a monster, he had actually said that directly to the kids. And they believed him. Not that Stanford was wrong, calling him a horrible person. He was a liar, and a monster. Also a snappy dresser. But something as simple as being snapped at shouldn't have bothered him as much as it did.

"Yeesh, fine by me. I didn't want to know anyways."

Figuring that his brother needed help (he always seemed to be the damsel in distress) Stanley went and retrieved the wheelchair. However, when he presented it to his brother he folded his arms (a feat, considering that he was laying on the ground) and looked away from him.

"I am perfectly capable of getting around without that."

"And I secretly want to marry that gnome-thing from the other day," Stanley replied, grabbing
Stanford by the arms. "Whelp, ally-oop!"

A very annoyed Stanford was placed back where he was supposed to be. Man this guy was a piece of work. How was crawling around on the ground any more efficient than rolling? Stanley was about to ask him exactly this, but he was cut off, as Stanford spoke first.

"I'm just so sick of not being able to do anything! I've had to depend on others practically all summer! In the hospital, to get around, to take care of myself, and even financially!"

"You're not any less of a person for relying on others. Think about it, what would I even do without Soos?"

Stanford gave him a weak smile.

"Trip all the alarms yourself?"

"I'm talking about around the house Poindexter, not crime. You really think I can walk up the stairs all the time, or mow the lawn without having a stroke?"

"I suppose not... I just... I want to get better! Is that so much to ask?"

"We'll you're not going to get better by dragging yourself in the mud all the time."

"You don't think I know that?!"

Once more, he recoiled, having been snapped at again. He could tell right away from the look on his face that the man instantly regretted doing so. To his surprise, his eyes started to grow shiny, tears welled up in them. He blinked rapidly, attempting to brush them away with the corner of his sleeve, but he had seen them nonetheless. He felt his anger from before melt again.

"Hey... Don't be like that. You're plenty strong still. Just, more up here," he tapped his own forehead. "Than down there. I can't really say the same for myself."

"But I'm not the same! It feels like I never will be."

"Gettin' peppered with bullets will do that to a guy. You're never really..." his throat tightened, innumerable, accusing faces flashed before his eyes. He swallowed hard, trying to shake the whirlwind of memories from his mind. "The same after shooting- I mean getting shot. You've just gotta' learn how to use your strengths and keep going on, do what you can do."

"When did you become the smart twin?"

"You on those painkillers?"

"Some," he confessed. "Why?"

"Because they're obviously making you delusional if you think that."

Stanford left Stanford on the front porch. He made sure to leave the door open, just in case his stupid brother tried to crawl his way through the house again. Honestly whatever went on in that guy's head was a mystery. He was just going to split open his wounds even more and there would be a giant bloody mess all over the place. Of course Ford would insist that he was fine when there were two still-healing holes in his body.

The kids were up now, they had fixed themselves some toast. Mabel was happily chattering to her brother about something, while Dipper flipped through the newspaper, probably searching for the
comics and puzzles. Mabel's toast was covered in the most glittery honey he had ever seen. Stanley wondered if the girl had added it as a topping, or if the weird twenty-four hour grocery store in Gravity Falls was weirder than he thought. Either way, he could not help but wince a little when the kid took a bite of her breakfast. There were rainbow sparkles caught in her braces and stuck to her lips.

Dipper had two plain slices of toast next to him. Either the kid didn't notice that he hadn't put anything on, or he actually ate the stuff plain. Stan didn't really know, he wasn't aware of every weird detail about the kid's life. When the twins saw him, they both chirped "morning!" and went back to what they were doing.

"This is for you."

The words came out of nowhere. Stan had not expected the plain toast to be pushed towards him, but it was. Dipper had found what he was looking for in the newspaper, he had it propped up, so that no one could see his face. Stan took the plate, and the newspaper. He rendered speechless for a moment. Then, he managed to give a quick thanks. He took the plate to the counter, where there was an assortment of condiments waiting. Peanut butter, regular butter, two different kinds of jam...

McGucket had really gone all out. Stan chose to stick with plain old butter. He took a knife and spread some across his toast. It was still cold, having been kept in the fridge, he had to wait for it to warm up before he could spread it.

Stanley started to eat despite this, thumbing his way through the newspaper as he did so. It was a local one, so all the page numbers were unfamiliar. Stanley found it interesting that every single article was written by the same Toby Determined person. Right underneath each article title, there was a small advertisement.

_Do you have a scoop? Send it in and it'll be published in less than twelve hours. (Please send in, we're desperate for news!)_

Just as Stanley thought that he had found something read-worthy, he realized that there was a hole cut through the article. Several in fact, all in different shapes and sizes. He instinctively looked at Mabel, she was the one who did creative stuff with the newspaper without supervision. She guiltily smiled at him, and held up her new paper hats. Stan was about to put the paper down, when something on the other side of the paper caught his attention.

It was... The obituaries section. There were holes cut out of this side too. He could see straight through the paper, because it was the last page in the newspaper. As he held it up, he saw that the triangular cut perfectly framed the kids at the kitchen table. Stanley recalled the threats that had been sent to him before, obituaries, for children, and funeral homes... He looked through the space, directly at the children, and then at the large, bold letters, which informed the reader what exactly the section of the papers was. Mabel looked up, and smiled at him with that large grin of hers.

The food he was eating seemed to stick in his throat. He could barely swallow, the toast became dry and tasteless. What was he doing, sticking around here and putting these kids in danger? It wasn't worth it. He... His own happiness wasn't worth it. He was being selfish by doing this, it wasn't fair to them. If he kept this up, they would wind up like the people in the papers. Another article, that would then be cut out so some other innocent kid could make a hat for her pig.

Just then, the toaster went off. Mabel leaped from her seat and grabbed the toast. She placed it on a new plate, and then refilled the toaster. Huh, so the kids were making breakfast this time around. It was a lot less hectic than him and McGucket's endeavor yesterday.

Speaking of which, Fiddleford entered the room. Was it just him, or was the guy more green, and
scaly than usual? Fiddleford had abandoned his sweaters for a green shirt, and matching green shorts. They clashed terribly, and they had a green, scale pattern printed on them.

"G'morning children!"

"Morning!" they said in union.

"This toast is for you," Mabel said.

"Oh, thank-you, but there's no time for eating today!"

"What? Why?"

"And what's with the crazy outfit? You look like a lizard person," Mabel made several hissing sounds, she pointed to his odd choice in clothing.

"Why don't you know what day it is?" Fiddleford asked.

"Um... Happy anniversary?"

"Mazel tov!" Mabel chimed in.

"No it's not that," he huffed, placing his hands on his hips. "Didn't Stanford tell you?"

Everyone seemed to be appearing when their names were brought up that day. Stanford entered the room. He looked like he had collected himself again, he didn't show any signs of distress from before. However, he was now wearing the same, horribly clashing green clothes that Fiddleford was. His came in different shades of green, patterned like camouflage clothes were. Except these ones had scale patterns on them. It just so happened that he was wearing foam hands as well. They were green, and shaped like flippers, with claws at the end.

"Of course not! I didn't want to ruin the surprise!"

"What surprise?"

"Oh, you'll see," he coyly replied.

"Now who wants to put on some blindfolds and get into the car?"

"Yaa- what?"

"Er, let's make that part optional."

It was a good thing that their drive was short, because Stanley did not know if he would be able to put up with more traveling with the family. Dipper and Mabel were itching to find out where their "surprise destination" was. They constantly badgered Stanford, who refused to tell them anything. It was only when Fiddleford, who was driving, accidentally ran into a woodpecker that they decided to relent, and tell the twins what exactly was going on.

Stan had to admit, he was curious as to where this was all going as well. Not that he would admit it out loud to anyone. Stanford and Fiddleford seemed excited enough about it. This either meant that it was going to be really nerdy, or genuinely exciting. Stanley hoped it was the latter, for his, and the kid's sanity.

"Alright you two gremgoblins, calm down," Stanford said.
"Tell us Grunkle Ford!"

"Yeah, tell us!"

"Sit down, you're distracting the driver."

Dipper and Mabel almost instantly took seats across from Stanford, they stared at him eagerly.

"Well, our story first begins thirty long years ago. Back when I was a mere researcher in the town, only just starting out my career. In Gravity Falls, all these decades ago, there lived, a mad scientist."

"Question," Mabel rose her hand. "Is the mad scientist you?"

"No, he was much more crazy than I am."

Interestingly enough, Fiddleford turned slightly pink when Stanford said this. Was this going where he thought it was going? The children did not notice this, they had all their attention focused on Stanford now, eagerly awaiting the rest of the story.

"Also slightly inebriated," Fiddleford defensively added.

"This scientist was a brilliant man, a mechanical genius."

"Was it Grunkle Fiddleford?"

"One time!" Fiddleford yelled. "It was the only time that one of them got away alright?! If you hadn't dared me to build a monster capable of avoiding human detection for long periods of time than this never would have happened!"

"What happened?" Dipper asked.

Stanford was utterly unfazed by Fiddleford's outburst. He continued with the story if part of it had not been spoiled, and interrupted.

"A monster was born. A mechanical monster. It had been released into Lake Gravity Falls, for testing. But when the time came to make it return occurred, nothing showed up! The scientist was unable to find the unfindable monster, it vanished completely. To this day, there are only ever vague reports from people who have spotted the monster. Those who have had their boats overturned, their fishing lines cut through, and fish eaten straight off the hook!"

"What sort of monster can even do that?" Mabel asked.

"The Gobblewonker!"

Mabel's fear turned into slight confusion.

"The... The what now?"

"Fiddleford wasn't the greatest at naming his robots back in the day," Stanford explained for his friend. "Remember the Pterodactyl-tron?"

"I'm trying hard to forget," Fiddleford muttered under his breath.

"And the Shame-Bot?"

"Shouldn't you be telling a story?" Fiddleford asked, his fingers tightening on the steering wheel.
"The point being, every year, we, the people of Gravity Falls congregate, and try to catch a glimpse of the monster! I enjoy it for the simple pleasure of monster-hunting, but many others come together to have a fun summer's day out there on the lake, enjoy life while we can. Also Fiddleford is required by law to apologize for setting a gigantic robot monster loose on the town every year and I have to join him because I was the one who originally came up with the bet. But we've made the most out of it!"

"Ha!" Stanley slapped Fiddleford on the back. "And here I thought that you didn't break any laws!"

"Yes well..." Fiddleford went back to smiling. "It is a fun holiday, I have to say that."

It seemed like everyone in Gravity Falls was out on the lake. This made sense, seeing as it was such a beautiful day. The sun shone brightly overhead, but it was not hot to the point where it was agonizing. There was a breeze, stirring the air and preventing it from being too humid. Overhead, there were countless, puffy white clouds. They stood out against the blue sky. The parking lot was jam-packed. Everyone seemed to have there vehicle parked there. Several tailgate parties were going on, with people sitting in the back of their trucks, having picnics and talking happily with friends.

There were banners set up on poles everywhere. Many of the flags depicted the large, monstrous head of a reptilian monster, with glowing amber eyes. Interestingly enough, they matched the horrible outfits of Stanford and Fiddleford. Stanley assumed that they were wearing them to mimic the monster on purpose. Between the parking lot and the beach, there was a short strip of grass, and dirt that had been packed down flat from years of people walking across.

There were tables resting on the grass, a few people mingled around them. Stanley walked over to inspect them. There were displays on one of the tables. Blueprints it seemed, for the original monster. There were also scrap pieces of metal sitting on the table. They were old and twisted. Flakes of green paint was coming off them, revealing the metal underneath.

Another table was set up as an information booth. There was a bored-looking redhead manning the station. She was chewing gum. In one hand, she was holding a magazine, in the other, she handed out brochures to whoever passed by. She would give the occasional greeting or welcoming words to people who passed, but was otherwise inert.

Stanley decided to pass over talking to the worker. He had several rolled up beach towels under one arm, and the umbrella in the other. The others were carrying things as well. Together, they found the perfect spot on the sandy part of the beach. Away from more of the people, and just the right distance away from the water. They were a little closer to the forest because of this, but none of them truly minded. There, they set up camp, and prepared for a nice day at the beach.

Fiddleford and Stanford had to leave for a bit. They had a yearly public apology to give. There was a speaker system set up, it had been playing music before. Now, it was stopped, and he could hear Fiddleford's voice from where he sat. His speech consisted of repeating the word "very" at least twenty times before saying "sorry" and getting to the gist of what he was trying to say. That was, he would never release a monster designed to not be caught ever again, and it was a good thing the robot wasn't made to kill people like the last one so they should all be grateful.

For a guy who had been forced to make a public apology every year and start a holiday, the townspeople sure seemed to like him. There was no "boooing" as he talked, and Fiddleford returned in one piece. It kind of made Stanley wonder why they were making the guy do all that stuff in the first place. As Fiddleford sat down, he asked him exactly that.

"Oh, Gravity Falls is full of ridiculous by-laws," he explained. "You just sort of have to go along with whatever thing they say."
"Why's that?"

"Just the way it was founded. Stanford and I did some investigating on it a while ago, but we couldn't quite find the answer."

"Puzzles involved were too confusing," Stanford added.

"Mhm."

Stanley would have been happy to sleep the day off, but he couldn't bring himself to do so. He wasn't feeling tired, despite the warmth of the sun. So he watched the twins instead. The kids had situated themselves closer to the water, and started to build in the sand. They talked as they worked together. First, they dug up a large pile of sand, and piled it together. Mabel would occasionally take the bucket, and fill it with water. She would carefully dodge the waves as she did so, and then run back to her brother. He didn't know what they were working on, but it seemed engaging enough to them.

The two of them playing in the sand would have made for a nice picture. But the longer he stared at them, the more uncomfortable he felt. Stanley eventually realized that it was because the obituary from that morning was on his mind. He kept thinking back to it, the mental image was burned in his mind. Two children, perfectly framed within the next paper's list of deaths.

It wouldn't even take that long for them to report it. He recalled the slogan from the paper. You could get a story in and published within less then twelve hours. How long would it take for someone unwanted to show their face? A day? Two? Less? They must have gained some ground with all that time he had spent in the hotel. Stanley didn't know what it was about the place that made him want to stay there for so long. He knew it was dangerous, he knew that they had to keep moving. If everyone else wanted to treat it like a vacation, that was fine. But he knew that there were threats out there, and he had to be ready to deal with them.

"Grunkle Staaan!"

He was shaken out of his thoughts by Mabel, who had come running over to him. She had her bottom lip stuck out in a pout, the kid clearly wanted something from him.

"Yup?"

"Dipper stole the shovel from me!"

"I did not! It's my turn to use it, we agreed on this Mabel!"

"He totally stole it," she said, in a quieter voice.

Stan wasn't exactly sure how he was supposed to solve the conflict. He couldn't even stop fighting with his own brother. How did the kid expect him to know how to solve her own problems?

"Why don't you just use your hands?"

"I am! But the shovel gives him a competitive advantage! He may as well have two people helping him!"

"Competitive you say?"

"We want to see who can build the biggest sand castle!"
"Well in that case-" Stanley rose to his feet. "I have no choice but to help you. Where do we start?"

Mabel took his hand, and dragged him to the structure that she had been building in the sand. She was working on walls it appeared, and he had to be careful to avoid stepping on the maze of walls that she had started to build. They expanded very far, apparently she was taking the idea of making a "big" sandcastle the horizontal way. Dipper appeared to be doing the opposite. He was building a tower of his own, by taking handfuls of the sand when it was wet, and laying them flat like bricks. The thing was going to get unsteady soon, with all the water that was soaking in around the ground through the structure. Mabel was going to face problems too, he could already tell. People who got too close, or when she got too far away from her starting point, would trample the smaller walls she had constructed.

Nevertheless, he got down on his knees, and started to help the girl pile sand together. His own walls were much larger than her own, most likely because of the size difference of their hands. As they worked together, Dipper started to fall further behind. Somehow, the boy managed to drag Stanford away from his monster-spotting near the lake. Stanley and Stanford stared at each other.

Without so much as saying a word, they knew that the competition had elevated to an entirely different level of intense. Stanford started to offer suggestions to Dipper, so his tower was more structurally sound. He got out of his chair, and pulled off the ridiculous foam hands he had been wearing before. Now he started to help him build. Seeing this, Stanley came up with an idea. They were not going to loose to them in a million years!

"Say kid, I know how we can build something, extra quick."

"How?"

"You ever done a wheelbarrow race before?"

"Yeah! All the time in gym class!"

"Well we're going to do that, but in reverse. Just keep your hands like this," he held his own hands flat and parallel to each other, with some space between them. "And let me do the rest."

It was a little awkward at first, seeing as he had to hold on to the kid's ankles while pulling her backwards at the same time, but nothing that they couldn't handle. Soon enough, he was practically running down and along the edge of the beach, while she used her hands to shape a wall as they went. He made sure to look behind him, and yell at anyone who was in their way. Once Mabel had declared they had done far enough, they doubled back, and made their way to the two losers of the competition. Neither Dipper nor Stanford looked very happy with the results.

"Mabel, you can't do that! It's cheating!"

"Well you had the shovel, and Grunkle Ford, a guy who knows architecture and a million other building-science things to help you," she replied. "I only had my bear hands!"

"And a professional con man!"

"Grunkle Ford built his own house! I think he knows how to build a super tall sandcastle."

What followed was one of the strangest arguments that Stanley had ever heard. The twins were arguing over which one of them was better. That seemed standard enough when it came to twins, but was different was that they weren't saying anything negative about either of them. They kept coming up with reasons for why the other great-uncle gave them the better advantage. Stan was almost flattered by it. Judging by the bright pink Ford's face was turning, he found it slightly embarrassing.
"How about we switch sides?" Stanford suggested.

"So that way she could have the advantage?!"

"So that way he could have the advantage?!"

"Oh boy, sorry I asked," he replied, trying to placate the twins. "How about we... Get some lunch?"

Surprisingly enough, that was all it took to make the twins forget about their bitter competition. Stanley supposed that was a given, seeing as none of them had really gotten that good of a breakfast before they left. Even he had only taken a few bites of his toast before he had lost his appetite. It seemed he had found it again too, at the mention of lunch. There was a queue set up at and around some of the other tables, which he had not investigated before. There, many platters were set up. They were filled with hot dogs and hamburgers.

It cost two bucks to stand in line. Stanley dropped a slug in the bucket of payments instead. Only those new-fangled vending machines could tell they were fake coins nowadays. So long as no one paid too close attention, they wouldn't notice. From there, it was a simple "grab what you want" situation. There were paper plates and multi-coloured plastic cutlery available to everyone at the first table.

Then came the actual food, which was an absolute free-for-all of grabbing hands. Right after that, there were small bags of chips, and plastic kiddie pools that had been filled with ice water, they contained cans of pop. Stan picked up a Pitt Cola, whatever that was, but he chose to pass on the chips. There were condiments at the end of the table, but he skipped getting any of those as well.

Just as he was leaving the line, to go sit with his family, he saw a familiar face.

"Soos! Hey Soos!"

He too was wearing one of the green shirts, with the scale pattern on them. Most of the people here were wearing them, forming a sea of emerald-green. Soos was standing next to an elderly woman, presumably his grandmother. They both had their own plates with hamburgers on them. The man-child's eyes lit up with delight when he was spotted. He and the woman came over to him.

"Hey Mister Pines! I didn't know you would be out here today!"

"Neither did I. I had no idea this holiday even existed."

"Oh yeah, it's kind of weird. Apparently it came to be thirty years ago. Way before my time!"

"Heh... Yeah..." Stan's eyes strayed to the woman standing next to Soos. She had not said so much as a word. "So uh, you're Soos'."

"Abuelita, yes," she answered. Suddenly, he was being hugged. Apparently this wasn't just a Soos thing, it was hereditary. Stan did the best he could to be polite about it, standing there awkwardly with his two full hands. Obviously she thought he was a decent person, and he didn't really want to ruin the idea. "Thank-you for being so kind to my Jésus."

"Aw Abuelita, you're embarrassing me in front of my boss!"

"So uh," Stan cleared his throat, she finally let go of him. "You guys need a place to sit?"
"Oh Soos, you did not tell me your boss was such a gentleman!"

Soos' abuelita fluttered her eyelashes at him. It took a great deal of self-control for him to not flinch away from her. He wasn't feeling mean enough to shatter the woman's good view of him. He couldn't really remember the last time someone had called him a gentleman, or kind. In fact, Stanley could not remember being called either of those terms in his life. Perhaps with a few of his earlier lady friends, but that was all one hazy blur now. He could barely remember their names and faces, so individual conversations were out of the question. Maybe it had been one of his twelve ex-wives?

Besides, something about the woman's soft-spoken way reminded him of Soos. Their faces were similar too, in shape, and especially in the nose. He couldn't bring himself to be too hard on Soos, let alone the older lady version of the guy. So, he lead them back towards the space he and his family had created.

Stanley had to give up his chair for the lady. He sat on a towel, with Soos next to him. As everyone else returned to their spot, he gave introductions between mouthfuls of food. There was a tense moment as Soos' abuelita and Stanford made eye-contact. His shoulders stiffened, and she stopped eating. Stanley figured as much, seeing as he was the one who had sent her favourite grandson on a potentially dangerous spy-expedition to his house. The tension quickly faded, and they went back to their fun on the beach.

Dipper and Mabel braved wading along the shore of the lake. Their hands were tightly clasped together, as if they were afraid that the other would be pulled out by the tide. Once or twice, Dipper would wince as Mabel squeezed his hand tightly. But then the reverse would happen, as a wave, a little higher than the rest, would wash past them. Occasionally, Mabel would bend over, picking up interesting pebbles, or fragments of sea-shells. She made her brother hold on to them, so that she could pick up more when she spotted them.

There were many swimmers out on the blue-green water. Occasionally, groups would pass by on a boat. Some of them had water skiers on the back, others were towing people on inner tubes. At one point, the boat suddenly stopped, and the person sitting within the tube was thrown through the air. They landed in the lake with a large splash. The crash of the waves, and the people all mixed into one. More boats appeared on the lake as time went on. They gleamed white against the lake. More people were "searching" for the "monster."

Once Stanford started to notice this, he became a little more restless. He had trouble staying out of trouble while everyone else was out deliberately finding it. So, they eventually left their place at the beach behind, and got a boat of their own. McGucket was filthy rich after all, so it shouldn't have surprised Stanley that he owned a measly sailboat. Especially since he had one too. He hadn't needed to smuggle anything over international borders for a while now though, so it was docked in Glass Shard's marina.

The sailboat was dubbed The Lazy Susan. Apparently it had been a wedding gift. Stanley couldn't really see how that was a compliment though. But then again, he wasn't the married one. Women probably cared more about the fact that they had a boat than what it was named.

The children excitedly clamoured aboard, they wanted to join in on the monster-hunt. Fiddleford forced them into life-jackets, despite their many protests. Stanford, being the accident-prone, danger-seeker he was, had to wear a lifejacket or be marooned on the beach. He wound up wearing one too. Soos' abuelita did the same with him.

Then, they left the beach behind. It became little more than a white strip in the distance as they sailed further into the lake. They were surrounded by cliffs, bleached white by the sun on all sides. A few scraggly pine trees clung to the sides, and there was a sprinkling of them on top too. The lake was
dotted with islands, most of them too tiny for more than one person to stand on. They were merely bits of rock, that stuck above the wave. Once they went further, the larger islands started to appear. These ones had trees growing on them, and even sign posts. Wild blueberries and orange-yellow lichens grew across the rocky surfaces. One of the islands (it had a weird name) actually had a beaver lodge on one side. Stanley remembered his conversation with the beaver in South Dakota. Then he remembered how the stupid thing had attacked him with its tail. Apparently these rodents were just as dumb. They must have thought that they had dammed up the whole lake.

The twins leaned dangerously over the railing. Mabel trailed her fingers in the water, leaving a path of rippling water in their wake. Soos and Dipper held disposable cameras Fiddleford had given to them. They were hopefully awaiting the appearance of the lake monster. Soos' abuelita was sunning herself, and flipping through a magazine. Stanford held a camera too, he was also looking over some of the notes that the had taken on the monster over the years in a small note book.

"It prefers the time of dawn to dusk, but has been spotted during other parts of the day as well," he said.

"Eating habits?" Dipper asked.

"Fish. Although I don't know why Fiddleford programmed it to run off of fish-"

"It converts them into energy," he defended. "Solar just wasn't reliable enough."

"Should we get some live bait?" Dipper asked.

"I wouldn't bother. If anyone's going to win in the live bait category, its Dan."

Stanford pointed to a burly red-headed man, sitting in a small row-boat. There were three other boys (all red-heads) sitting with him. The man was wrestling an enormous sturgeon, as long as his muscly arm, and just as thick. It was flopping around, and slipping from his arms. The boys cheered the man as he started to punch it into submission.

"How can we even compete with that?" Dipper asked.

"Don't worry Dipper, we have something they don't."

"A grappling hook!" "Your extensive knowledge of monster hunting!"

"What? No, great-niece, that is a harpoon. And put that down before someone's eye gets poked out. I'll teach you children how to fire that right after we go over the standard Gobblewonker-hunting protocol."

"Wait, so what do we have?" Dipper asked.

"Team work," Stanford replied. "Also One-Hundred-And-One Jokes to Tell Your Mortified Relatives!"

The twins groaned as Stanford started to flip through the book.

"Fiddleford and I wrote this together," he said, tuning another page. "Let's start with this one: what did the tissue cell from the meristematic part of an onion root say to the titrated basic solution of sodium di-"

"Lame! Everyone knows the best jokes come from the heart!" Stanley interrupted.
"These did come from the heart. We just wrote them down. But why don't you say one?" Fiddleford asked.

"Sure thing!"

"Let's hear it then!"

"My ex-wife still misses me, but her aim is gettin' better!" Stanley slung his arms together, and waited for everyone to laugh. "Her aim is gettin' better! Y'see, it's funny because marriage is terrible."

Soos was obligated to laugh, because he worked for him. The twins however, cringed and gave fake-sounding laughs. Stanford smacked Stanley over the head with the joke book.

"Hey! What gives?"

"I'll tell a joke that's actually funny," Fiddleford replied.

"It is funny!" Stan insisted. "If you get married twelve times."

"Of course it is. Now-"

Suddenly, Fiddleford leapt up to his feet. He eagerly started to wave at one of the boats—correction, that was not just a boat. It was practically a cruise ship. That was the largest yacht he had ever seen! He seemed to be waving at two figures on the deck. One with powder-blue hair, and the other blonde, they waved back to him.

"Who is that?" Mabel asked.

"My wife and granddaughter. Oh they must have finished their shopping trip early and decided to rendezvous earlier! HI SUSAN! HI PACIFICA!"

"Pacifica?"

"It was her father's idea, not mine. He really was a horrible parent," he explained. "Patricia wasn't too crazy about it, actually cited it as one of the reasons for the divorce. Not in those exact words of course, the lawyer dressed it up by saying she and Preston did not agree on the way she was being raised—"

"The what now? How is she related to you?" Mabel asked.

"Legally, not through blood. You see, my son is married to the former Northwest matriarch, Patricia, and her daughter is Pacifica!"

"And here I thought having two Stans was confusing," Stanley joked, nudging Stanford in the stomach.

"It still is, for some people."

Namely Dipper and Mabel's parents. Stanley still had trouble believing that they were stupid enough to mistake him for Stanford, and sent them to New Jersey instead of Oregon. That was sort of a big blunder, especially since they knew Ford lived in Oregon. He wasn't quite sure where the whole New Jersey mix-up had come from. Perhaps he had faked Ford one too many times and wound up with some information being changed. Perhaps they were just on an entirely different level of stupid that he was yet to comprehend. You had to be pretty stupid to send your unattended children on a
week-long trip to the other side of the country, and then proceed to leave the place yourself, to a
country with no reception.

The confusion had been good for him though. What would his summer have been without the kids?
The same old schemes? Ghosting around an old, gross house that was fifty times too large for just his
lonely self? The thought of having to go back to that was unbearable. The mind-numbing boredom,
the countless empty days that went wasted by himself. Soos brought a few bright patches to his life.
The man-child had probably been the only thing that stopped him from... Giving up. At least, before
the kids had come along, and he had spent more time with Ford.

Stanley wasn't dumb, he knew that revenge got him nowhere, it never had. He wasn't living for
revenge of any sort, against any one. It didn't feel anywhere near as good as he told himself it did.
Revenge, vengeance, whatever the tangled cycle had become... It only ever left him feeling hollow,
like something was unfinished. This threats against Ford were empty ones. Just like how he had felt,
empty. Stupid kids had gotten to him though. Them and Ford, and perhaps even Fiddleford, not that
he was going to admit that to anyone, had really made life seem less pointless. He actually felt like
living again, it seemed like he had always wanted...

Well, Soos had helped him cling on, but being surrounded by others again made him think life was
worth it. As the day passed on, he knew that he would only think that, so long as they were all
whole, and intact. Alive... Stanley knew that it was impossible for him to stick around, so long as he
wanted them to be fine, and whole. He needed to get on a boat, and sail away as far as he could from
all of them for the rest of his life. Then no one would ever be able to bother them again. Yet, he
would rather be the dead one, he would take any of their places, even Fiddleford's, if it meant that
they were not dead. But he would have to put his money where his mouth was before it was too late.

Somehow, he knew that he was truly going to miss his life once it was all over, but he didn't really
have any other choice.

It was for the good of his family.
All was still and quiet in the house. Sunlight streamed through the window, only partly blocked by
the curtains. The beams of light were a pale orange at first. As the sun continued to rise, they turned
brighter orange, small streaks of pink mixing within. Eventually, once the sun had fully risen, they
became a glowing yellow-gold. The sunbeams moved with the sun's movements, they eventually
came to rest upon Stanford's face.

He twitched a little when the light hit his eyes, squeezing them shut tighter. After a few more
seconds, unable to escape the light, he tried to turn away from it. However, he found himself pinned
down by something. As he shifted around, and grew more aware of his surroundings, Stanford
realized that the thing leaning against his chest was a someone, not a something. He could feel them
breathing. Stanford opened his eyes, squinting at the bright world around him. His glasses were on,
he must have fallen asleep before he could take them off. He was still in his clothes from the day
before.

Everyone was. He had fallen asleep on the floor, not the most comfortable of places to rest. To his
right, Mabel had her head resting on his chest. The girl's hair tickled his chin. Dipper was on his
other side. The boy had fallen asleep on his back, and he was being used as the family pillow.
Stanford didn't know how to get up without disturbing either of them. It had been a late night
yesterday.

They hadn't spotted the monster this year (Mabel was disappointed that she didn't get to put her new
harpooning skills to use.) but they had stayed out to watch the fireworks. The town really could put
on a show. They had been larger and more colourful than ever. He was especially impressed by the
shapes the fireworks could form in the air as well. As much as he enjoyed pyrotechnics, he had never
done much with fireworks.

Once that had been over, they packed up, and headed home. The warm summer day had seemed like
forever ago. But the physical proof was still there. All of them had at least three mosquito bites in a
place they couldn't reach to scratch. As he started to move more, a familiar, warm feeling crinkled
underneath his skin. Sunburn. It seemed like a given, since they had been out on the lake for so long.
Around his neck and on his nose was where it was the worst. The skin was already peeling there.
When he brought a hand up to feel his neck, bits of skin flaked off. He was going to need the aloe
vera soon. The others probably would as well.

Dipper started to stir. In doing so, he pushed the hair out of his forehead. He fixed it again for the
boy, knowing how self-conscious he was about the birthmark. In doing so, his eyes fluttered open.

"Mhm? W-what-?"

"I believe we all fell asleep on the floor."

"Oh... Mornin'."
"Morning. Now just make sure to be quiet, everyone else is still sleeping," Stanford pointed to Mabel, who was sleeping with her mouth open. Waddles was curled up in a tight ball by her side.

"I will."

Still yawning, Dipper left the den. The creaking of the stairs told him that he was off to get dressed. Now that he was free on one side, Stanford cautiously worked his way out of his great-niece's grasp. He was just glad that she was not leaning on the arm he had injured. He would be pinned down for a while if that had happened. Luckily, she did not wake. Stanford was able to crawl over to his wheelchair, and lift himself in. Maybe he should convert to a cane, or a walker. As old as the idea made him feel, he needed to get his legs back into the habit of walking. He felt stronger now, he was sure that he could regain some strength and balance soon enough. He filed away the thought for later.

Fiddleford was sleeping on the couch. He and Stanley had both collapsed upon it the might before, too tired to even argue over who should have it. Now it was just Fiddleford, he was covered with Stanley's blazer, and still appeared to be sleeping soundly. Stanley was nowhere in sight though. He had most likely woken up and gone up to bed. He was the most tired out of all of them the previous night. He had been very worn, speaking less, and staring more with a strange expression. When they asked, Stanley had just brushed it off as being tired. They had a long day yesterday after all.

Stanford changed his clothes and gave his face a wash. The sunburned spots on his cheeks stung terribly. He had not even noticed them with his five o'clock shadow in the way. Also, he was in a bit of a need of a shave. The idea of scraping a razor blade across his face right now wasn't that appealing. It already hurt enough without shaving cuts to add to the mix. He needed to find a more efficient way to shave. Perhaps if he improved laser hair removal in some way... By using a live flame instead of a high-powered laser! Just another idea to explore later. Besides, he didn't want to lug the blow torch out of storage unless it was necessary.

He ran a comb through his hair, dislodging grains of sand. And here he thought the mosquito bites were the only thing making him itchy. How had so much sand gotten in his hair anyways? He got rid of it to the best of his abilities, and then went in search of some breakfast.

Both twins and Fiddleford were awake now, and going about their business in the kitchen. It was a tight squeeze with the three of them (plus a pig) in the space. Stanford decided it was just best to wait before he got involved. The twins settled for cereal, while Fiddleford had toast and marmalade.

Stanford fixed coffee for the both of them, Fiddleford gratefully smiled in return. Having a feeling that the boy wanted to be included, Stanford gave him a tiny bit of coffee as well. It was three quarters milk and three table spoons of sugar, but it was still coffee. Sure enough, Dipper grinned when he was handed the mug. Then, he sat down with his family.

"So, is there anything in particular you want to do today?"

"Is fishing any good at the lake?"

"Relatively, even if there is an enormous mechanical monster that feeds off of fish eating most of the-"

"I get it," Fiddleford interrupted. "People have been holding on to this for thirty years like it was fully my fault! Stanford was the one who checked the equations and helped me weld the thing together! Yet who gets all the blame?!"

"Why do you want to go back to the lake?" Stanford wondered. "We were just there yesterday."
"Grunkle Ford did you know that the cute boy to Mabel ratio is incredibly high?" Mabel suddenly asked him. "Even higher than the one of vampires!"

"Well I can't really tell you what constitutes as cute or attractive. But I can tell you that the number of boys around your age living in Gravity Falls is higher than the number of girls. Why do you ask?"

The girl pulled up her sweater sleeve, revealing a multitude of phone numbers. She must have collected them throughout yesterday. Stanford's eyebrows rose very high when he saw this. He knew the girl had some sort of summer romance goal, and he had seen her trying to achieve it earlier on their road trip, but he had no idea she was compensating for her lost time now.

"Whoa. Take it easy there great-niece. You don't want to make enemies with every girl and boy in town do you?"

"Nope! Which is why I'm sticking to supernatural hotties instead! Just like how Dipper's sticking to-"

"MABEL!"

"REDHEADS WHO WORK AT THE LAKE!" Mabel yelled back.

Fiddleford snorted, nearly spitting out his coffee, and Stanford fought to hide a laugh.

"That is not-" Dipper brightly blushed. "-not true!"

"Which is why we need to go back there today, and pretend to buy stuff from the bait and tackle shop for a fishing trip."

"I don't see why not," Stanford replied. "So long as you make sure not to-"

Just then, the doorbell rang.

"Ah, that'll be the paperboy. Probably coming around for collections."

"Did you say, boy?" Mabel eagerly asked.

Stanford went through his wallet and pulled out a five dollar bill. He gave it to his great-niece.

"You can give it to him."

A quick hug was given, and then she ran to the front door. While she was gone, Dipper poured salt into her cereal, it blended in perfectly with the sugar she had sprinkled on her cereal. Revenge would not be so sweet this time. It would be salty. They could hear her loudly talking to the poor paperboy, who clearly just wanted his money from her. Eventually, a triumphant Mabel skipped back into the room. She tossed the folded newspaper on the table. There was a new phone number and name written on her inner wrist in blue ink. There was a large, toothy grin on her face. Dipper rolled his eyes. Now, they all eagerly awaited for Mabel to take a bite of her cereal.

Stanford took the paper and pulled it out of the standard pink plastic bag. With one hand, he rolled off the elastic band. With the other, he picked up his coffee and took another sip. He wanted to see what was going on with this year's presidential elections. Two-thousand-twelve seemed like a promising time for the plant people who controlled the candidates to strengthen their ties with the reptilians in control of medical and military issues. But would either of the candidates do it?

He popped the spine of the newspaper, and unfolded it. Stanford almost skipped over the front page news, it was always town gossip. He would have missed it, if not for a small glance at the title.
STAN PINES DEAD!

What?

He couldn't quite make the connection at first. Stan Pines... That was his brother. The paper was saying his brother... The newspaper was saying that his brother had... Instantly, his eyes tore over the page, trying to understand what was going on and why the newspaper was printing lies. His brother was here! At home with them, he couldn't be dead, or anything like it! But then, he saw the photograph.

It was of the bridge, where the waterfalls were. One of the guard rails was shattered, there were black tire marks on the pavement. All around the area, there were workers, hauling a water-logged RV out from the falls... His eyes flicked back to the article. Break lines had been cut, there were remnants of someone's body found in the vehicle. Clothing, dentures, glasses... The body had most likely been dragged out by the current. They would dredge the river for it that day...

... No... This wasn't... This wasn't real... That wasn't real... Stanley...

"Grunkle Ford are you faking another heart attack? Stan said that you're not allowed to copy that anymore!"

Stanley...

"Stanford? Is everythin' alright? You ok?"

"Stanley..."

The newspaper was pulled from his shaking grasp. His mug of coffee fell from the other hand. It landed in his lap, spilling its scalding contents everywhere before rolling off, and shattering on the floor.

"Foul play suspected in the death of... Oh... Oh no..."

"What's wrong?"

"Grunkle Ford are you ok?"

"Children... I'm afraid Stanley has..." Fiddleford held the front page towards them.

Everything became deathly silent, as the twins stared, wide-eyed at the front page. All of them were speechless, no one knew what to say. Stanford felt like he had lost his voice, and it was never coming back. A hard lump settled in his throat. He felt like he could barely breathe, like some otherworldly force was pressing against his throat and constricting him. He couldn't move, or think, or say anything. He could only sit there gasping for breath against the crushing grip that had seized him.

There was a laugh. Everyone's attention was drawn to the source, it was Mabel. She laughed for a second time and then a third. She burst into full-out, uncontrollable giggles. She laughed until her face turned pink, and she too was struggling for breath. The girl clutched her sides, and she doubled over. Dipper raced to catch his sister before she could fall, but she brushed him off.

"You're so funny Grunkle Ford! For a moment there I really believed you!"

"Mabel-" Fiddleford began, gently touching her shoulder.
Mabel shook him off. She straightened herself up, and came towards him.

"You... You can stop making that face now Grunkle Ford. I saw that desperate advertisement in the newspaper! You can print anything, in less than twelve hours. But it's great for a joke, you got us all!"

McGucket tried to reach for her again. Mabel leaned closer to him, her smile was twitching around the edges, and her breaths came out in short pants.

"You're not fooling anyone Grunkle Ford. You can get Stan to come out of hiding now. We're not mad about being tricked, right guys?"

She looked back at her brother and Fiddleford. They were both stock-still, unsure of what to do. Just then, Mabel grabbed his shoulders. She didn't seem to care that she was squeezing his injured one in a death-grip. The wound throbbed painfully, he could feel blood trickling out from the aggravated place. He let the girl toss him back and forth, keeping his head limp, facing towards the ground.

"It's not funny anymore Grunkle Ford. Stop pretending now please. Great-Uncle Ford, please! Stop it! STOP DOING THIS! IT ISN'T FUNNY ANYMORE! GREAT-UNCLE FORD IF YOU DON'T STOP PRETENDING RIGHT NOW I'M GONNA'-" Mabel's voice grew smaller again. "P-please... Stop it... P-p-please..."

Mabel seemed to become aware of the blood on her hands. She stared down at her trembling palms, which were stained with his own blood. There was a growing patch of scarlet, staring in his shoulder and trailing down his arm. There was blood dripping on the floor, landing in puddles and splattering a dark crimson across the ground.

"P-p-please..." Mabel began to whimper. "It's n-not funny. It's not funny. It's not funny. It's-"

What was he supposed to say to the girl? That it was really all just a joke and Stanley was hiding beneath the kitchen table? He couldn't speak. His tongue was tied in knots and it felt like his lips were sealed together, pressed into a hard line. His breaths were short and desperate, it his throat seemed swelled shut, like he was slowly asphyxiating.

"Mabel, Stan is-

"P-please..."

She started to sob. Mabel ran out of the room before she could actually begin to cry. Dipper looked between him, and the place where Mabel had just exited. His face was a pale, flat, milky-yellow colour. He looked as if he was going to be sick, his face was scrunched up with a mixture of emotions and confusion. When he tried to walk, he nearly fell. Fiddleford had to steady his shoulders, but he looked like he needed support himself.

"I don't get it. Why would S-Stan leave without telling-

"We all knew he had to leave soon, but-

They all knew that Stanley would have to leave to keep any criminals off their tail. But Stanford had never imagined that they might be so close. It was easy to forget they might be in danger, when no one had never seemed to be following them. If he had never asked Stanley to stay, this wouldn't have happened. He should have let Stanley move on. This was all his fault. It was all his fault. This was all his fault. He was the one responsible for his brother's death. He had killed Stanley...

"Why didn't he tell us? Why would he just... I thought we were finally starting to-"
Dipper ran out of the room, following after his sister.

"Stanford, I'm so, so, so, sor-"

"GUYS!"

Soos' distressed voice cut in before Fiddleford could say any more. The man-child's eyes were red and filled with tears. Shiny streaks ran down his face as he burst into the room, carrying two papers in his hand. One was the newspaper, and he was waving it frantically. Between laboured breaths, he gave a few choking sobs.

"We saw."

"The mail!" Soos cried. "He put it in the-"

"Put what?!!"

The other paper was shown to them. Stanford looked over the title. That was all he could read before an anguished groan took over him. He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to block the image from his mind. But it burned inside of his skull, clear as day. He could see it there, right next to the title of the news article.

LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT OF STANLEY PINES

No lawyer's office could have mailed that from New Jersey state and had it delivered overnight. Someone had put it there. And the only one who could have done anything of the sort was his brother. That was when the terrible, awful understanding came over him. Stanley had put the will there himself, meaning he had planned it all out. No one had caught up to Stanley as he left town. He had not been murdered. It was a suicide.

Fiddleford came to the same understanding as him moments later.

"N-no, Stanley wouldn't- he had so much! He had-"

"A family to protect."

"What?"

When he opened his eyes again, Soos had overturned the will. There was a small sticky note attached to the back of it.

"H-he said he wanted them to leave us alone, for good!" Soos said.

The note was offered to him, but he refused, and closed his eyes once more. This couldn't be happening. He couldn't be losing his brother like this. How could Stanley ever think that it was a solution? A small part of Stanford knew that it was a viable one, it said so. But he squashed the knowledge. That was his brother! He had sacrificed his life thinking that he could keep them safe.

"Check the mail."

There was a solid minute agony to wait through. Stanford wanted to scream, he wanted to scream at the top of his lungs until his chest burst and his respiratory system was torn to shreds. He could feel the need to shout building up inside of him, like a steadily growing balloon. He wanted to yell at the world and cry before he exploded. But all he could do was sit there at the table, and wait for a response.
"I have it. Do want me to read it?"

He feebly nodded.

"All my liquid assets are to be divided equally between Jésus Ramirez and Stanford-"

"No! Not that part! The note! The note!"

The second copy of the will was handed to him. With trembling hands, he turned it around.

**I'M SO SORRY**

"No... No..." he dropped the note, and clutched his head. "Stanley no! Why didn't I do something to stop him? I should have realized that he was up to something, that he was planning something and I didn't even stop to think! Stanley..."

The message, what all of this meant finally started to sink in. He wanted to scream. Oh how badly he wanted to scream at everyone in the room. He could feel his vocal cords straining to form sounds. But when he opened his mouth to speak, only a pathetic croaking sound came from his throat. And yet he could hear himself repeating over and over, like a broken record, the only thought that was in his mind.

"I'm so sorry... I'm so sorry... I'm so sorry..."

The world blurred before him, as the stinging tears finally started to fall.
Chapter Notes

It's the last chapter... What the heck?! This story went by crazy-fast, at least for me. Versatility was super fun to write, probably one of my favourite longer pieces to date. The only thing that could measure up to how great it was would be all the wonderful response I got for it! So thank-you, so much to all of those who followed along with this story! You guys are awesome, and I hope to see you lingering around my next few stories!

I've got two ideas in the works now. One appears dark when you look at the basic premise, but it's actually a bunch of stupid family fluff (sort of like this story) and the other has a fun premise that could promise for lots of family fluff, but winds up being dark and angsty... So we'll see how that goes. I think I'll do a bit for both, see which I enjoy writing more, and ask for people's input...

But, I'm wasting your time. So again, one huge final thanks to everyone who read along with this fic! It was a pleasure to write! Stay tuned for whatever comes from me in the near future!

Sleep had seemed impossible on the surface. Stanford could only lay on the couch, blankly staring at the rafters. His eyes still stung and watered painfully, he could barely see they hurt so much. He knew he was probably dehydrated, but he could not bring himself to get a glass of water.

Fiddleford was doing his best to distract the children, he could hear them talking in the den. He could hear their voices (mostly Fiddleford's), but he could not make out the individual words. Not that he wanted to listen in on their conversation anyway. He felt numb, hollowed out on the inside. So he lay perfectly still on the couch, almost fearing that he would fall apart if he moved. He felt so empty on the inside he thought that he would crumble to bits if he made so much as a twitch.

The pain and shock from before had toned down, to a constant aching feeling. It started within his bones, and spread throughout his muscles with every beat of his own, living, heart. It traveled through his veins, swirled around his fingertips, and spread to the very tips of his hair. Every breath he took felt like a fight against gravity. His chest struggled to push itself up, before it would collapse back down again.

Yet, despite the pain, despite the awful, drowning feeling of guilt that smothered him, Stanford somehow found himself falling to sleep. But not a restful one. Almost instantly, the man knew that he was dreaming. It was the type of dream where one felt like they could wake up, if they wanted to, or something disturbed them. The muffled sounds of voices in the house almost woke him again, but his eyes felt so heavy... And so he was dreaming.

The couch he had been laying on became intangible, as did all the walls, even the ceiling. He was floating. Stanford looked down at his hands. There was something very... Off with this scenario. Was he lucid dreaming? Were ghosts messing around with his room? Oh, ghosts... Dead people... Dead... Stanley...

"You gonna' start crying again?"
That voice... He knew that voice! Misery turned to fear as a chill ran down his spine. But when he turned to look, the horrible excuse for a human being (literally) was not there. That was not to say the space behind him was empty. It was occupied by... A higher-resolution drawing of that shape-painting! The thing he had seen so long ago, in a mysterious cave. Stanford supposed it was fitting. His adventure with Stanley had started there. And now that it was over, he was dreaming about the weird drawing, which just so happened to have someone else's voice. The triangle seemed to know what he was thinking, for it said;

"Hey, just because I've been losing weight, it doesn't make me a drawing."

"Sorry?"

"Don't sweat it," the not-a-drawing started to back-stroke through the air, circling around him. "Death is so tragic after all. It can really mess with your common sense, cause you to make rash decisions, all that."

"Er-" the painful twinge that followed the reminder caused him to clutch his chest. "Y-yes."

"Aren't you going to ask how I know that?"

"You're a part of my head, I assumed-"

The thing stopped in its tracks, and laughed at this.

"I'm not a part of your head."

It laughed again. Stanford could have sworn he heard it say, "At least not yet." But he wasn't so sure of himself. This dream was very strange, not like anything he had ever experienced before. The thing, whatever it was, was also starting to make him feel uncomfortable. Was it some sort of creature of Gravity Falls? Maybe the thing had moved in while he was out that summer, this could just be an introduction. But if it was real, and it did know these things about him... Suddenly, Stanford remembered why the voice had set him on edge originally. That, and the creature's bright yellow body could not just be a coincidence.

"Have you been stalking me?!"

The creature paled a little, and awkwardly fixed its bowtie.

"I prefer to call it subtly encouraging you to return to Gravity Falls."

"Subtle?! You're about as subtle as a freight train you knucklehead! What do you want?! Why are you here?!"

"Knucklehead?!" it turned red-orange in places. "You're the one who can fall for basic hypnosis from an evil hotel! I had to go in and bail you out before the stupid thing turned your brain to mush!"

"Ugh, and here I thought I might be able to get some peace in my sleep." Stanford said, glaring at the creature. "So, you just go about doing whatever creepy thing you're up to inside of my head. I'm going to wake up."

"Wait!" the creature grabbed his arm, stopping him from pinching it. "Stanford buddy old pal, you don't need to do that! You've had a long day, you're tired, you're not thinking straight! All I want to do is talk!"

"And all I want to do is sleep. And yet here you are, completely ruining the one, single shred of a
thing I had to look forwards to this day."

"Aw, don't be like that, what's there even to look forwards to outside of your head?" it asked. "I mean, just look at you!"

It pointed to his legs. Stanford hadn't realized it until now, but he was standing. He supposed he hadn't thought much of the information and disregarded it, because this was only a dream.

"At least you've got a functioning body here! The other one's a complete wreck! Wouldn't you hang around and not have to get help from someone for a bit?"

"You're not any less of a person for relying on others."

"No."

The creature's grip on his arm grew tighter. It was starting to look nervous.

"Do you really want to go back there? Your life's kind of a mess right now friend-o. You show up and those kids are going to be all over you again. Something you might want to avoid, especially after..." he was poked in the spot where his wound should have been. "Mabel freaked out on you there. Kid's taking it hard, they both need some time really."

"They're family Poindexter. My family."

That was only more of a reason to wake up. He couldn't just sleep so that he could avoid his problems. His family needed him, the kids needed him. They were a lot more important than he was. Poor Mabel... He could still hear her begging for him to give up the act. Dipper had been different. He had been so quiet, yet so emotional at the same time. The sickly pale expression on his face still stuck with him now.

Heck, even the man-child wasn't doing well. Soos was probably taking it the worst out of all of them, if half of what he had heard about their time together was true. Soos looked up to Stanley, almost seen him as a father figure. He had been the closest to Stanley throughout his isolated years.

"I really do need to get back."

His arms were twisted behind his back so he could not pinch himself awake.

"Nooo you don't."

"Look, you, I don't care about your schemes or whatever it is you want., he snapped, wrenching his arms back. "Ideally, you would stop stalking me and trying to be my friend. That would be perfect actually. I would pay you what little money I have if you would just fuck off permanently!"

"Come on Fordsy- Can I call you Fordsy? I'm gonna' call you Fordsy. Just hear me out!"

"The last time I heard you out I somehow agreed to become best friends with you! And that went horribly!"

"Hey, usually its the other way around, people are begging to be friends with me!"

"Of course. Now if you stop doing that-" he had to pull his arms away from the thing again, it was really bent on not letting him wake up. "I'll hear you out."

Slowly and suspiciously, the creature let go of his wrists.
"Right then. Now, the reason why I wanted to talk to you has to do with your brother's... Passing."

Stanford felt what little tolerance had for the conversation drying up. He folded his arms over his chest.

"What is it?"

"We could fix it."

"Fix what?"

"I know a guy. He's got access to some pretty reliable time-travel, and if we went back, say thirty years, seven months, ten days, and five hours exactly, we could save him!"

"Why thirty years?"

"You could fix your relationship in the process! Trust me! It's fool proof!"

"But Stanley and I were even angrier at each other then then we are now!"

"Not important, do you want to save your brother or what?"

"I."

Time-travel? He had encountered several time-travellers before, and tried it a few times, for science. (And also to perhaps collect hair and blood samples of history's greatest scientists.) But actually going back in time, thirty years? What about the children? Who would be taking care of them, would they even exist if he went back in time? What if he got rid of them entirely, through altering the past? He hardly had any family left as it was. Stanley was gone, and if he couldn't save his brother in the past, and lost the kids, he could wind up with no one...

Plus, how were they going to get around the pesky problem of paradoxes? Surely this, whatever the triangle-thing was, had thought about those issues, right? The plan was full of flaws, it would never work. He could never get his brother back like this. Despite this inward decision, the creature did not seem to pick up on it. Or maybe it did, because it continued to talk, attempting to persuade him into taking the deal.

"We go back, patch things up, and it'll all be good and happy!"

"But-

"You'll have your brother back, don't you want that Stanford? Don't you care about him? Wouldn't you do anything to save him, knowing what you do now?"

"I."

"You'll have your brother back, you'll have an arm and a leg back! You'll be one whole, solid person again!"

"Look, it's, nice, that you want to help me, but I-

"You've already nearly lost those kids! Are you going to let Stanley slip through the cracks even when there's a chance to-

"You were the one who pushed my great-niece over a cliff! Why you want to save my family after you've tried to kill it?!"
"Water under the bridge!"

"That's where you threw Dipper!"

The creature grew uncomfortable again.

"Ah, yes, good point... But you see, the thing about that is..."

Suddenly, Stanford made the connection. Falling from a height, into a dangerous body of water... First Mabel, then Dipper (if the story the twins had been talking about to each other was any true) and now Stanley. Only, there was no one there to save Stanley. What if it really wasn't... That thing, whatever this supernatural irritant was, this thing could possess another person's body. The vivid image, of his brother, with bright yellow eyes driving off the side of the road suddenly came to him.

"You... You did it!"

"I've done a lotta' things, you're going to have to specify."

"You killed Stanley!"

"Nope! I can't take credit for that one," it shrugged. "He didn't need my help to kick it. I'm just here to take advantage of your grief- I mean, help a buddy out!"

"YOU KILLED HIM! IT WAS YOU! I KNOW IT WAS YOU!"

"Whooa, take it easy there."

He grabbed the creature. He was going to tear the stupid thing apart brick-by-brick, like he should have done before. But it passed through his fingers, untouchable. He gave a furious growl, and leaped towards it again. Now it yelped, moving out of the way.

"Yeeeah, maybe it really is time for you to wake up," it said. "I'll talk to you later, ok pal?"

"Make it never and you've got yourself a deal! I might wind up killing you if I see you any sooner!"

"I've got some things to account for now, anyway," the creature said, pensively tenting its fingers together. "I guess thirty-one years of procrastination isn't any worse than thirty. So see you next summer! Bye!

Stanford suddenly awoke. There were tears in his eyes and he could feel his brother's name on the tip of his tongue. He had rolled off the couch in his struggle to wake up from the dream. Oh, what a nightmare. He rubbed his eyes, and tiredly blinked. To his surprise, it was the morning already. It had felt like no time had passed during the dream, and yet, here the morning was.

Day two without a twin brother had begun. Stanford forgotten that he had kept track of that ever since the start of the summer. Yet now, he would be counting the days until he passed as well. The second day was always much harder than the first. He knew that from experience. But the thought that he would have to go through losing his brother all over again. It was too much, and he had to slump, with his back propped up against the couch. He groaned, and rubbed his eyes again. He couldn't do this. How was he supposed to get through the day? What was he even supposed to do now that Stanley was gone? Somehow, he did not feel like he did it voluntarily, he managed to pull himself back on to the couch, and then into his wheelchair. Stanford didn't bother with his appearance, he knew that it was horrid anyways. All he really needed were his glasses. He slipped those on, and left the room.
The twins were already awake when he entered the kitchen. Fiddleford was leaning against the counter with one arm, and sipping a black cup of coffee with the other. Everyone had dark circles under their eyes. Stanford suspected that he did as well, but he was in no mood to check his appearance.

Mabel was wearing the same sweater as yesterday, a phenomenon he had never seen, in his entire time spent with her that summer. Dipper looked pale and sickly as ever. He was poking at his breakfast, the boy clearly looked nauseated at the thought of eating anything. When he appeared, Mabel ran up to him, and he was hugged. He was momentarily caught off guard, but hugged the girl back. She gave him a gentle squeeze and quietly said;

"I'm sorry."

It took him a moment to muster up the ability to reply. His vocal cords felt like they had been torn to shreds, his throat still ached painfully from the day before. When he swallowed, a rough, stinging sensation trickled down the back of his throat.

"Don't you so much as worry about it."

Their grip on each other tightened. He could hear her sniffling, she was obviously trying to not break out into tears again. He patted her back in circular motions, and silently wondered how he was keeping it together when she was breaking down again. Perhaps he was all cried-out after the previous night. But no matter how much he wanted to, he could not bring himself to tear up again. At least, not in front of the children. When they stopped, he could see that Dipper was staring at them, a peculiar expression upon his face.

"There's hugs to go around."

The chair scraped loudly as he jumped from his seat and ran over to them.

"Children, I'm so sorry your summer had to turn out like this."

"What? No Grunkle Ford we liked spending the summer with you, and G-Grunkle Stan!"

"This was one of the coolest summers of our lives, and it's not even over yet!"

They both smiled at him, genuine grins. He could only manage a weak spasm of his lips in return, even though their kind words made his heart melt, and his eyes tear up even more. What had he ever done with these children? How had he managed to get by, with hardly anyone in his life? When they were around, it was easy to forget that he had ever been through a time when

"Plus we got to meet even cooler friends and family. Even... If it wasn't for long."

"I should have done more to prevent this." He sighed. "Just something, anything!"

"It's not your fault Grunkle Ford."

"But-

_Ding dong!_

There was no post on Sundays, nor was he subscribed to the Sunday paper. (Which in Gravity Falls, solely focused on what kinds of sons to put in your days. Nowhere near as interesting as it sounded.) In addition to that, no one ever showed up at his door. The few that did (Fiddleford, and any number of supernatural creatures.) simply went in and made themselves at home whether he liked it or not.
It chimed for a second time, and there were several more, rapid button presses. Three short, one long, another short, two more long, and a short. He recognized that pattern, and knew exactly what it meant. Those rings were morse code for... No, that wasn't possible, he was imagining things. Yet still, his heart started to speed up, he could feel it pounding against his ribcage. He made a movement towards the front door. The ringing started again. Fiddleford rolled his eyes.

"Don't you worry Stanford, I'll-"

"I'll get it!"

Before anyone could stop him, he had shaken the twins off, and raced towards the door. But, to his dismay it was not Stanley. Stanford didn't know what he had been expecting. Stanley was gone, and not coming back. He must have been really going crazy if he thought that Stanley would just show up on his doorstep.

He must need some more rest, or maybe that stupid triangle inside of his dreams was doing something strange to his mind and he just hadn't noticed. Now knowing he was wrong, and no doubt delusional, Stanford hung his head, and prepared to slam the door on the salesman.

"Sir, would you like to buy a Stan-Vac vacuum? Stan-Vac: It sucks more than anything!"

"No I would not like to buy a..." Stanford trailed off, as he got a better look at the salesman's face. "Did you say... Stan-Vac?"

The salesman winked at him. Stanford could barely contain his shock and elation.

"Yup! It's a real standout item on the market right now! Guaranteed to meet all of your standards! If you would just let me stand in for a moment!"

"B-by all means, come in! Right away!"

Picking up his vacuum, the man entered the house. They walked straight to the kitchen. Everyone watched in confusion as he drew the blinds fully, plugged in the vacuum, and turned it up to high setting. Over the deafening noise of the vacuum, he yelled at them, "The Stan-Vac is real great at getting rid of bugs!"

"Bugs? But it's a vacuum!"

"Yup, really great at drowning out those pesky bugs!"

Suddenly, he knew what the man was talking about. Not the insect type bugs (although he did have a problem with those) but the listening kind. Wire-taps, and other listening devices. Catching on, he helped the man search through the kitchen. They turned up one, haphazardly duct taped underneath the kitchen table. No one had even noticed it. A chill spread through him, as he realized that someone had been hearing their conversations all that time.

"Whoops! It looks like I caught some kind of phone-cord here!" he yelled, right at the wire tap. "Oh no, take that away from the vacuum before it's-"

The wire was thrown to the ground and crushed underneath his heel. Stanford let go of the breath he didn't even notice he had been holding. Now, all of them looked towards the so-called salesman. Slowly, the man took off his beard, and fake eyebrows. He got rid of his false nose, and took off his shoes. He lost at least two inches in height, there must have been some sort of trick to the shoes that he was wearing. Finally, the man pulled off his wig, underneath the wig there was a bald cap. And underneath that bald cap, there was more hair. Eventually, the man took himself apart, revealing bit-
by-bit who they already knew was underneath.

"GRUNKLE STAN?"

"STANLEY!"

Stanford was the first person to reach his brother. And when he did, he punched him straight in the jaw. Fiddleford's right hook followed, and they both aimed an uppercut at him. Stanley fell backwards, rubbing his face and staring up at them.

"You... You're standing again!"

Almost instantly, Stanford fell back to his wheelchair again, as his leg twinged painfully. But he had done it. Stanley had finally driven him crazy enough to make miracles happen. Stanford would have punched the shocked look off his face if he wasn't feeling so happy. Well that, and the children screamed, and dog-piled on top of him.

Hope and happiness swelled up inside of him like a balloon. His entire body ached with protest, it hurt so much. Yet suddenly, the pain didn't matter. The stunning loss of breath, the choking gasp that snagged inside of his mouth, none of it mattered. He grinned. He smiled so widely that his cheeks started to hurt. That feeling of eating a sugary-sweet yet incredibly sour candy had taken over his mouth, and he could hardly bare to grin anymore. But his brother was back. Stanley had returned from the grave, he was here!

It seemed like such a blessing that he could have gotten up and done a jig, yet his leg gave away from protest when he tried to do this. Stanford had to settle for staring at his brother, taking the sight of his face in, as he was attacked with righteous anger at his deception, and affection.

"Grunkle Stan!"

"K-kids!"

"We thought you were dead!"

"Well yeah, that was kind of the idea." Stanley said, turning pink in the face.

Stanford's shock and happiness turned to anger. Stanley had faked his death! He had cried! He had made all of them cry over his death! The children, they had been restless, completely destroyed. He had not even thought to give them a hint about what he was going to do! How could Stanley actually fake his death, only to reveal that he actually was alive! Stanford saw a bright, ruby-red.

"YOU KNUCKLEHEAD!" Stanford yelled, he had found his voice again when he heard the twin's shaky voices. "WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL US YOU WERE GOING TO FAKE YOUR DEATH?!"

"I thought you wouldn't..."

His cheeks turned even brighter, and he mumbled something under his breath. But Stanford didn't need super strong hearing to know what his brother had said.

"Of course we care if you're dead!"

"Yeah!"

"And what about Soos? Someone better call him by the way, last I heard he was trying to perform a
séance."

Fiddleford picked up his phone and dialed Soos' number. He put it on speaker phone as Soos picked up.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Soos."

"Mister Pines are you saying Jésus or hey S- ARRRAAAGH! GHOST! GHOST ON THE OTHER END OF THE PHONE LINE! IF ANYONE'S LISTENING SAVE YOURSELVES! MY BOSS IS BACK FROM THE-"

"Soos, I'm, I'm not a ghost. I faked my death, alright?"

"Y-you, what?"

"I'm alright Soos. I'm alive."

"I'll be right there."

The other end of the line went dead. Fiddleford hung up, and now the attention was all brought back to Stanley. He was still sitting on the floor after being punched and tackled. He rubbed his jaw, which was even more scarlet than the rest of his face was.

"Grunkle Stan we thought you cared about us!"

"Yeah! How come you lied like that?!" Dipper asked.

Stanley sighed, and hung his head.

"Look, kids. All of you. I've never really been that great of a guy. I'm a screw-up alright? I keep messing up, I keep hurting you." No one failed to notice that he looked at Mabel when he said this. "You're all better off without me-"

"So you're just going to keep faking your death and leave?!"

"I kind of have to keep faking my death kid. Start a new life. Or maybe I'll just impersonate Shermy instead, who knows?"

"You are not impersonating our little brother Stanley Pines!"

"Yeesh, relax, it was a joke Sixer."

"Well it wasn't funny."

"Look," Stan sighed again, and pushed back his hair. "What I'm trying to say is, I'm sorry. I'm sorry for messing with your heads by faking my death, that you got caught up in my problems this summer. I'm especially sorry that I took my anger out on you. Both of you kids."

"Grunkle Stan..."

Mabel's bottom lip started to tremble again, and she tried to blink away her tears. Yet to everyone's surprise, it was Dipper who started to cry. He gave a choking sob, and threw his arms around his neck. Stan made a few choking sounds as he squeezed tighter, but they could see that his eyes were turning pink as well. Mabel joined in on the hug.
Stanford, shakily balancing on his one good leg managed to hope over and fall on the ground next to his brother. He hugged Stanley as well. Fiddleford sniffled too, and attempted to wipe his eyes. Then Soos arrived, and before anyone knew what had happened, they were all sitting on the floor, their arms wrapped around Stanley as they cried.

So they cried. They cried and cried until they could cry no more. Until they felt as if a cheese grater had run across the lining of their throats, stripping it to the bone. Until their lungs seemed to swell larger with every hyperventilated breath, threatening to burst. Their eyes itched horribly with the salty stinging of tears, and rubbing only made it worse. But they rubbed their eyes anyway, making room for more tears to slide down their puffy red cheeks. Their noses dribbled, their eyes ran, and their hands grew weary of pushing away the tears. But eventually, there were no more tears to shed, they all dried up.

Fiddleford still hiccuped quietly, as did Mabel. Stanley and Stanford had lost their glasses on the floor in the process. It was just easier to take them off while they cried, than constantly take them off. Somehow, Waddles had found his way into the mix, he was trying to comfort his owner, giving her hand a reassuring lick. Mabel quietly started to scratch him behind the ears, only giving the occasional hiccup.

Eventually, Fiddleford stood. He got glasses of water for everyone. They all drank in silence. A box of tissues was produced. They all dabbed at the corner of their eyes, and blew their noses. The tissues piled high. Suddenly, everyone became aware of just how tired they were. Soos flopped on to his back. Dipper copied him, their heads were touching. It was Dipper who broke the silence.

"Are you really going to leave?" he asked. "Just run away?"

"Don't get me wrong kid, I know I have a lot to make up, to all of you, but now isn't the best time for that, and it'll take a while before... I'll just be blunt here: it'll be a while before you guys should forgive me, and I need to lay low for a few months. The timing isn't ideal. I've got a boat waiting for me out in the marina. It's leaving the States in a couple days."

"A boat?"

"The North Pole calls," Stanley answered. "From what I've heard, there's good gold in the Yukon of Canada."

"C-Canada?"

"Mister Pines, you can't just go to Canada!"

"Then where am I supposed to go?"

"Why not head on another road trip?" Fiddleford suggested.

"I'm not sure about you guys, but I'm sick of that RV," Stanley answered. "That's sorta' why I crashed it into a ravine."

"What about... A houseboat?" Stanford slowly asked. "Sure it wouldn't be as glamorous as our plans for the- er, ignore that last part. Get a houseboat, sail along the Columbia for a bit, head out to the ocean!"

"That's... A good idea," Stanley said. "But I don't think I'd be able to manage something that large on my own. I'd need some kind of, many that was handy and knows at least thirty different uses for duct tape."
Slowly, a smile split across Soos' face.

"I think I know just the guy."

"And I'd need deckhands, a second mate, and..." he looked at Stanford as he said, "A co-captain."

"I have been thinking about retirement for a while now. The business has been doing fine without me at the helm in my leave of absence. Maybe it's time that I formally resign." Fiddleford replied. "Plus if the children agree to go they're going to need a lot more adult supervision. What do you think kids?"

Dipper looked at Mabel. Mabel looked at Dipper. They seemed to be having a silent conversation with their eyes alone. Then, they said in unison, "We want to go!"

Now, all eyes were focused on Stanford. When he opened his mouth, only a croak came out. How had everything changed so suddenly? It felt like minutes ago he had been mourning the death of his brother. He had blamed himself for the loss, thinking that it was his fault Stanley felt he wasn't worth anything to them. Yet, throughout their trip, and the time he had thought his brother was gone, Stanford had discovered just how not true that was. He wanted to make up with Stanley, to forget about all the unpleasant memories of the past and move on. The time they had spent together had caused him to feel this hope again.

For a time, he had actually thought it was possible, that by the end of the summer, they would finally be back to normal. Discovering he had lost Stanley before he could ever try to patch things up with his twin had been paralyzing, awful. He could feel the same controlling feeling taking over his body now. He was frozen, speechless. But not out of anguish, and shock, but because he could not believe things had turned around so quickly. That Stanley actually wanted to make things up, he wanted to go away on a boat.

"You alright there Ford?"

"Ford?"

"Don't go," a suspiciously triangular voice whispered inside his mind. "Think about your research, you need to stay here in Gravity Falls, perfect that grand unified theory of weirdness and all that, not go away again! Gravity Falls needs ya' Ford!"

"I... I hear there are reports of dobhar-chú in the Columbian River. They would make for an interesting study."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Don't do it! You'll regret it!"

Stanford squashed the little voice in his head, and smiled at his brother.

"I'd love to."

Nothing in the universe could prepare the world for the havoc the Pines' family's next misadventures would bring.

Fin
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