Somewhere deep in the woods of Gravity Falls is a half-buried statue. That statue is holding its arm out.
Somewhere deep in the woods of Gravity Falls is a half-buried statue. That statue is holding its arm out.

It appears to be made of stone.

Most of the residents of Gravity Falls ignore it, but not because it holds no interest for them.

Teenagers occasionally come close enough to vandalize it. To throw rocks at the giant eye in the center of the statue, spray paint curse words on it or take pictures of themselves sitting on it. When they look at the pictures, their smiles fade. They leave and never come back.

It’s not always teenagers who come. Sometimes it’s old men and women, with dark, angry secrets in their eyes. People old enough to remember the unpleasantness. The events. The stories that are never told, never passed on. Often they’re drunk. Sometimes they’re shouting. Usually, they’re crying.

Every now and then someone comes with a sledgehammer. The statue appears to be made of stone. It should crumble easily, but it never does. Even the thin little arm, barely an inch in diameter never breaks under even the heaviest of blows.

And the statue is holding its arm out.

So far, no one has tried to shake its hand.
Chapter Summary

In which we rejoin Stan and Ford somewhere at sea, and Stan gets a check-up.

Stan picked at the plastic arm of the chair. He smelled blood. He wasn't sure if it was really a scent that hung in this room or if it was just a memory trigger, but he couldn't get it out of his nose.

There weren't any rooms in the Stan O'War II that only had one purpose. Space was too much of a premium on a little craft like this. The beds they slept on were where they relaxed. The bathroom was where they cleaned and stored fishing tools. And this room—what Stan liked to think of as Ford's "nerd cave" was the site of every bit of frontier medicine that took place on the boat. Countless panicked, painful moments of first aid and three terrifying surgeries that Stan prayed he'd never have to experience again.

Even with unpleasant memories written into the walls of the room, Stan felt comfortable there. There wasn't an inch of this whole craft that didn't feel like home to him. Not a single place where he didn't feel at peace enough to relax and put his feet up. No. His surroundings weren't the reason he felt anxious, the reason his fingers kept finding edges on his clothes or ridges on the chair to pick at.

Ford pressed a tiny black box against Stan's temple. "Tilt your head to the side," he said.

Stan didn't bother asking what the device was meant to measure. He just tilted his head, trying to see out of the corner of his eye whether Ford was reacting to whatever that little gizmo was telling him. Whether he seemed troubled or relieved.

“All right...look at me, now.” Ford reached a gloved hand forward and gently pulled Stan's eyelids apart, shining a light into each of them.

Stan flinched at the image that leaped into his mind with sudden force. His brother was grabbing him, though not nearly so gently or carefully as now. Ford's face was drawn, his eyes sunken. Cold air at his back, snow melting on him, soaking through his shoes. Ford reeked like gin and broken hopes, and there was something sharp and wild in his eyes. Not even looking at him, looking through him. Stan's breath caught in his throat.

The image faded. Stan's heart rate returned to its normal uneven patter...His mind was still a jumble of facts and figments some days. He suspected it hadn't been a hundred percent even before the memory gun. But whatever fragment of memory had been triggered by Ford shining a light in his eyes, it wasn't pulling him into a full on flashback. He was all right...he was all right.

Ford noticed the tension pass through Stan, apparently mistaking its source.

“We're almost done.” he said, his tone calming and comforting.

“M'fine. Don't worry about it.” Stan waved a dismissive hand.

Ford finished his examination and turned away, snapping off his rubber gloves and scribbling something in a notebook that he drew from his pocket. Stan listened quietly to the sound of pen
scraping paper until he couldn't take it anymore.

“Well?” he asked.

“Your eyes are normal.” Ford said, not looking up from his notes. “Though the cataract in the right one has shrunk two millimeters in diameter, while the left seems to be deteriorating faster. Probably because of that dumb eyepatch you started wearing.”

“I told you, I see better with it on.”

“You just want to look like a pirate.” Ford smirked at him.

“I also like lifting it up and scaring kids with my bad eye.” Stan smirked, slipping the eyepatch on. Even below deck he felt more comfortable wearing it. He really did see better with his bad eye covered.

Ford's smile didn't last long. “The dowsing rod didn't detect any supernatural presence around you.” he said.

“Well, that's something. You think maybe what you saw last night was all in your head?” Stan stretched his arms until he heard a satisfying pop. “Been a while since we've seen land. Wouldn't be the first time one of us went a little stir crazy, you know?”

“I would very much like to believe that...” Ford frowned, holding out out the notebook. A column of numbers was circled on it, and he pointed to it as if Stan had any clue what it meant. “But the readings from the analyzer indicate high levels of krthuas particles.” Seeing the blank look on Stan's face, he added “That's bad. Krthuas particles don't naturally exist in our dimension. They're usually only found in the Nightmare Realm.”

Ford sighed, leaning on the workbench and running a hand through his hair. “I don't know if this is a new development, or if it's been like this since Weirdmageddon.”

“How do we know for sure this is Bill?” Stan said, finally voicing the name that both of them had been thinking about for hours. “Maybe those whatchacallits are coming from somewhere else.”

“I know what I saw, Stan. You were sitting on your bunk, your eyes were glowing and you were talking backwards.”

“So?” Stan shrugged. “We run into all kinds of weird stuff out here. Last week we had to scrape a bunch of poetry-reciting frog heads off the side of the hull. Who's to say it wasn't some other anomaly messin' with me?”

“No...” Ford shook his head grimly. “You were talking in his voice.”

Stan stared at Ford...he hadn't mentioned that before. His brother's six knuckles were white against wood of the workbench.

“Believe me.” Ford said. “I know that voice when I hear it.”

The two of them were quiet for a moment. Stan stood up, old joints popping as he moved.

“Ford--” Stan began, but was cut off when his brother slammed a fist down on the table, startling him into silence.

“I should have been watching for this since the beginning. Ever since Weirdmageddon. It's
just...when your memories started coming back, everything was so...so...” He trailed off, his hands shaking. “I should have been vigilant. It's all my fault.”

Stan put a hand on his shoulder, squeezing tightly. “Quit talking like that.”

Ford didn't speak for a long while. When he did speak, it was in a still, small voice.

“What if he's coming back?”

Something in Ford's tone reminded Stan of their childhood. Not one of the happier memories.

“Then we'll deal with it.” Stan said, his voice solid and serious.

The reassurance didn't seem to land. Ford's shoulders were still stiff, his fingers still gripped the edge of the table. Stan felt his stomach twist as he finally brought up what he'd been thinking about since Ford said Bill's name the other night.

“If he is coming back, if there's some part of him left in my brain,” Stan said, “can't we get rid of him...you know...the way we did the first time?”

Ford finally let go of the table and took a deep breath, sighing. “We could, certainly, if Mabel hadn't destroyed the memory gun.”

“As if you couldn't figure out how to make a new one in five--”

“The memory gun was destroyed, Stan.” Ford said, firmly. “It's not an option anymore.”

The look of finality in Ford's eyes was a relief. The idea of going back, fully back into that fog that still crept into him every now and then, if less often now than before...well. The words 'not an option' were music to his ears.

“All right. Then what are our options? Let's figure this out.” Stan said.

“I don't know.” Ford took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. “I need...time to think. Someplace quiet...and both of us need other people around. Especially if what happened last night happens again.”

Stan nodded.

“We need people who've dealt with Cipher...” Ford continued. “It wouldn't hurt to have someone around who knows a lot about the memory gun either.”

Despite himself, Stan felt a smile curling up the edge of his mouth. He could see where this, and consequently they, were headed. Ford noticed his smile and returned it.

“Up for a trip back to Oregon?” Ford asked.

“Am I ever not?” Stan smiled.

“I'll start plotting the course.”
“If you like *Ghost Harassers*, uh, I have the whole series on DVD in my dorm room...” Dipper fiddled with the cup of soda in his hand, outside the cafeteria. “If you wanted to maybe come over and watch them sometime. Or just borrow them!” He added hastily, “Borrowing's fine too!”

“Wow, the whole series?” Amy replied. “Even the controversial lost episode where you can see cameraman Dirk Firkington run by in the background wearing a sheet over his head?”

“Oh that one, yeah,” Dipper laughed. “It's pretty funny, I guess. Although it's also really unprofessional. I mean, paranormal research has enough trouble being taken seriously without stuff like—ah, I mean...” Dipper hesitated, not wanting to go off on a rant.

Amy smiled at him. “This is pretty cool, I've met lots of people who watch this kind of thing for a goof, but never anyone who takes the paranormal seriously.”

“Oh, I definitely take the paranormal seriously,” Dipper said, leaning in. “When I have my own ghost hunter series, I'm going to bring it the sophisticated level of discourse it deserves.”

Dipper had noticed Amy sitting in a corner table of the cafeteria all semester, but this was the first face-to-face conversation they'd actually had...and to his surprise it seemed to be going pretty well. He'd learned they were both from the West Coast and both finishing up their sophomore year. She was a biochem major, he was double majoring in forensic science and media production. They both liked *Vampire Heart Surgeon*, hated *Vampire Heart Surgeon II*, but thought *Vampire Heart Surgeon III: Vampires in Miami* was vastly underrated.

“Haha, maybe I can be on your show when you have one. I've had some pretty weird experiences myself.”

“R-really? Me too!” Dipper replied.

“Like what?” she asked.

“Uh...you first.” Dipper had learned over time that most people didn't believe his stories from Gravity Falls. He'd started to listen to what other people had seen first, then share something that was on a similar level.

“Okay, so, I used to live in this creepy old house, right? The kind of place you hear about people being murdered in.” She held out her hands, gesturing dramatically as she told her story. “And I
have a cat...and one time, I thought I heard my cat moving around downstairs. But then I looked behind me and she was sitting right there on my bed!"

There was a long pause.

“Um...that's it,” Amy said.

“Oh! Maaaaan...that's....pretty creepy...” Dipper averted his eyes and took a slurp from his soda.

The awkward silence was interrupted by a muffled pop song coming from Dipper's bag.

“Doooon't go, squan-der-ing your feeeeeeeelings....” the cell phone sang. “Place all your loooove oooon meee....”

“Heheh...it's...it's ironic.” Dipper said, blushing and thumbing the 'accept call' button, silencing the BABA tune. “Just a second.” He lowered his voice, speaking into the phone. “Mabel?”

“Dipper! Guess where I am!” Mabel's voice squealed through the speaker. Dipper winced and pulled the phone a few inches away from his ear. His sister had two modes on the phone: too loud, and way too loud.

'Guess where I am' was something that Dipper had been hearing from Mabel a lot lately. Ruvesvale College had felt like a new home to Dipper almost since he'd arrived on campus, but his sister's college experience was shaping up to be a little rockier.

Mabel had gotten an arts scholarship to a school in Sunnydale, but after taking a few psychology classes her first year, she started talking about changing her planned major. She and Dipper had a lot of long phone conversations about it. She wasn't sure anymore if she wanted to stay as an art major, to go into psychology and become a social worker, or maybe split the difference and do something with art therapy. So she'd opened an Etsy, sold a bunch of old sweaters and crafts and since then had been taking a year off to travel, to visit friends and figure her priorities out.

“I dunno, the sprinkle factory again? The sloth orphanage? Listen, this actually isn't a good time--”

“Oh, but there's someone else here with me, and I bet you've got time for him.” Mabel said knowingly. There was the sound of wind and some muffled talking, then another familiar voice came through.

“Dipper, my boy.” Ford said through the phone's speaker. “How are you?”

“Great Uncle Ford?” Dipper's eyes widened. “How long have you—wait, just a second.”

Dipper covered the speaker of the phone and turned back to Amy. “Sorry, I actually kind of have to take this...it's my uncle, he's usually away at sea studying...well, never mind what he studies. Sorry.”

“It's okay.” She glanced down at her bag and blushed. “Um, maybe we can continue this conversation some other time? Over a cup of---”

When she looked up, Dipper was already gone.

“Okay!” Dipper grinned, walking along the quad with his phone against his ear. “So how long have you been back on land? Are you in Gravity Falls?”

“Not yet. We met up with Mabel in San Carlos.” Ford said. “She's going to give us a ride up to the
Mystery Shack in Stan's old car. She's taken excellent care of it, you know. Even if the fuzzy pink seat covers are a little bold.”

“Heh, yeah...she's gotten a lot of use out of it, that's for sure. I think she's trying to beat Stan's record for most miles driven across the country.”

“Now Dipper, I hate to take you away from your studies, but do you think that---”

“Yes, of course!” Dipper said. “Absolutely, I'll come! ...Wait, you didn't—you were going to invite me, weren't you? I didn't let you finish.”

Ford chuckled. “I was. That is, if you're certain...”

“It's fine. Summer break is coming up anyway, I just need to finish my final for Multimedia Studio. I can hand it in early and be there in a couple of days.”

“Excellent! You'll probably arrive around the same time as us, then. We'll see you soon.”

“We'll see you soon!” Candy hung up the cell phone and stuck it back in her pocket, carefully velcro-ing the flap shut so that it wouldn't fall out while she was upside down. She unhooked her harness from the ceiling and began swinging downwards.

“Pacificaaaaa!”

Candy's cheerful voice echoed through the massive underground room that once housed an interdimensional portal. A room that was now packed with half-finished projects, unearthed paranormal artifacts, power tools, and a system of cables and ziplines that only Candy seemed able to navigate. She'd been trying to fix a set of mechanical spider legs when her phone rang. (It had crawled up into a niche in the ceiling and was refusing to come down.)

“Mabel is coming for a vis-ooof!” Candy was cut off as she hit the ground, the wind knocked out of her. With a few deft clicks, she undid the latches and slipped out of her harness, running into the control room where Pacifica was tapping idly on her cell phone.

“Another visit. I know.” Pacifica said. “She'll be here in a day or two.”

“Wait...did she call you first?” Candy stopped. She narrowed her eyes and continued to herself in Korean. “Has Pacifica advanced past me in Mabel's friendship rankings? This could mean war.”

“No...remember the tracking device you put on her car, in case of emergencies?” Pacific showed Candy the screen of her phone. On it was a map of the US with a blinking dot moving upwards on it. “She's been headed in this direction for, like, hours. She's probably a day away, longer if she stops every ten miles to take pictures, which you know she will.” she added smugly.

“Oh.” Candy said. “...Wow. You noticed that before she called? How much time do you spend watching to see where Mabel is?”

“I—For your information, none of your business!” Pacifica blushed. “Also, shut up. Also, Grenda's going to land on you if you don't move, like, now.”

Candy stepped to the side as Grenda crashed to the bottom of the fireman's pole that they'd put in the basement a year ago. Grenda hated waiting for the elevator.

“Surprise attack hug!” Grenda leaped up and crushed Candy in her embrace.
“No thanks.” Pacifica said as the larger girl advanced on her. “I said no thank you, I—oof!”

“How’re my two besties doing?” Grenda crowed, squeezing both of them. “Doin' lots of science together?”

“We have something better than science today!” Candy said, holding her phone up to display the selfie Mabel had taken in front of the Welcome to Oregon road sign.

Grenda dropped Candy and Pacifica, grabbing the phone to look. “All right! Mabel's coming! We can break out the four-person tandem bicycle again.”

“Do you think the Ramirez know?” Pacifica asked.

“Aieeeee! They are going to freak out!” Candy cried.

“Melody's out picking up the kids, but Soos is almost done with his tours for today! Let's go tell him!” Grenda hurried to the elevator and slammed the button down. “Ugh, stupid elevator. Why can't fire poles have an 'up' function?”

“Maybe they can...” Candy mused as the elevator doors opened. “We saw gravity reverse itself once. I'll bet Mr. McGucket could show us how to do it on a small scale...”

“Dorks.” Pacifica rolled her eyes. The three of them stepped in.

“Soos!” Candy shouted as the elevator reached the top floor. “You're not going to believe this!”

“You're not going to believe this!” Soos said, gesturing out towards the crowd that was gathered on the front lawn of the Mystery Shack. “If I hadn't found it under my car, hosed it off and nailed it to this stump with my own two hands, I wouldn't believe it existed either. Right before your eyes, ladies and gentlemen, here in Oregon is an artifact from another time. The remains of a genuine prehistOric monster. Behold, The Gobblewonker!”

Soos gripped the edge of the sheet that covered the attraction and hesitated, savoring the moment for just a little while. He'd given it some thought, and he'd decided that by far his favorite part of this job was pulling sheets off of things. The anticipation in the crowd, the excitement at what was about to be revealed made him excited. Made him see whatever hodgepodge creature he'd glued together with the awe and amazement of a twelve year old boy gazing at a fiji mermaid for the first time.

With a flick of the wrist, Soos pulled the sheet away from the badly battered head and neck of a robotic sea monster that had once been kept under Gravity Falls lake. Propped up on the stump, it stood higher than anyone in the crowd. Its jaw slipped open with a rusty metallic creak.

The crowd seemed underwhelmed at first, until Soos stepped on a switch hidden at the bottom of the stump, lighting up the strings of Christmas lights that were wound around the beasts' neck. Its eyes glowed, and as a final touch the hidden flamethrower Candy had installed was activated, sending a curling tongue of flames out at the huddled tourists. Soos smelt burning plastic and singed hair, and the crowd went wild.

Soos took an extravagant bow, blissfully soaking up the cheers as the crowd clapped their ash-covered hands. More than a few reached into their wallets to toss fistfuls of bills in the nearby tip jar.
“That's the tour, dudes! Thanks for visiting the Mystery Shack...be sure to stop in the gift shop on your way out. Remember, ten percent of every dollar you spend there goes to support rest homes for elderly gnomes and fairies!”

He wondered why they always laughed at that last part...he guessed that charity just made people really happy or something.

“Soos!”

Soos heard a high pitched scream and turned towards the house. Candy, Grenda and Pacifica—the girls Melody had taken to calling the Mystery Trio—were all running in his direction. Candy was screaming and waving a cell phone.

“Soos, guess what?!” Grenda chimed in. “Mabel's coming, and she's bringing both her Grunkles with her!”

“I know, dudes!” Soos waved, grinning at them. “It's gonna be so awesome, I can't wait!”

Candy skidded to a stop, looking disappointed. “You heard about it already? Why has everyone heard this already?”

“Well yeah, don't you read their blog?” Soos pulled a smartphone out of his suit and tapped it a couple of times. “They mentioned heading back to Gravity Falls a couple days ago. I have notifications on for whenever they update!” he smiled. “Most of Stan's entries are rants about the government. Did you know that they're adding flouride to the water to make people more accepting of the Communist new world order?”

“Dipper's coming too,” Grenda said. “It's gonna be like a reunion! We should make t-shirts!”

Soos looked Grenda seriously in the eyes and put his hands on her shoulders. There was once a time when he'd have had to bend down to make that gesture. But now the girl he'd known as a preteen was a woman that surpassed him in height.

“Grenda. You. Are. So smart. Yes, we should make t-shirts.” He let her go and turned to the others, grinning. “I'll ask Melody to get her old screen-printing equipment out. Pacifica, I'm putting you on graphic design duty.”

“Ugh, fine. But only because anyone else'd mess it up.” Pacifica said.

“I should probably go inside and change...” Soos said, heading towards the Shack. “Melody'll be home soon and we've still got a lot to do to get the house ready for everyone...”

“Melody knows too?” Candy said. “Not fair. I wanted someone else to be surprised...”

The words had barely left Candy's mouth before the sound of squealing tires and synthesized music came from behind her.

Soos turned back towards the road—a beat-up black van was barreling up Gopher Road towards the Shack. It came to a halt just a few yards away from the four of them. The back doors were thrown open and a young, tattooed woman in a tank top was shoved out onto the dirt, followed by a backpack and a duffel bag.

“All right, we're here.” A scrawny guy with bleach-blonde hair said, leaning out the back of the van. “I gave you a ride, so we're even. I don't want to see your dumb girlfriend-stealing face ever again!”
“Screw you, Todd!” the woman stood up. “I was the only reason anyone came to see *Nyne Eyed Spydys* in the first place. You think the crowds showed up to hear your shitty harmonium playing? Good luck getting gigs without me!”

The scrawny guy—Todd apparently,—spit on the ground and slammed the doors shut. The van skidded off back towards the highway.

“Sheesh.” The woman stood up, adjusting the bass guitar slung around her back while the others stared. “You'd think guys who bill themselves as 'anti-emo' wouldn't be a bunch of crybabies, right?”

After taking a moment to dust herself off, she turned around. Half her red hair had been shaved off in a undercut, but her face was unmistakable. Soos realized his jaw was hanging down and pushed it closed with his hand.

“Hey losers.” Wendy smiled, holding her arms out for the hug she knew was coming.

The screams that followed reached frequencies that only dogs could hear. And that was just Soos.
Ford couldn't sleep.

He stared up at the riveted metal ceiling of the Stan O'War II. The hard bunk underneath him was good for his back, but difficult to get comfortable on at times like these. His insomnia hadn't bothered him like this for a very long while, but now it seemed to be making up for lost time.

He should have been vigilant. He should have paid closer attention.

Bill never slept. He never rested. He had no family to care about and nothing to distract him. Fighting him required constant, unyielding vigilance. Ford had learned that the first time he'd faced him. But it seemed that the hope of being rid of Bill permanently had made him forget. He'd slacked, ignored things, relaxed. And now his brother was paying the price.

In retrospect, there had been something subtly off about Stan for a while. Or...no, not something. Lots and lots of little things. Each one unimportant on its own, each one easy to ignore and forget about. But in retrospect all of them were pointing towards a similar source.

His brother always had a dark sense of humor, even when they were children. More so now that time and experience had hardened him. But once in a while the jokes Stan told...didn't seem to have a punchline. Like a night just a few weeks ago, when they were watching the stars from the deck together, Stan had said “Ever think about how eventually the sun's gonna go nova, boil the sea and burn all of this stuff to ash?” And then laughed to himself, like it was the funniest thing in the world.

When that star-spawn had attacked the boat, Stan had grabbed a bottle of his cologne and hurled it at the monster. The eldritch creature, like all of its foul breed, was allergic to the camphor in the bottle and it had been driven off. But Stan couldn't possibly have known about that. When asked, he said he'd just grabbed something and thrown it without thinking, it had just been dumb luck. But there had been a heavy lantern and a pick and rope right beside him. Why throw that, of all things? And didn't he usually keep his cologne below deck, in the bathroom?

What about that massive beast, one Ford had never been able to identify but that was easily the size of an island, that had charged the boat head-on? Ford had been panicking, trying to steer out of its way and screaming at Stan to help him, but Stan would only stand on the bow, staring it down. Just...staring at it, not speaking, not doing anything until turned away. It stopped charging and turned away and neither Ford nor Stan could explain why. When Ford asked why he'd been standing and staring at it instead of coming to help him steer, Stan shrugged and said that he must have frozen up. It was as good an explanation as any.

It wasn't that Ford thought Stan was lying. But maybe he hadn't known the truth himself. Sometimes there was something in his brother that made Ford shiver. On rare, rare occasions, there was something in his smile, or his laugh...
Maybe there was a voice deep inside Stan that had made him grab the cologne, something that stared back at that beast in the water and scared it away. Something equally ancient and strange that was protecting them—no, Ford corrected himself. Not protecting them. Protecting Stan, protecting his human vessel. Possibly protecting Ford so that he could use his mind as a tool. But he wasn't protecting them. Bill cared for nothing and no one other than himself.

Ford hated himself for this. Hated the thought of not trusting Stan now, after all they'd been through. And perhaps that was why he'd written all of those incidents off at the time. Each one of them was easy to miss. Easy to ignore. Easy to forget.

It was his fault. He should have been vigilant...if he'd have caught it the first time that Stan had done something strange...maybe...maybe....

Ford paused in his thoughts. Someone was Walking on the deck. He lifted his head and turned to look at the bunk beside his. That was strange...when had Stan gotten up? He hadn't heard him leave.

Ford sat up in bed, sighing. He wouldn't be surprised if Stan couldn't sleep either, given why they were headed back to Oregon. Ford might as well give up on sleeping and start and early day with his brother.

He slipped a jacket over the sweater he'd fallen asleep in and started climbing the stairs. Hardly the first time the two of them would find each other awake in the pre-dawn hours. Ford's nightmares would wake him with a strangled cry that always woke his brother up. Stan, by contrast, never voiced his terror even in his sleep, making only quiet whimpering sounds. But he thrashed and struck out at the darkness around him, knocking into the walls and confines of the ship loudly enough to echo through the entire craft. Sound carried pretty far in there.

Ford paused at the entrance to the deck...was Stan crying? Ford hesitated, wondering if he should wait for the sound to die down before approaching. Stan would most likely try to compose himself if he realized he was watched, would stifle the tears that he needed to let go. But after listening a moment longer, Ford realized it wasn't crying he was hearing. Stan was laughing...chuckling to himself over something.

Ford ascended and stepped out into the cold sea breeze. The sea was clear, and the stars shone so brightly they seemed to pierce through the sky. Ford looked up at those distant lights and swore he felt something watching back.

Stan's shoulders were hunched. His hands were gripping the railing so tight that his arms were shaking. And he was laughing. Laughing harder and louder with every step Ford took. And there was something wrong, there was something wrong with his laugh.

“...Stanley?” Ford reached for him, his voice small and uncertain.

“...No.”

Ford stopped cold at the voice that came out of his brother's mouth.

Stan turned, a wide, painful grin splitting his face.

“...Not anymore.” Bill said.

Ford woke screaming into the darkness of an unfamiliar room.
Stan woke to the sound of familiar screaming.

The voice that was crying out was the only thing familiar to him at the moment. ...Where was he? Even in the dark, he could tell that the room was wrong. He wasn't in his bunk on the Stan O'War II. And he wasn't in the Mystery ShAck either. All those rooms had a familiar air to them. A texture to the darkness, a recognizable echo that told him he was home even before his eyes registered. Where was he?

*Keep calm. He told himself. You'll remember eventually. Your name is Stanley Pines. He began running through his usual mantra. Your brother is Stanford Pines. You live together on a boat named after one the two of you built when you were kids...He slowly sat up, realizing his arms were pinned by a sleeping bag. As he untangled himself, he ran through what recent events he could recall. The two of you are driving to Gravity Falls with your grand-niece. Your grand-niece is named Mabel Pines...she told you that she has a friend in Eagle Point...*

There it was. They were staying with one of Mabel's friends, in her apartment...that's why he didn't recognize it. Heh, that girl seemed to have pals stashed away everywhere. The little charmer.

Stan shook the sleeping bag off, trying to remember what room Ford was sleeping in. It had been him screaming, Stan was sure. There had been a time when the sound of Ford screaming in his sleep would have made Stan come running. But nightmares were hardly an uncommon thing for either of them, and over the years the experience of one twin being wakened by the other had turned into as much of a routine as their morning cups of coffee. Stan just hoped Ford hadn't woken anyone else up...Mabel was a hard sleeper, but he didn't know about her friends.

Stan crept barefoot down the darkened hallway, trying to avoid turning any lights on and waking someone. The unfamiliar confines of the apartment were throwing him off in the dark. Was the room Ford was sleeping in on the left or the right? He couldn't really remember...

Stan stood in the hallway for a moment, trying to think, when he felt a pair of arms wrap around him from behind---

*ambush, alleyway, rough bricks and broken glass, panic, escape*

--no. No, he was safe. He knew who this was...just to be sure, though, Stan fumbled down the arm that was holding him, looking for the hand that clutched tight to the fabric of his undershirt, his breathing only returning to normal after he'd silently counted the fingers.

“You okay?” Stan asked.

“Mmmn-hmm.” Ford said, voice muffled by Stan's shoulder.

Stan stood, quiet as Ford held him tightly, his hand on Ford's hand, listening to his twin's breathing as it slowly calmed.

“I love you, Stanley.” Ford's voice broke the silence.

Stan was startled. It wasn't that he and Ford never said they loved one another. It just...never took that form.

“I love you” from Ford sounded like “You don't need to do everything yourself, get some rest.” “You could've been killed, you idiot! Don't ever do that again!” “Does it still hurt?” “I got those chips you like.” “Let me help you.” “I can't believe you went toe-to-toe with that beast, Stan, you're incredible! My brother!”
“I love you” from Stan sounded like “Are you crazy, you can't go there alone!” “Yeah, yeah, you're still the biggest nerd in the seven seas.” “Do you need money? Take some money with you.” “I patched the hole in that damn threadbare sweater you're always wearing.” “No, keep talking. I'm listening.” “Go back to sleep, I'll sit up here and make sure nothing happens.”

“I love you” was the feeling of a steadying hand on your back when you teetered a little too near to the railing, it was the taste of a mug of hot chocolate someone made because you looked cold, it was the gift of a scarf or hat, or it was wearing that hat every day even though it itched and didn't quite fit right, it was the calming presence in the terrifying dark, a reassurance. But it was almost never the words “I love you.”

“I love you too, bro.” Stan said, giving his hand a squeeze.

“Don't go.” Ford whimpered. His voice was fragile as a promise. “Please don't let go. Don't let him win.”

“I'm not going anywhere.” Stan said. “And if he is coming back, I'll beat him down even harder than I did the first time.”

Ford's grip tightened on him slightly. Stan couldn't tell if that was a sign his assurance had done anything or not.

“It feels like I just got you back.” Ford said. “I'm afraid to lose you. And...maybe...maybe I deserve to lose you, after all those years I ignored you, but--”

“Stop.” Stan took Ford's hands. He pulled himself out of the embrace, turning so he could look his brother in the eye. “Don't ever say that again.”

Ford swallowed, but didn't speak.

“You don't deserve to lose me. And you're not going to. Nothing is going to take me away from my family...not after all we've been through.”

Whether it was Stan's words, his tone, or just the knowledge that Stan didn't think he deserved to lose him, Ford seemed somewhat reassured. Stan pulled his brother into tight hug. Outside, the dawn was starting to break. Chasing the shadows back into the corners of the world, for another few hours at least.
It was the calm before the storm.

The children knelt, contentedly playing on the carpet in the den of the Mystery Shack. Their eyes were on their toys, lost in a game of make-believe. Neither of them gave any thought to what other eyes might be watching them from the shadows. Why would they? They had never known anything but safety in their home. Too young and innocent to imagine the deadly reality outside their safe little world of play.

The creature crept closer. Despite its size, it could move silently. Could curl behind a sofa or crouch behind the ancient television and wait for the perfect moment. And it knew this house as well as they did. Knew all the cracks and shadows and secret niches where it could hide, undetected. Ready to strike.

“Raauugh!” the beast shouted, leaping at the children. “I'm a terrible two-headed ogregoat, and I'm gonna drag you dudes off to my lair!”

The younger boy shrieked and laughed as the monster lifted him off the ground, tucking him under its beefy arm. His sister ran to his defense, yanking at the great beast's sleeve with ferocious tenacity.

“Nuh-uh!” the girl bravely shouted. “You're not an ogregoat, you're papi!”

“No I'm not!” the bloodthirsty terror insisted. “I'm a terrible ogregoat and I've got your brother!”

“No!” she said, pulling harder on his arm and stamping her foot. “You're papi! You're papi! You're papi!”

Soos was pulled off balance by a particularly strong yank from his daughter, and he fell to the ground with a thud. “Heheh, all right, you got me. You little guys are too smart for me.”

“That's right!” the girl said, crawling up onto his big belly. “You're papi, you're papi, you're papi!”

Soos's daughter, Stanley “Lee” Ramirez was five now, big for her age and getting a little too big to comfortably climb on her dad's stomach. But Soos just didn't have the heart to pull her off him.

Soos had made a deal with Melody a while ago. He'd name their first child and Melody would name the second. Soos had to admit, he'd been surprised when the baby that the doctor had
introduced to him as his son started pulling him and Melody over to the pink aisles in toy stores, begging them to buy skirts and asking to be called Lee instead of Stanley. But Soos had always figured that fatherhood was gonna be full of surprises. If his son was really his daughter, he could roll with that. He wasn't picky.

“Papi, papi, papi!” Lee's little brother, Sephiroth Link Ramirez, chimed in.

“Yeah, that's right.” Soos ruffled the two-year-old's soft brown hair from his position on the floor. “I'm papi. Hey, have either of you seen your brother around?”

“Hhhhhhhrruuuuuuaaaaaaugh!”

Lee clambered off of Soos's stomach and Sephiroth dove behind him as the sound of running feet came closer. Soos felt a hard, heavy impact in his side as a tiny head slammed into him. He barely saw more than a blur of long dark hair before the wind was knocked out of him again by a small, strong fist.

“Aaaaahhhhhraugh!” the boy roared, swinging again at Soos's stomach. “Argharaghargharghargh!”

“Chestaur!” Melody's sharp voice came from the other side of the room. “What did we say about roughousing with papi when he isn't expecting it?”

Chestaur froze at the chastising voice and growled apologetically. Soos took the opportunity to take a gentle hold of the long rattail braid growing down the boy's back, just in case he got it in his head to charge again. He'd been doing this a lot lately, every since the two little bony bumps that were his baby horns started coming in.

“But I wanna punch everything, all the time!” Chestaur shouted.

“I hear ya, little dude. That's puberty for ya.” Soos stroked the toddler's hairy back with his free hand, soothingly. “But ya gotta learn to keep it under control. Hit a pillow or a tree or something.”

“Puberty?” Melody said. “He's not even five yet.”

“Well, he's half Manotaur.” Soos pointed out. “They have like, seven or eight puberties, remember?”

Satisfied that the danger of being charged at was over, Lee ambled over to Chestaur and took his hand. “C'mon Chesta'!” she said, “Let's play outside. Gompers doesn't mind headbutts.”

“Yeah! I'll show him whose territory this is!” Chestaur grinned.

“Don't go too far,” Soos said as the two of them headed for the yard. “And remember what mom said about riding on your brother's back!”

“Only run slow, an' only when he says 'okay!'” Lee chirped from the doorway.

Soos and Melody had started fostering Chestaur after the Manotaurs' methods of child rearing (which mostly consisted of throwing the toddlers into big hole and cheering them on while they fought) were deemed unsuitable for the half-human hybrid. Chestaur's mother had left long ago to become a pro wrestler, so it wasn't long before Soos and Melody got the paperwork in order to officially adopt the little bull.

“We should get the girls to invite Fistcrunch over here more.” Melody said, adjusting the two live chickens she was carrying under her arms. “We really need more information about what to expect
with him...and I'd rather not have to stick my arm in the pain hole again to get it.”

Soos nodded, reaching to pick up Sephiroth who was waving at him in a clear 'up! up!' gesture. “...Is everything ready? Are the rooms upstairs set up, is everyone gonna have a place to sleep?”

“There's plenty of room, relax.” Melody said. “I'm a little worried about mami, though. She hasn't stopped cooking for three days. Has she even slept?”

Appearing on cue, Abuilita stuck her head out of the kitchen at that moment. Her hair was disheveled and she had flour all over her apron, but she her face held its usual look of contented calm. She reached out and easily plucked the two chickens from Melody's hands.

“Thank you.” she said, ducking back into the kitchen.

“We should really keep Waddles away from her when he arrives, who knows what might happen.” Melody said.

Soos laughed. “Nah, Abulita would never cook family. She always gets this way when there's a reunion. She'll be okay.”

The sound of a car horn suddenly came from outside, followed by the excited shouts of children. Soos's face lit up.

“Oh! Sounds like they're here.” Melody said, “You go say hi. I'll be right there, I've gotta go get something!”

“Ready to say hi to the family, Seph?” Soos asked the tot in his arms as he headed outside. Sepheroth shrugged and snuggled into Him.

Outside, Mabel had already picked Chestaur up and was spinning him around in circles.

“---Aaaaaah! Look at your little horns!” she cried. “You are so cute, I'm gonna eat you right up!”

“No!” Chestaur shouted gleefully. “You cannot eat me, I will destroy you! I will raze your crops and take your women!”

“Ahh! Not my women, they're so pretty!” Mabel cried in mock despair. Chestaur's further threats were cut off as Mabel started blowing on his tummy, dissolving the hairy little hybrid into giggles.

Meanwhile, Stan and Ford were occupied with helping a very large, very stubborn pig out of the backseat of the car.

“You dudes need any help?” Soos asked.

“We'll be fine.” Ford said. “If we can haul a beached sharktopus back into the ocean, we can definitely handle this fellow.”

Stan turned to Soos, grinning hugely. “Hey, there's the famous Mr. Mystery! And who's this big guy?” He leaned in close to Sephiroth. “I haven't seen you since you were crawling. You remember me?”

Soos felt Seph's grip tighten around his arm. He stared at Stan with huge, nervous eyes, not replying.

“Uh...he's a little shy.” Soos explained, worried that Stan might be hurt if Seph pulled away or started whining. “Maybe he doesn't recognize--”
Seph's little head shot forward, his teeth clamping down on the end of Stan's bulbous nose. Stan cried out, and after a moment Seph loosened his grip.

“Augh!” Stan cried “What the he—uh, hotcakes was that about?”

Seph giggled with delight at Stan's reaction, clapping his hands.

“Seph, no!” Soos cried. “I'm sorry, Stan—I think maybe he thought your nose was a kumquat or something. You gotta admit the resemblance is—uh, I mean…” He squirmed a little. Seph reached for the ground, making a 'down' motion, and Soos let him toddle off.

“Heh, cute.” Stan rubbed his nose, watching the toddler go. “Remind me to get him a muzzle for his next birthday.”

His arms now free, Soos leaned forward and gave Stan a hug. “It's really good to see you again.” he said.

“Heh, all right, all right. Cut it out, huh?” Stan said, though he didn't pull away like he did when he actually wanted you to stop hugging, so Soos didn't let go for a good minute. “Good to see you too...how's the Shack doing? I can see she's still standing, at least.”

“We've had two fires, a fairy infestation and a giant robot attack since you were last here.” Soos said, still contentedly squeezing Stan in his arms.

“Not bad.” Stan said, “Wait till you've seen her through a kaiju migration, then you'll really be settled in.”

“Grunkle Stan, Grunkle Ford!” Lee cried, running up to them. Lee had picked the word 'Grunkle' up from Mabel and Dipper, and it seemed to stick to the two old men. “Yaaay, you're back!”

Stan bent down, ruffling Lee's hair. “How's my little Stanley doing?”

“Call me Lee, Grunkle Stan,” Lee chided him, annoyed. “Stanley's a boy's name.”

“Right, right, sorry. Remember, you're still gonna have to fight me for that name when you turn thirteen. Don't think shortening it's gonna get you out of your duties.”

“I'll win.” Lee grinned. “Bring it on.”

“That's my girl!” Stan laughed, lifting her up. “C'mon, let me see that muscle!”

Lee excitedly flexed her tiny biceps while Stan made a show of looking impressed. He set her down, then, so that she could properly greet her Grunkle Ford, who was already kneeling down for a hug. It was about then that Melody came out, wearing her new t-shirt. Pacifica had done a great job with the design—a border of pink and green flowers circling an anchor with the word “Reunion!” in white cursive letters. Sephiroth hurried up the porch steps towards her, and she gathered him up into her arms.

“How was the drive?” Melody asked.

“Ugh, Waddles got soOoo carsick.” Mabel complained. “Grunkle Stan had to rock him in the backseat for like, an hour before he finally settled down.”

“I did not.” Stan folded his arms. “And if I did it was only because I didn't want him pukin' in my car.”
“I have to admit, you looked pretty maternal back there, Stan.” Ford teased, smiling affectionately. “Holding that enormous pig and singing lullabies to him in Spanish.”

“Drop it.” Stan said threateningly. “Hey, speaking of changing the subject—are we the first ones here?”

“Nah.” Soos said. “Wendy beat you dudes. She's picking Dipper up from the bus stop right now, they'll be back any minute--”

The words were barely out of Soos's mouth when he saw the pickup truck approaching over the ridge. It pulled to a stop in the parking lot and Wendy and Dipper stepped out, talking to each other about something.

“Anyway, don't stress about it too much.” Wendy said, continuing whatever conversation she and Dipper had been having on the ride. “You'll know what and who you want sooner or later. And if it takes a while, no biggie. My dad didn't figure out he liked guys until he was in his forties. There's no rush.”

“I guess you're right.” Dipper sighed. He glanced up at her and smiled. “Maybe I should just go back to crushing on you, huh?”

“Pfft!” Wendy laughed and grabbed Dipper in a headlock. She gave her hand a big, sloppy lick and mashed it into his face. “There, it's like we kissed. Now we have to get married.”

“Aaah!” Dipper laughed, struggling to shove her away. “You're so gross!”

“Look who's talking--when's the last time you washed that greasy hair, college boy?” Wendy grinned, mashing his hat down onto his head. Before heading to the bus stop, Wendy had gone into town to buy herself a pageboy cap that now rested on Dipper's head, and Wendy was now wearing a beanie with a UFO on it that seemed more Dipper's style than hers.

The two of them were still laughing and tussling when Mabel blindsided Dipper with a hug, tackling him to the ground.

“Brobro!” Mabel cried. “Aaaaaah I can't believe it's really you! Look at you, you've gotten so old!”

“Mabel...” Dipper laughed, pushing himself off the ground and smiling. “We saw each other three months ago.”

“You're ancient now!” Mabel continued. “I barely even recognize you...please, tell me you remember your dear sister Mabel...”

“I remember my sister's a nutcase.” Dipper laughed, grabbing Mabel's arm and returning the hug.

“C'mon inside, dudes.” Soos said. “Abuilta's been cooking for days, there's food and drinks and everything ready.”

“We made t-shirts!” Melody added.

The small crowd slowly made its way inside. Waddles lumbered ahead, looking around and sniffing at the familiar environment while Lee tried to climb on his back. Chestaur followed after. Melody set Sephiroth down nearby and let him loose to toddle off wherever he liked.

“You have lovely children.” Ford remarked, smiling at the sight.
“Darn right we do.” Melody beamed. “You should stick around and see them this Summerween. We've got a Lord of the Rings group costume planned.”

“We're gonna glue dog hair to their feet!” Soos said.

“We're gonna wash it first.” Melody clarified.

“...We still need four more kids, though.” Soos winked at Melody. “For Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday.”

“Ha!” Melody turned to him, slinking her arms around his middle. “No chance of that, honeybun. Unless you want to carry them in that cute little panda bear belly of yours.” She shook his chub playfully. “And by the way—if he ever asks, you don't know how to make that happen!” She added, pointing to Ford.

“Understood.” Ford chuckled in response.

Frankly, Soos understood what Melody meant. After Seph had given her so much trouble, so much pain and a few genuinely terrifying moments in the delivery room, Soos wasn't sure if he was really into the idea of Melody getting pregnant again either. But the ‘one child for each day of the week’ thing had been a private joke between them for years now. It wasn't likely to ever go away.

“Hey Ford, come look at this!” Stan called from across the room.

He was looking at the family pictures that filled up most of the eastern wall. Lee had gotten up on his shoulders and Chestaur was dangling from his outstretched arm. If he minded or even noticed the fact that he'd become living playground equipment, he gave no sign. (That reminded him—Soos made a mental note to deal with the actual living playground equipment that occasionally came into their yard at night and left seesaw tracks and slide impressions in Melody's garden.)

“They've got photos of the time that Lee got kidnapped by the queen of the spider riders and we had to fight her army to get her back!” He pointed to a photograph on the wall—it showed the four of them, Stan, Ford, Soos and Melody, fighting off a dozen or so twelve-legged creatures. Spiders on top, horses from the abdomen down.

Soos remembered that day—those guys sure were good at throwing stuff. The extra arms meant they could rain rocks down on six people at once. Or six times as many rocks down onto one big guy trying to shield the others with his body.

“Heh...I remember that.” Ford said. “Did we ever figure out whether the queen wanted to adopt Lee or eat her? –Hey...wait a minute. Who took these pictures?” He turned back to Soos and Melody, pointing. “How do you even have these?”

“Brian took them.” Melody explained. “One of the gnomes. Ever since the you-know-what back in 2012, the two of you are like, celebrities to most of the forest creatures. Brian runs some kind of newspaper in the enchanted glade, and he gave us copies in exchange for a quote.”

“The angle really brings out my jawline, huh?” Stan smiled, admiring the photograph. “Did we make the front page?”

“Front page of the gossip section, yeah.” Melody snorted.

“Good enough for me.” Stan said.

An insistent ringing and repeated knocking sound came from the front. But before Soos could get
near enough to answer it, the door burst open and Candy and Grenda hurried in.

“We're here! We're here!” Grenda shouted. “Did we miss anything?”

“Don't have fun without us!” Candy called.

Hearing their voices, Mabel hopped up from her spot on the floor where she'd been tickling Sephiroth and ran to the doorway. The three of them collided in a pile of hugging and excited shouting—exclamations of joy, questions, threads of conversation and in-jokes picked up from whatever letters and emails they must've been sending each other...Soos lost track of what they were saying in the excited babble that came from the three of them.

The door had barely even closed all the way when it swung open a second time and something small, dark and fast came bounding in. It was clearly canine—a shaggy black dog the size of a young Newfoundland breed. But it had two tails, glowing red eyes and long white fangs coming from the matching muzzles of its three heads. The beast bounded around the room, barking in loud, low tones. Seeing it approach, Ford leaped up and grabbed a nearby chair, holding it in front of him like a lion tamer.

“Keep back!” Ford shouted, stepping in front of Soos and pushing him back protectively with one arm. “It's just a juvenile, but even at this age they can be deadly! Soos, tell me your grandmother has some crucifixes lying around...”

“Well yeah, of course. But you really don't have to--”

“Go get them, quickly. I'll keep it disoriented until we can drive it off. Stan, try and clear a path, but keep your hands away from its--”

“No!” A sharp, authoritative voice came from the front door, cutting Ford off mid-sentence. The hellhound froze.

“No, Pawzuzu!” Pacifica walked in, hands on hips. “No jumping! Sit!”

The three-headed pup whined submissively and lowered its rear to the floor, still wagging with excitement.

“Sorry for scaring you, Mr. Pines.” Pacifica sighed, “She's usually so well behaved. She's just excited with so many new people here.”

“Fascinating...” Ford lowered the chair, looking at the beast with new interest. “You've actually managed to tame and train a fifth-circle hellhound? How did you overcome its hunger for human souls?”

“Snausages.” Pacifica said, scritching the top of Pawzuzu's head until her tails thumped loudly against the floor. “And a lot of patience...”

“Pacificaaaa!” Mabel cried, pulling Pacifica into a hug. “It's so good to see you!”

Pacifica smiled. “Yeah...uh...it's, pretty okay to see you too, I guess.”

“Aaah, and you're wearing the earrings I Made you!” Mabel pulled back, squeezing Pacifica's hands. “Oh my gosh, they look so pretty on you!”

“Aaaaaaugh!” Mabel squealed, dropping Pacifica’s hands. “I missed you so much! I missed everyone so much!” She wrapped an arm around Dipper’s neck and pulled him back into her, grabbed his shoulders and shook him back and forth. “I can’t believe we’re all here!”

“Calm down!” Dipper laughed, pulling his sister off him.

“Can’t! Too excited!” Mabel grinned, hands shaking. “You know it’s been over a year since the whole gang’s gotten back together!”

“Heh, yeah...I know.” Dipper smiled, rubbing his neck where she’d grabbed him. “Just try not to explode, okay?”

“No promises!” Mabel laughed, running off.

“If you have time, I’d really like to hear more about—Pawzuzu, was it?” Ford put a hand on Pacifica’s shoulder. “Where did the three of you find her? I thought the Gravity Falls hellmouth had been sealed for centuries...”

The two of them chatted for a while, Pacifica talking to Ford about her experiences while he occasionally asked questions or paused to jot down notes in a new little journal he pulled out of his jacket. Pawzuzu sniffed around them, curling up at Pacifica’s feet while they talked. Stan, meanwhile, had taken a seat on the floor to better allow the children to climb over him. From the looks of things, he was sharing stories of monster fighting with Grenda.

Dipper and Wendy had parked themselves by the table of snacks Soos had set out and were continuing whatever conversation they’d had in the car over tiny spicy sausages and cakes. Mabel barely sat still for a moment. She hopped from one part of the room to another, talking loudly, laughing freely, joining in one conversation, then another, then another. As if afraid to miss a moment of time with anyone. Soos just stood in the back and watched.

“You okay?” Melody’s voice came from behind him. “Do we need to enact operation Delta Theta Gamma?”

*Delta Theta Gamma* was what they called it when Melody took over hosting duties for a while because Soos had to go somewhere and cry a whole bunch. Given that his whole family was coming back home, he’d figured he’d be needing operation D-T-G today.

“Nah...I’m fine.” Soos smiled and wiped the corners of his eyes on his sleeve. “Thanks for checking, though.” He kissed her on the cheek, and went to sit with the others.

For a while, the whole crowd sat together, chatting, telling jokes and catching up with one another. After a while, Stan stood up—finally pulling away from the kids—and went over to the liquor shelf.

“All right,” he said, pulling out a glass. “I’m pouring drinks. Anyone want anything?”

“Right here!” Mabel called cheerfully. “Could I have a rum and cola with grenadine and three cherries?”

“Mabel! We’re still only twenty.” Dipper said.

“For like, three more months!” Mabel rolled her eyes. “I still can’t believe you’ve made it through two and a half years of college without tasting alcohol.”

“Now, now.” Ford said, lifting his own glass. “If Dipper doesn’t want to drink, you shouldn’t be...”
pressuring him.”

“Thank you, Great Uncle Ford,” Dipper said, smiling at Mabel with a look that suggested he was sticking his tongue out, even when it was kept tucked away in his mouth.

“Nuts to that!” Mabel hopped up and yanked the cocktail out of Stan’s hand, holding it in front of Dipper's face. “I'm pressuring the heck outta you! Peer pressure! Peer pressure! Peer pressure!” she began chanting.

“Peer pressure! Peer pressure!” Wendy took up the chant, followed by Pacifica, Candy and Grenda. Whether it was because they wanted to see Dipper drinking or they just got caught up in the act of chanting, Soos didn't know. The chant thing had certainly happened to him before.

“Peer pressure, peer pressure!” the chant continued. “Chug, chug, chug, chug!”

“Fine.” Dipper rolled his eyes and took the glass from Mabel’s hand. He took the smallest, daintiest sip possible and handed it back to her. “There.”

“Woohoo!” Mabel grabbed Dipper and pulled him into an enormous hug, drink splashing over the edge of her glass she did so. “I got my bro to drink with me!”

Soos smiled at the twins as they held each other and laughed. He wondered if the little dudette had actually wanted Dipper to drink, or just wanted him to join her in something. Either way, their laughter was cut off pretty quickly when some loud boom and crash noises came from the kitchen. Soos heard Abulita calmly calling out “It's fine, it's fine...” but it was hard to hear her under the smoke alarm.

“Soos, I’ve got a great idea for your next attraction, Soos--” Stan said, gesturing dramatically. “Ford and I ran into this sucker out in the Norwegian Sea. You ever seen a fish with two heads? Well this one had about fifty heads. It was nothing but heads, looked like a buncha grapes, except those grapes all had eyes and teeth and a couple of fins sticking out.”
“Whoa.” Soos smiled. “I bet I could make something like that out of cabbages...How did it know which way to swim?”

“Beats me—it got caught in our net by mistake, so it wasn't swimming anywhere.” Stan switched to Spanish. “Ford wanted to take samples before we let it go, but it must've had some kind of predator defense or something. Cause the second he got near it, four or five of its heads burst open and sent green goo flying everywhere, mostly all over him.” Stan laughed. “He stunk like burning hair and rotten tuna for a week after that...don't tell him I told you so, though.”

Soos grinned. “Man...imagine if I had fifty heads. I could watch the kids in every room in the Shack at once. I'd be, like, the ultimate dad.”

Stan snorted and gave Soos a punch in the arm. “The ultimate something, that's for sure.”

From inside the kitchen, Soos overheard Ford muttering to Abulita in Spanish. “I don't know why they think I wouldn't be able to learn Spanish. I speak seventeen languages, only six of them are of earth origin.”

“Your pronunciation is better than Mister Stan's.” Abulita remarked in the same. “He talks like a mush-mouthed little boy. It's cute.” She passed him a wad of dough and gestured for him to start kneading it. He obeyed. “Let them think they have secrets.” Abulita said. “It's good for boys to feel like they have secrets. It makes them independent.”

“Heh. Good advice.” Ford said.

Soos was starting to get the impression he shouldn't be overhearing this. But odds were good he'd forget about it by nightfall.

“Mr. McGucket is here!” Candy's voice came from outside.

Ford stuck his head out of the kitchen when he heard that. (Soos wondered if he'd noticed that his hair was on fire.)

“What?” he asked. “Hold on, I'll be right out.” He stood up straight and dusted the flour off his sweater, walking back into the living room. On the way, he passed a mirror and glanced in, straightening his glasses and extinguishing his hair.

“Watch your step,” Candy's voice came from the porch. “That floorboard is still loose.”

“Ahh, don't fuss about me, Candy.” McGucket said, appearing in the doorway with Candy hovering behind him. His long beard was tied up with a bunch of ponytail holders, and he was dressed in slacks, sandals and a t-shirt displaying a character from Robot Angel Fighting Team. “I might be old but I'm still plenty spry.”

“Oh!” Grenda smiled, reaching down to pet the chittering creature that scampered in after them. “He brought his pet raccoon, too!”

“'Pet' raccoon?” Pacifica smirked. “Did the divorce papers finally go through, then?”

Ford glared back at her briefly before turning to McGucket. “Fiddleford...it's good to see you again.”

“You too, old friend.” McGucket smiled, reaching out a hand and pulling the other old man into a hug. “You two been keeping safe out there?”
You know us. 'Safe' is a concept we never really mastered. But we get by all right.” Ford smiled, reaching into the satchel at his side and pulling out a strange, beeping mechanism. “Which reminds me...is this yours? We found it attached to the underside of the Stan-O-War.”

“You're darn tootin' it's mine!” McGucket said, poking Ford in the chest. “Someone's gotta try and keep tabs on the two of you while you're off galivanting somewhere in those icy waters looking for monsters that'll eat ya as soon as look at ya!”

Ford chuckled and rubbed the back of his neck. “Well...it isn't that I don't appreciate the concern. Just...please, next time warn us when you're going to put a tracking device on our ship. We almost had matching heart attacks when we found it—until we saw the 'McGucket Labs' label on the side, that is.”

“Don't feel bad, though.” Stan came up behind Ford and put an arm around his shoulders. “At least you just put it on the boat. A few months ago I got kidnapped by pirates for a week. Two days after I got back, I woke up in the middle of the night and found Sixer here trying to put a chip in my ear!”

“I told you, Stanley, I was going to wait until you woke up!” Ford protested. “I was going to ask you first...Besides, you'd been saying how you were thinking about getting an earring. I just thought, well, why not make it functional as well?”

McGucket chuckled at the two of them, and accepted a cup of sasparilla from Melody as he found a seat with the others.

When everyone was settled in, Ford went to stand at the front of the room, clearing his throat to get their attention.

“All right.” Ford's tone turned serious. “You're all probably wondering why we've called everyone here. And as much as I'd like to say it was just an excuse for a reunion, I'm afraid there are darker forces at work.” He glanced at Stan, who was feeding a cracker to Waddles under the coffee table. “Stanley? Perhaps you should be the one to explain...”

“Hmm?” Stan looked up, dropping the cracker—a look on his face like he'd been caught in some criminal act. “Oh, right, right. Sure.”

Stan took a sip of his drink and stood up, facing the crowd. “So, basically, we think Bill was never fully erased from my mind. He's probably coming back, and if he is we're all going to die.”

Soos dropped the tray he was carrying and stared. The whole room fell silent, shocked faces staring at Stan. Ford's face dropped into his palm.

Stan looked around at the faces of his family, grinned and clapped his hands. “So! Are those empanadas I smell?”

AVQ XYWA JVIZH WOIDBNG HPUSMUU GT J-PQXO'G QRJVMRASP KSUPI. WOIDBNG PPYQW ZWZRLFE.
“Wh-what?” Dipper asked. “Bill's coming back? But how? You said that we got rid of him for good...” Stan saw Mabel reflexively scoot closer to her brother and reach for his hand. Dipper took it and squeezed tightly.

“Now, calm down. We don't yet have any reason to assume the worst.” Ford said, “But we should be prepared for it all the same.”

“But...what do you mean, he wasn't erased?” Mabel's brow furrowed. “Grunkle Stan, are you okay?”

“Is the whole town going to start glowing again?” Pacifica wrapped her arms around herself. “Are...are things going to get as bad as they were before?”

“Can we stop him? There's a way to stop him, isn't there Great Uncle Ford?” Dipper asked.

The room filled with murmurs and uneasy questions. Ford held his hands out in a calming gesture.

“Please, please, settle down everyone. As I said, we don't yet know that Bill is capable of returning to our dimension or gaining physical form again.” Ford said.

“Is he still in Grunkle Stan's mind?” Dipper asked.

“We have...compelling evidence that he is, yes. But it's possible that whatever fragment of Bill remains in Stan's mind is too weak to do any real harm.”

“Yeah.” Stan tapped the side of his head with his fist, hoping to lighten the mood a little. “He might just be floating around in there, stuck in my memories of the 80s.” He shuddered. “Ugh. So much hair spray.”

“But we have to take any sign of Bill's presence as a serious threat. And that's why we need to be prepared for a fight.” Ford said. “Everybody here has one thing in common—you were all there that day at the Fearamid....or, in the case of Melody and Ms. Ramirez, you're close family of someone who was. Either you were fighting Bill in the Shack-tron like Candy and Grenda, or you were inside while they bravely provided a distraction.”

“We are drift compatible!” Candy grinned, exchanging a high-five with Grenda.
“...Right.” Ford raised an eyebrow. “As I was saying...most of you were there when the prophesied zodiac came together...but...then didn't end up working for reasons beyond our control.” he added, glancing up at the ceiling. “Which were nobody's fault, really.”

“You've got to be kidding me, that was your fault!” Pacifica glared, pointing at Stan and Ford. “You two couldn't stop fighting for five minutes when everyone's lives were on the—mmf!”

Pacifica was cut off when Mabel stuffed a sweet roll in her mouth. Her eyes widened in surprise, then she resentfully settled down and started chewing.

“...Regardless of why, the zodiac was interrupted that day and was never used. But we've gathered nearly everyone who was destined to be a part of it here today.”

“Everone except Robbie.” Wendy said. “He's still in Prague 'finding himself.' Can you believe I used to go out with that guy?”

“I believe it.” Pacifica said, a half-eaten sweet roll in her hand.

“Yes, that reminds me...where is the Gleeful boy?” Ford asked. “He had some extensive dealings with Cipher as a child, wasn't he supposed to be invited here too?”

“Maybe his invitation got lost in the mail, or in the paper shredder or something.” Mabel said with an exaggerated shrug. “I mean, he still lives in Gravity Falls so we can get him in an emergency. And with Robbie gone we can't form the zodiac anyway so does it even matter it doesn't let's move on.” Mabel took the half eaten roll from Pacifica's hand and popped it in her own mouth, quieting down.

“Can that kerjigger even be put back together now?” McGucket asked. “All the symbols've been changed around.” He pointed to the fez on Soos, reflecting the symbol that had once been Stan's.

“I can't say for certain whether or not it would work again. To be honest, I'm not entirely sure what it would have done if we'd successfully formed it back at the Fearamid, beyond stopping Bill. But the prophecy identified the people who were there in that moment. Any associations we might have had with the symbols since then are irrelevant. It's us. It always has been, and it always will be.”

“Is that why you called us all together?” Soos asked, grinning. “Are we gonna hold hands and blast Bill out of Stan's mind with the power of friendship?”

“No.” Ford said.


“At least, that isn't the Plan yet. We should try to get the Valentino boy back in Gravity Falls again if we can, we may need that level of firepower. But first we need to understand what we're fighting.” Ford put a hand on Stan's shoulder. “We need to figure out just what was left in Stan's mind, and how powerful it is. Then, we need to root it out, and destroy it by whatever means are necessary.”

The room fell silent at that...quiet as a tomb, Stan thought. He looked around. Everyone was grim-faced, and no one was meeting his eyes. No one but Mabel that is. She was staring straight at him with a look of worry on her face that cut straight deep to his heart.

“But, uh, hey.” He smiled, elbowing Ford in the side. “That can wait until tomorrow, right? I
mean...We all just got here, y'know? We deserve a break tonight.” He looked back out at the
roomful of solemn faces. His eyes met Mabel's again, and he smiled and winked at her. To his
great relief, he saw a weak smile start to spread over her face.

“Grunkle Stan's right...” she said. “We're not gonna let that three-sided jerk scare us. We beat Bill
before, and we'll beat him again! The important thing is that we're all together again.” She
squeezed Dipper's hand and held it over her head. “As a family! And we're not gonna let a little
thing like impending doom keep us from having fun!”

“Whoo!” Wendy stood up, pumping her fist in the air. “Heck yeah! Let's party like the world's
ending...again!”

Something in their energetic shouts pierced the air and chased away the heavy silence that had
settled over the room. People started smiling again, murmuring approval and cheering back. Stan
smiled gratefully at the sight. He glanced at Ford, the only one whose face still had a solemn look
on it...but when he met Stan's eyes, Ford smiled back too.

Not long after that, Soos's grandmother came in to announce that dinner was ready and the family
eagerly filed into the next room. Stan didn't follow after, not right away at least. He hung back
instead, watching the others leave. Just savoring the sight of everyone—the kids toddling after
Soos and Melody. Dipper and Mabel, who he still couldn't help thinking of as kids themselves. All
their friends and family...everyone smiling again. Everyone relieved.

He was grateful to Mabel for leading the cheer. He wanted to have this night...just an evening of
food and drink and conversation. Maybe a few games, some catching up...everyone still happy, not
worrying over Bill. He wanted that. He needed that.

He felt a familiar presence behind him, knew it was Ford without even looking. Stan kept watching
until everyone had filed into the dining room, Waddles trailing lazily behind them. Ford only spoke
when the room was emptied of everyone else.

“I know what you're thinking.” he said.

Stan raised an eyebrow, offering him a weak smile. “Yeah? You wearing an invisible mind-reading
helmet or something?”

“I don't need one when it comes to you. ...Also, most mind-reading technology requires
subcutaneous implants, you can't take it on and off like a helmet.”

“Pfft. Pardon me.” Stan rolled his eyes. Ford's hand fell on his shoulder.

“...Listen to me. Even if I considered your life an acceptable price to pay to destroy Bill, we have
no idea what will happen to him if you die. Your death could just as easily free him from wherever
he's trapped in your mind. And if that happens, we don't stand much chance of caging him again
this time around.”

Stan kept looking out at the empty room. He didn't answer...there wasn't really any point in trying
to deny what he'd had in the back of his mind since they got here...since he was surrounded by so
many reminders of what was at stake.

“Quite frankly...we need to keep you safe now for the sake of the universe as much anything else.”
Ford added.
“Guess I didn't think about that.” Stan admitted.

“Well think about it now.” Ford said firmly. “And don't get any dumb ideas in your head about hurting yourself to protect us.”

“But dumb ideas are the only kind I get.” Stan smiled at him, hoping to bring in some levity.

“Not this time.” Ford replied, unsmiling. “Don't forget what you said to me before. Nothing's going to take you away from your family. I certainly hope you meant that when you said it.”

“All right, all right. You made your point.” Stan shrugged Ford's hand off his shoulder and elbowed him gently. “Guess I'll have to start showing an ounce or two of self-preservation.”

"See that you do." Ford said. "Because I plan for you to have plenty more nights like tonight."

_________________________

“Good night!” Grenda called, opening the door to her Jeep. “See you tomorrow!”

“You sure you dudes don't want to stay the night?” Soos asked.

“In the lab? Pfft, no thanks.” Pacifica said. “I've already woken up to the smell of burning circuitry too many times. Besides, you've got five guests already. We'll see you in the morning.”

“Okay...drive safe!” He waved as the car sped away. Mr McGucket's chauffeur had already come to pick him up. Things were finally starting to wind down. To be honest, Soos had completely lost track of the time...it was  way past the kids' bedtimes, and time to be rounding them up.

Seph had been found curled up in a corner behind the Sascrotch, and had been easy to coax upstairs. Chestaur had been more difficult—he rarely went to bed without a fight, but Melody had managed to get his teeth brushed and his mane groomed. Now it was Soos's job to find the last little member of their family, who seemed to have disappeared completely. He wandered around the house for a while, calling her name and peeking in all her hiding places, before it occurred to him to check the back porch.

He should have known. He found Lee curled up on the battered old couch out on the porch, in the lap of someone else who'd been absent for a while. Stan sat on the couch, sipping at a can of soda from the case that Soos had made sure to stash under the couch (right where Stan used to keep one) before he'd arrived. He was looking out at the trees and at the sky, one hand on Lee's head, absentely stroking her hair while she slept snuggled into him.

Soos smiled and took a seat beside them. Stan glanced at him, nodded, then turned his gaze back to the treeline.

“Nice night tonight, isn't it?” Soos said.

“I never thought I'd miss the view from this porch as much as I did.” he muttered. “On nights like tonight you can even see the glow coming off that one weird mountain to the east.”

“Heh...yeah.”

The two of them sat in an easy silence for a while.

“For so long I wanted to escape this old place.” Stan said quietly.
Soos looked at him, a little shocked. “Escape it? But...I thought...you loved the Shack...”

“Sure I do. But you can love something and hate it a little bit. My brother and I know a lot about that.” He smiled. “I stayed here for thirty years because I couldn't leave until I got Ford back. It was home, sure. But there were some days when the windows might as well have had bars on them...every rickity beam or badly patched hole just another sign that everything was fallin' apart around me. Everything of Ford's just a reminder of what I kept failing to do.”

Soos was quiet at that. It made sense. Even before he'd known half the reasons why, he'd always known there was a sadness in Stan, something that got better and worse over the years.

“But you've done a great job with her. You and Melody, and the kids...” He stroked the back of Lee's sleeping head. “You made the old place into a real home.”

Something warmed in Soos at the praise, and he shuffled his feet on the porch boards. “Heh. Yeah..I've got a pretty great family, don't I? And I have the best job in the whole world. Maybe someday if I keep working at it, I'll even be as good as the real Mr. Mystery.” he smiled.

He hadn't meant the comment to be self-deprecating. It had been a little joke, a nod to Stan and all that he'd taught him during his years working at the Shack. But something about it must have rubbed Stan the wrong way, because he wasn't laughing. Wasn't even smiling back.

“Are you kidding?” Stan said, frowning. “Soos...I was gonna close this place down. I was ready to toss all those years in the Shack out the door.”

Soos looked down at his hands, squirming...he didn't like to think about that.

“...I've seen you giving tours here.” Stan continued. “You put everything into it. I had my old dog-and-pony show. Work the crowds, make up some wild stories, throw in a few wisecracks so that even if they didn't buy it they were laughing. But you found your own way of doing it. You get them to see the Shack the way you see it.” He smiled and looked up at the sky. “Hell, you even got me to see it through your eyes. You were right, Soos. This place is full of dreams.”

Soos felt his throat tighten. Hoo boy. Where was operation Delta Theta Gamma when you needed it? His mind slowly fumbled around for words that could possibly express what he was feeling...even just a quiet thank you wouldn't form on his tongue.

“You've done good, son.” Stan murmured.

Son.

That one word hit Soos square in the chest, stopping his thoughts in their tracks. The one syllable that had slipped so casually out of Stan's mouth, son, son, son, son...Stan seemed to realize what he'd said a moment later and shifted nervously, trying to play it off.


But it was far too late, Soos was already crying. He pulled Stan into a tight embrace, tears streaming down his cheeks.

“Thanks, dad.” he whispered.

Stan smiled, his voice tight, and hugged back. “All right, all right...enough with the waterworks. You're gonna get me going.” He wiped something from the corner of his eye, and Soos was fully prepared to pretend it was glitter if it would make the old conman happy.
They sat like that until Lee started squirming in her sleep, and Stan let go to shift her in his lap a little

“Thanks for saying it.” Soos said.

“C'mon, you always knew.” Stan replied, keeping his eyes fixed on the stars.

“Heh, yeah...I guess.”

The two of them sat in silence for a while, until Soos spoke up again in a quiet voice.

“...You're gonna be okay...” he asked, “...aren't you?”

“Sure I am.” Stan replied. “We Pines men are tough as nails, aren't we?” he grinned and elbowed Soos gently. “It'll take a lot more than some evil geometry to mess me up.”

“Heheh...yeah.” Soos couldn't keep from grinning at being included among 'Pines men.' Something in Stan's confident manner was very reassuring. “I mean, I've seen you fight a pterodactyl with your bare hands. It's not like you haven't faced anything dangerous before.” He looked down at his feet, smiling. “I mean, if he does come back, you can just hit him with the ol' left hook, right?”

“Dnrm ihtzt.” Stan said.

“...What?”

Soos turned. Stan wasn't looking up anymore—his shoulders had gone limp and his head was dIpped forward over Lee's sleeping form. Like he was nodding off.

“Dnrm ihtzt...wp a p bdg lhd odt tdtrnbwico wes mkeg epnims.” Stan muttered. He slowly lifted his head and turned. His face was slack and his eyes rolled back in their sockets. “Ht ppd p pdmt...iuabqay...pvs twm ai um wes iawpg h dgm pmtl df.”

“Wh-what...what's going on...?” Soos stood up. Stan's voice sounded strange...harsh, like he was in pain. His head turned to the side and his arms closed around Lee, who woke up with a start. Soos reached forward instinctively to pull his daughter back to him, but Stan was holding her so tightly.

“QCI BXB QY QQI...II IAL UMAL PEPY UZDM WQB.” Stan intoned, head back, eyes still blank. “UCBXL WM LAH TTFI EDNSMNGICO LHN PT'D TDTR SZTABMS AI IAL.”

When the others came, attracted by the sounds of shouting, they found Soos holding his bawling daughter close to his chest. Stan was slumped forwards in front of him, unresponsive. Soos could only stroke Stan's face with his free hand, crying “Wake up....please, dad...please wake up....”
Chapter Summary

In which someone finally steps out of the shadows.

Chapter Notes

Thanks as always to the wonderful Scribefindegil for betaing and for the header images!

“Shouldn’t we be doing something for him?” Soos asked, hovering by the door.

Ford shook his head, glancing back into the darkened bedroom where Stan had been tucked in for the night. “There’s nothing we can do, besides keep an eye on him. And be there for him when he wakes up.”

“Is he going to be okay?” Mabel asked. “Should we take him to a hospital or something?”

“A hospital? What would we even tell them?” Dipper replied.

“He doesn’t need a hospital.” Ford said. “Physiologically, what he just went through is very similar to a seizure. Not a nice experience—I had the displeasure of learning that firsthand for a few months thanks to Bill’s interrogation in the Fearamid. He’s going to be exhausted after that. What he needs now is rest.”

Stan was drifting.

His head rested on the flat wooden seat of a tiny fishing boat, the one he used to take out to Gravity Falls Lake sometimes on fair Sunday mornings when he needed a few minutes to clear his head. The one he’d spent a memorable afternoon in fishing with the twins in the summer that Ford came back. It was surprisingly comfortable to lie in.

“But...that wasn’t just a seizure!” Soos protested. “I saw him, he was talking all inside-out, and his eyes were rolled back, and...”

“Shh, shh shh. I know.” Ford put a hand on Soos’s shoulder, doing his best to calm the rising panic in him. “He had a similar episode while we were at sea. I know that it was frightening...but this only confirms what we already suspected. The plan hasn’t changed. Starting tomorrow, we prepare to go after Bill.”

The slow, steady bobbing of the fishing boat rocked him gently, like a babe in arms. The breeze was just the right temperature and had the faintest hint of salt to it, mingling with something vaguely sweet. He stretched his arms back behind his head and adjusted his position a little. This was a nice spot to rest in. Peaceful. Pleasant.

He pulled his cap forward over his eyes, covering them, and was surprised to feel something
pulling back.

Stan gave the cap another yank, thinking it might just be caught on something, and a force ripped it right out of his hands. He looked up and found himself staring into a pair of cold, yellow eyes.

“Go and get some sleep.” Ford said to Soos. “We could all use a good rest given the task ahead of us. I’ll stay with Stanley tonight.” He placed a hand on Dipper's back and another on Mabel's.

“That means you two as well, come on.”

Dipper sighed and glanced back into the room, where Stan's sleeping form was just visible. He was turned away from the door, the blankets slowly shifting up and down as be breathed.

“Well...at least he can sleep after tonight.” Dipper sighed, reluctantly heading for the stairs.

“Hope he's having nice dreams.”

Ford stood in the doorway, watching the others go. Stan stopped snoring for a moment. He muttered something in his sleep, then resumed his regular breathing. Ford knew from experience that the dreamscape was as vast and deep as any ocean he and Stan had ever had occasion to sail on. And he also knew there were horrors lurking in its depths.

“Dammit!” Stan sat up and reached forward, trying to grab the cap out of Gompers' mouth. “Give it back, ya filthy...animal....”

Stan trailed off as the little goat turned to the side. He had a second head growing out where his tail should be, like the pushme-pullyou from a story his mother had read to him when he was little. Down the middle, where the two halves of the goat connected was his own careful, uneven stitch—the kind of sewing job found on half the exhibits in the Mystery Shack.

Stan gaped as Gompers raised up onto his back legs, dropping the cap out from the mouth of his upper head. It landed in the grass....yes, the grass. Stan realized his boat was bobbing on the softly undulating lawn outside the Mystery Shack. Gompers's second head picked the cap up and started chewing.

“U TGNQ XTM KEQPX WX QAYD KGDAKZM.” Gompers's top head said. “AX KSG’L BMEX OPSFSI UB, A OAYXL KLAT FZQA2ZK FW WSF CACJ UXSFPPWK.” The creature pulled a pipe from behind its back and stuck it in its mouth, walking backwards into the forest.

“Ooooh...kaayaay.” Stan turned his gaze to the ground around his boat. Despite its overgrown grassy appearance, it still rippled like the surface of the water. Fiji mermaids, the kind he used to make by gluing half a trout to the mummified remains of small monkeys, swam in it, heads occasionally breaking the surface and winking at him.

He reached a hand out and pressed it down on the ground, testing the solidity. It seemed like it would hold his weight. Carefully, he stepped out onto it and found it was every bit as solid as normal.

“This...this is a dream.” Stan muttered, walking slowly to the door of the Shack. “I'm dreaming.”

The Shack's interior was larger than Stan ever remembered it being. Hallways curved and turned where they should have ended. Doorways opened into new doorways that hadn't ever been there before. Even as Stan thought to himself that he could easily get lost in the maze of this place, he felt himself being drawn deeper inside. There was something he was looking for. Something he knew was there, if he could only just remember where it was.

Someone was watching him, he knew. There was a presence he felt peering out from every crack.
A gaze on the back of his neck that was as real and solid as a hand or a rope. When he finally hit a dead end, Stan grabbed a lamp from an end table, spinning around and holding it close, ready to lash out and strike at whoever was behind him.

The one he'd always known was there.

The face in front of him—if one could even call it a face, there was so little on it that could form an expression, just one cold eye and the texture of brick—was what he'd been looking for since he entered the Shack. It was what he expected to find. But finally seeing Bill up close, in front of him and not hiding away in the shadows, was enough of a shock that the lamp he'd been holding slipped from his fingers and shattered on the ground.

“You!” Stan shouted, surprise turning quickly into anger. “What are you doing here in—”

Stan paused. Bill was speaking his words along with him, saying the exact same thing as he did, the moment he said it.

“What are you—” Stan and Bill said in unison. “Stop that!” they continued. Stan paused. Bill maintained eye contact. “Seven bulldog table gargle. How are you doing that?” Stan and Bill spoke together.

“You think it's annoying for you,” Bill said, “think of what I've been going through. I've been having the same conversation with you almost every night for years now. Like most things in this train wreck you call a mind, it's boring.”

“What do you mean, the same conveSation every night?” Stan asked.

Bill sighed and rolled his eye like an annoyed teenager. “Most nights, anyway. You're always surprised to see me. It's only when you sleep that you're deep enough in your own mind to talk to me. When you wake up, you forget.”

“I have to tell Ford, there must be—” Stan stopped talking when he realized that Bill was talking with him again.

“Save it.” Bill said. “Believe me, we've been through this. There isn't any way to remember.”

Stan shut his mouth tightly, if only because he didn't want to give the little bastard the satisfaction of mirroring his words again. Had he really been speaking to Bill in his dreams every night? Every night for the past seven years? Was it possible?

There was something...faintly familiar about all this. He couldn't remember actually seeing Bill in his mind before. But there was still some distant recognition...it reminded him of when his memories went foggy on him. Ford would always try to talk him through it, and even when he didn't understand anything there's that distant feeling that he'd heard it all before, over and over again.

He told himself that it didn't matter...Ford already knew Bill was still in his mind, he didn't need to be warned. But he wished he could hold onto something, bring something back to the surface....

“When you wake up you'll just remember having a dream about sailing or drowning or something dumb like that.” Bill continued, “So can we please move on from—”

Bill was cut off as Stan's fist barreled into the center of his eye, knocking him backwards out of the air. The punch landed solidly with a satisfying weight to it, and Stan was pleased to find Bill's form had just as much physicality here as it had that one fateful night in the Fearamid. Nothing dream-
like about that. Nothing insubstantial about the way he went careening through the air, skidding across the ground and hitting the opposite wall with a beautiful thunk.

“Okay.” Stan cracked his knuckles and took a step closer to Bill, “If what you're saying is true, if I can't use any of this when I wake up 'cause I'm not going to remember it, then it doesn't really matter what I do here, right?” he asked “So I guess I'll just beat the snot outta you until sunup.” He pulled his fist back for a second swing.

“Wait, wait!” Bill held up his tiny hands, just barely scooting back in time to avoid the blow. He looked genuinely panicked. “You know, you've got a pretty unique situation here. Not many people get to experience full, lucid dreaming! You could create entire worlds here. Travel deep through your subconscious. There's got to be something you'd like to do with that power more than you want to beat on me for a few hours!”

“Hmm. Nope. Can't think of a thing.” Stan grinned, stepping forward. “I'm gonna enjoy this.”

This time, Bill nimbly dodged Stan's fist and floated up and around him, hovering just out of reach.

“Don't be like that. We could have some fun together.” Bill said.

Stan took another swing at him, but he was too high to reach. He distantly wondered if he could float too, if he wanted. This was a dream and all. But when Stan had dreams about flying, they usually ended with a ten mile plummet to the ground. He decided not to try it.

“I've been in your brother's Mind too, y'know.” An image of Ford flashed in Bill's eye. “I know things about him he's never told, even to you.”

“Not interested.” Stan lied. He folded his arms, wondering if he could grab one of those dangling legs and yank the triangle back down to the ground. He'd have to wait for the right moment.

“Aww, c'mon Stanley. Don't you want to know how many times he almost called you up back in the seventies?”

Stan felt something stir deep in him. Ford had never mentioned looking for him during those ten years. He tried to keep it from showing on his face, but either he let something slip through or Bill just sensed his interest, because he floated slightly closer. Still too far to grab.

“He hasn't told you about that, has he? I know, because I can see him through your eyes. He's never mentioned it once.”

“Believe it or not, I'm not as dumb as I look.” Stan growled, glaring up at him. “I'm not taking the bait. I don't play rigged games.”

“Not a game, not a trick. Not a deal or anything like that. Just a way to pass the time. Something to do instead of spending the night hitting me...again.” He added the last word with an irritable roll of his eyeball. “You don't have to shake my hand. ...Heck, you don't even have to say yes...just watch...”

Bill held up a hand and the scenery around them shifted. One of the Shack's walls splintered and fell away, and on the other side of it was Ford...not the one he'd left in the waking world, but a different one. A younger one, sitting in the kitchen of his house in Gravity Falls, years before it became the Mystery Shack. He was nibbling the end of a pen and looking at something in the newspaper...maybe solving a crossword puzzle. He looked young. It was hard to remember ever being as young as that.
Stan squirmed. He didn't trust anything that came from this demon, and he didn't feel comfortable seeing something from Ford's memories like this. It felt like an intrusion. A violation, even...if there was something in Ford's past he wanted to tell Stan, he'd tell him in his own time.

But...he'd always assumed that Ford just hadn't tried looking him up until he was desperate enough to call on him for help. They'd talked before about those years, the ten years they were apart after their father threw Stan out like yesterday's garbage. Ford had told him a lot about what he'd been doing...his time in college, feeling like he'd finally hit his stride and found a purpose for himself in Gravity Falls...then the slow decline of everything as Bill drew him further into the portal project and ultimately betrayed him. And Ford had heard Stan's stories too...he knew how much it would have meant to Stan in all those years if he'd gotten even a phone call from Ford...

If his brother had looked for him then, even briefly...why had he never mentioned it?

Bill took his silence as consent, (and was he wrong? Stan could have told him to stop, could close his eyes and cover his ears, but he didn't) and the image started moving, the memory began to play out. Stan knew he didn't have to watch. He could turn away. But...if he was going to forget it anyway, it wasn't really intruding on anything, right? It wouldn't matter in the end. May as well watch anyway.

The easiest con is tricking someone into doing what they already want to do. And a good con artist can always con himself.

The room around Ford was a mess, but not the weeks-old layered up mess it had been when Stan was called down there almost forty years ago. Just the usual never-does-the-dishes, only-washes-his-clothes-when-he-starts-to-stink (if then) mess he long ago learned to expect from his nerdy brother when he was involved in one of his projects. Stan smiled a little as Ford flipped through the paper, sipping at a mug of coffee beside him.

Something seemed to catch Ford's eye and he frowned, slamming the paper down on the table.

“Oh, come on!” he snapped. “Honestly Stanley, is this what you're doing with yourself now?”

Stan nearly jumped at his name. For a moment, he thought the image of Ford was addressing him directly. But then he saw where his brother was looking and he understood. In the corner of the paper was an ad he just barely recognized—from long, long ago. Back when he was trying out some of his mom's old tricks, doing tarot readings and telling people they were gonna be rich and famous. He was surprised the little paper he'd taken an ad out in had wide enough distribution to make it up to central Oregon, but there it was. His own face grinning up at him from under the silly turban he'd picked out for the photo.

Below the photograph was a number to call, a blurb about “the Mysterious Martin Oakley” and all the time he'd spent studying mysticism in the far east (the closest thing to truth the ad had in it. He may not have been developing psychic powers there but by this point he'd spent seven months in Shenzhen and another two in Luang Prabang—where he became deeply grateful that he'd spent the entirety of the Vietnam war living outside the system and safe from the draft.) That must have been what caught Ford's eye.

“Perfect.” Ford muttered. “I'll probably have half the town bothering me about this because they saw your picture and thought it was me! Isn't it enough to make a mess of your own life without intruding on mine?”

Stan caught Bill smiling out of the corner of his eye. “Brotherly love, am I right?” Bill said.
“So, what? Am I supposed to be surprised here? Upset?” Stan shrugged. “You think I didn’t know how he felt about me back then? You think I never said anything just as rotten about him during those ten years? It’s in the past.”

It wasn’t really a bluff, honestly. Sure, it stung to hear something like that from this memory of Ford. But he knew when he woke up, his brother—the one who was real, not just a fading memory—would be there. His brother who loved him, who would stick by his side no matter what. Who was probably already worried sick over the scene Bill had made him cause last night.

The scene he’d caused last night...Stan had almost forgotten about that. All he really remembered was nodding off while talking to Soos...then seeing the poor kid's terrified face while he was shaking him, begging him to wake up. The image made Stan’s jaw clench.

“I’m pretty sure you traumatized Soos for life.” He said matter-of-factly, not letting anything show in his voice.

“Ha, ha...yeah.” Bill chuckled, as if sharing a joke. “Not easy to do with someone as thick-headed as him, of course.”

“You’re gonna pay for that.” Stan promised.

“Just keep watching.” Bill said, pointing to the hole in the wall that the memory was visible though. “This is where it starts to get good.”

While Stan's attention was away, the memory seemed to have skipped forward in time. The kitchen was empty and the night sky was visible through the window. There was the distant sound of the door opening and then Ford staggered in, looking muddy and exhausted. He’d clearly just spent a day stomping through the woods doing who knows what out there. A backpack was strapped to his back along with some kind of weapon. He tossed them both down and sat in the kitchen chair. He pulled a tape recorder out of his coat—something he'd use when he was too tired to write—and spoke into it.

“Experiment #210 still hasn't been recaptured. Trying to track him in the woods is challenging to the point of futility, given that his tracks could take the form of anything from human footprints, to the tracks of a deer, or a cluster of beetles.”

“Still, all other projects will have to be put on hold until I can find him.” Ford continued, “he's become uncontrollable. Until I know where he is, I'm not safe in my own home...”

As Ford spoke, Stan saw movement in the background behind him. What had looked like a discarded dish towel was growing tiny, insect-like legs, creeping across the sink and then leaping onto the floor. As it moved, it grew—legs extending, dark, gorilla-like arms growing from its sides as it crept closer. Ford seemed oblivious, still talking into his tape recorder.

“He could be anywhere, disguised as anything. Watching me from the forest...inside my own home. Even creeping up right behind me...”

As the creature leaped up to strike at Ford Stan couldn't keep himself from shouting, “Look out!”

It did no good, of course. The shapeshifter, in the form of a nightmarish giant bat, landed on Ford's back and knocked him to the floor. Ford's reflexes weren't what they eventually would be and he couldn't do much besides scream and lash out wildly. But luck was with him, as one of his flailing limbs landed a blow on the bat creature's snout. It screamed in pain, falling back.

“Pfft! He can't hear you, dummy!” Bill laughed. “All of this already happened!”
“I know that. Also, shut up.” Stan muttered, watching as Ford grabbed a chair and tried to drive the creature back with it. He felt his hands twitching, unconsciously moving in time, as if he could move Ford's fists with his and fight the battle for him.

But he couldn't. And Ford was outgunned when his foe could change shape—Stan watched helplessly as the creature's arm elongated, lashing out around the chair and yanking Ford's left leg out from under him. He heard his brother scream in pain, heard a cracking noise that he swore he could feel as the creature twisted Ford's leg and threw him towards the other side of the kitchen. Something was broken, or fractured at least. By how loud Ford was screaming, it must have hurt like a motherfucker.

The creature changed forms again, this time turning into something pale and alien-looking. It loomed over Ford, laughing madly. In the back of his mind, Stan tried to remind himself that Ford would be okay. This was in the past. He had to make it out of this alive...but that thought didn't stop his heart from pounding as the creature's arm became an enormous, scythe-like claw. It stood by while Ford stayed curled on the kitchen floor, nursing his leg and moaning.

“Look at me.” the creature said. “I want to see your face.”

Ford muttered something, reaching an arm out in front of him. Trying to crawl away? No...not that. Stan spotted the bag Ford had thrown down when he first entered the kitchen. Ford grabbed something from inside of it and ran his thumb across its side. The object shuddered and beeped in his hand.

“What are you—”

The shapeshifter had barely gotten the words out when Ford hurled the thing at its face. It ducked, but not quickly enough. The little black bomb exploded in a blinding flash of light, with enough force to send the damn thing flying across the room, where it landed with an inhuman shriek by the opposite wall. A huge chunk had been taken out of its left shoulder and the strange flesh of its arm was torn up. By the way its legs groped helplessly underneath it, by the way it struggled and failed to stand, Stan suspected it had worse injuries than what he could see. It was down for the count.

Ford slowly got to his feet, using a chair for support against his weakened left leg, and grabbed the weapon he'd tossed aside when he came in. Some kind of tranq gun, Stan guessed, or at least that was what it looked like. He lifted it to his shoulder and took careful aim.

The creature saw the gun. It turned...but rather than attacking, it changed form again. Stan's stomach clenched to see it—the monster laying on the floor had transformed itself into a familiar, scabby-kneed child with band-aids covering his arms and too many teeth for his face. It was him. It was Stan. The shapeshifter had turned itself into him as a little kid.

“Don't...please!” the voice was all wrong, too sweet and cutesy. Stan supposed that thing must have only seen a photograph of him. “Ford, please don't hurt me! I...I'm scared! I don't wanna go back in that cage!”

“Don't listen to him...” Stan muttered. “You're smarter than that, c'mon....”

“He can't hear you.” Bill said again. “Do I need to write it down so you remember?”

“I can't hear him with you yappin' in my ear.” Stan said.

He kept his gaze on the images in front of him. Ford barely hesitated. He fired a dart into the center of the thing's tiny chest. Then another, and another and another. He kept firing until the childlike
figure before him stopped moving entirely.

Stan exhaled, relieved. Ford, on the other hand, looked shaken. He dropped the gun and slid to the ground, hands trembling, breath shaky. He stared at the unconscious creature on the other side of the room, tears forming in his eyes.

His foot suddenly brushed against something on the floor. The newspaper from that morning, which had fallen to the kitchen tile when the bomb sent the breakfast table flying across the room. Ford picked it up and looked at the ad again. Still shaking, he reached up and knocked the kitchen phone off its cradle. He started to dial...but six digits in he stopped. Stared at the phone, then at the photo in the paper. He sighed heavily and put the phone back. Then he curled up, his chin resting on his knees, and quietly began to cry.

Stan turned. He'd seen enough...he'd seen too much. He felt like a heel for watching.

“That wasn't the only time, of course.” Bill smiled from the air above him. “But ya gotta love the look he gets when he aims a gun at your face. Not the last time he'd end up doing that, am I right?”

Stan clenched his teeth. He might be a heel for watching, but he saw a better target for his anger than himself this time, and it was floating about two and a half feet above his head.

“You know what, Bill? I've listened to you too much tonight.”

Stan crouched and leaped into the air, floating up beside Bill and closing a fist around his leg. He yanked the little equilateral asshole downward and swung, ready to slam him into the wall of the Shack.

But something was wrong...the wall wasn't solid. Bill passed right through it. When Stan dropped him in surprise, he realized he could see through his hands. The world was dissolving around him.

“Ha! Too late for that, pal.” Bill held his hands at the sides of his head and wiggled his fingers mockingly. “Looks like you're waking up. Say hi to ol' Fordsy for me!”

Stan opened his mouth to retort, but everything was dimming, getting foggy.

Someone was shaking him gently. Stan sleepily thrashed a little, trying to pull away.

“Stanley? Are you all right?”

“Mmmnh...” Ford's voice registered in Stan's ears as he groggily pulled himself from sleep. He stopped thrashing. He opened his eyes. “Izzit morning?”

“For another hour or two, yes...I thought I'd let you rest a while, but I knew you wouldn't want to sleep the whole day away.”

Stan yawned, sitting up and stretching. He'd been having a dream about sailing or drowning or something like that. He couldn't exactly remember the details.

“Wait a minute.” He looked skeptically at Ford. “Did you sleep? Or have you been sitting up there all night?”


“Hmm...you didn't sleep well though.” Stan insisted. The bags under Ford's eyes told a story of
“Well...no. But there's not much that I can do about that.” Ford said apologetically.

Stan nodded. He understood. Sometimes you could tuck Ford into bed, give him a glass of warm milk and a shot of brandy and make sure he didn't move until morning, and he'd still be up all night. Tossing and turning and muttering into the pillow.

“How's your leg?” Stan asked.

Ford blinked at him. “My...what?”

“Your leg...didn't you hurt it? Your left leg?”

Ford shook his head. “I don't know what you're talking about, Stanley.”

“I thought...” Stan frowned. Did he just dream about it? The more he tried to remember his dream, the more the details eluded him.

“Nothing happened last night except...well...” he trailed off. “Do you remember what you did on the porch?”

Stan winced. “Yeah, I do. I mean, not the thing itself, but I remember you telling me about it. Guess that wasn't a dream, huh?”

“Unfortunately not.” Ford smiled weakly at Stan. It didn't last long before his expression turned serious. “...You should get dressed. We...the others are waiting. We should all have a talk about this.”

Stan winced, sitting on the side of the bed. “'Have a talk,' yeesh. I remember when Mom used to say that. Usually it meant I screwed up.”

“You didn't do anything wrong.” Ford said firmly. Almost defensively.

Stan looked at Ford a while. The bags under his eyes weren't the only sign of strain on him. He got out of bed and grabbed a pair of slacks from his travel bag, pulling them on over his boxers.

“Okay.” he said, barely glancing back at Ford. “Just promise you're not gonna tell me to cut my hair.”
Chapter Summary

In which Ford explains things and Stan makes sarcastic remarks.

Chapter Notes

Thanks as always to Scribefindegil for beta reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“...Let me know if they're too tight.” Ford said apologetically, closing the cuffs around Stan's wrists.

Stan only grunted in response. Ford searched his face for signs of anxiety, but found nothing. Stan's face was passive, which was troubling. He was being deliberately hard to read. Ford had worried that Stan's history with law enforcement might have left him with some trauma at the idea of having his hands restrained. But when he'd held the cuffs out, Stan had nodded and offered his wrists with no hesitation that Ford could detect.

“Do we really have to do this?” Soos stood behind the chair, frowning. “I mean...he's not acting weird or anything right now...”

The big guy had been hovering around Stan since he emerged from his bedroom, to Stan's feigned annoyance. Ford had been quietly relieved to see that what Bill had put them all through last night hadn't made Soos wary of Stan. If anything, he was more clingy that usual. Worried, just like the rest of them were.

“Enh, it's fine.” Stan waved his cuffed hands dismissively. “He's just playing it safe, in case Bill really takes over. I don't mind.” He grinned at Soos. “Not like it's the first time I've had a pair of these on, right?”

“Do you think that's really a possibility?” Dipper asked from his spot on the edge of the sofa. Mabel was seated on the floor in front of him, knitting to keep her hands busy. There was something very soothing about the rhythmic clack-clack of her needles. It took a little of the edge
off his mood. Ford distantly wondered if, after all this was over, she might be willing to give him a couple of lessons. Scarves and socks certainly seemed like a better use for nervous energy than a pile of chewed-up pens.

“Better to not take the chance.” Ford said. “You know as well as I do what a frightening experience it is to lose control of your body. The least we can do is make sure Bill doesn't hurt anyone if that happens. We have too much at stake to—”

“Grunkle Stan?”

A tiny voice from the doorway made Ford jump. Lee was up. Still in her pajamas, dragging a smiling soft toy behind her—a character from one of her cartoons.

“Hey, pipsqueak.” Stan smiled, deftly hiding his wrists behind crossed legs. “How'd ya sleep?”

“Okaaaay.” she said, hanging back by the door. “Papi says you were just playing last night?”

It came out as a question, as uncertainty. She might not be old enough to fully understand what was going on—heck, sometimes Ford didn't think he was old enough to understand it—but she picked up on more than people expected. It seemed that children were like that. Always underestimated.

“That's right, sugarplum.” Stan said.

“I didn't like it. You played too scary.” Lee approached him hesitantly, frowning.

Stanley pulled his hands out from behind his leg—where had the handcuffs gone?—and reached down to ruffle her hair.

“Sorry about that. You know your old Grunkle Stan gets carried away sometimes.”

“Well, I don't like it.”

“Yeesh, I said I was sorry.” Stan said, “Whadaya want from me?”
Lee considered for a while, then held out her stuffed toy. “You gotta apologize to Wander. ’Cause he got scared too.”

“All right, all right.” He rolled his eyes and patted the little creature. “Sorry Wander.”

“And give him a kiss.” Lee insisted.

Stan hesitated only a moment before planting a kiss on the toy's fuzzy green hat.

“And give him a twenty.” Lee added.

“All right, you—!” Stan laughed and grabbed Lee, tucking her under his arm and noogieing her as she squealed and laughed. “Chip off the 'ol block you're raising here, Soos!”

“Heh...yeah. I know it.” He held out his hands. “C'mon Lee. Let's get some breakfast in you, huh?”

Stan released Lee from his hold and she nodded, gathering up her toy and taking her father's hand. And that was it...she seemed entirely satisfied with just an apology. With his penchant for practical jokes that usually went a bit too far, Ford supposed it hadn't been the first time that Stanley had “played too scary” with her and had to apologize for it...just the first time there was something worth being scared of behind it.

He marveled at the idea. Imagine being so young and innocent that seeing a loved one possessed by an inter-dimensional demon fell into the same category as seeing that same loved one jump out from behind the couch with a monster mask. It boggled the mind.

“Kids, am I right?” Stan shrugged. Ford gave him a look, and he pulled the handcuffs out from behind his back. “Uh, whoops. Must've picked the lock by accident without realizing it.”

“Stanley...” Ford sighed.

“Okay, okay, for real this time.” Stan held out his hands again.
Ford took them, his grip still gentle, and pulled them behind Stan's back. He made certain the cuffs were tight. He didn't relish restraining his brother like this, but he was determined to hobble Bill.

“The sooner we get Bill out of your head,” Ford said, “the sooner we can stop resorting to measures like this.”

“So what's the plan?” Dipper asked. “We're ready for anything.”

“I'm sure you are.” Ford said. “The plan right now is to do what Bill did. Enter Stan's mind so that we can determine how much of Bill is still in there, ferret him out and, if possible, destroy him.”

“That should be easy for us.” Mabel grinned. “We did it before, didn't we?”

“Yeah,” Stan muttered. “And I'm still hearing synthesized music in my nightmares.”

“This will be more difficult. From what you described of your first encounter with Bill, he left Stan's mind voluntarily. He's not going to do that this time around. The mere fact that he's been dormant all this time means it's likely he can't return to his dimension.”

“Do you think...he needs Stan? That he needs to stay in his mind to keep existing?” Dipper asked.

“It's possible. I don't think he'd still be there if he could easily leave. If he could take over Stan's body or take physical form at will, he would have by now.” Ford said. “Right now, we don't know how much of Bill even exists, or what form he's in. For all we know, he might be so weak and fragmented that he's no danger at all. But the smart thing to do is assume he's dangerous, and go in ready to face a threat.”

“Yeah.” Stan said, throwing an arm around Ford. “Luckily, we can be pretty threatening when we wanna be, too.”

Ford turned to Stan, looking pointedly at the arm he'd just placed around his shoulders and his dangling, not-cuffed hand. He raised an eyebrow.
“Whoops.” Stan grinned, a wicked glint in his eye that Ford was one hundred percent certain had nothing to do with Bill. “Guess I accidentally picked the lock again.”

Ford shook Stan's arm off with irritation. “Are you trying to tell me something, Stanley, or are you just being infuriating on purpose?”

“I'm making a point.” Stan said, dropping the handcuffs on the table in front of him. “If I can get out of these, Bill can too. All that they'll do if he takes over is give ya a false sense of security.”

Ford looked at the discarded handcuffs, annoyed that his brother had a point. Between Stan's own muscle memory and Bill's intelligence he could probably handle all forms of escape artistry.

“You'll just have to watch me.” Stan shrugged. “...And if my eyes go yellow, don't hesitate to put a bunch of tranquilizers in me.”

“I won't.” Ford said firmly, looking him in the eye. Stan nodded, seeming satisfied.

“Yeesh.” Mabel said. “Awkward. Anyway, what do we do if we meet him in there? The last time involved kittens, and I'm hoping that's a theme that can continue.”

“Last time, you were disorganized and inexperienced.” Ford said firmly. The two of them frowned at that, and he softened his tone. “Don't get me wrong. You handled yourself incredibly well with Bill, especially for two twelve year olds with nothing but an incantation and a few cryptic warnings to go on. But this time, we need to go in prepared.”

Ford stood and wheeled a blackboard out from behind the bookcase, and began drawing notes on it.

“Oy. He's got the chalk out now.” Stanley said, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

“I've invited Fiddleford over to help me take some readings. With luck, he'll be able to give us more information on exactly what the memory gun did to Stanley's mind. In the meantime, I want you two to find out everything you can about any presence Bill might have had in Gravity Falls since Weirdmageddon. If the memory gun didn't destroy him completely, it may have fragmented him. Broken him into pieces. If so, it's vital that we make certain none of those pieces join together.”
Ford paused, looking at what he'd written so far. After some consideration, he put a second underline beneath the large **NO!!** he'd written beside a drawing of two halves of a triangle connecting.

“Once we've done that, we'll be able to prepare a small team.” Ford turned back to Dipper and Mabel. “I know that all of us want to help Stan...but we can't all go. For one thing, the strain on his mind could be dangerous. But more importantly, the more people we send in, the more minds Bill will have to work with. He could use our thoughts against us, or worse.”

Ford drew spirals and frowny-faces above the heads of the figures on the blackboard to convey what a serious issue this was.

“A team of two people is our best bet. They can protect one another and keep each other focused, while still providing Bill with relatively little material to use against them.”

“And who're these two gonna be?” Stan said, folding his arms. “Don't I get any say in this?”

Ford looked at him and blinked. He'd have thought the answer obvious. “Of course you do. You're the one who will be choosing the team.”

Now that was a rare sight—Stanley speechless. He sank back into his chair, looking surprised. Ford might have smirked at his reaction—he'd obviously planned to be defensive, only to have the wind taken out of his sails—if he didn't look so vulnerable at the moment.

Ford went and sat down next to him. He put a hand on his shoulder, keeping it there until Stan turned his head towards him. “It's up to you, Stanley.” he said. “This is all happening in your mind. Things will go smoother the more comfortable you are with this.”

Stan was quiet. He seemed aware of all the eyes on him, waiting for his response. After a few minutes, he started squirming.

“Okay, okay.” Stan sighed. “Well...Ford.”

“No surprises there.” Dipper said.
“And, uh...” He rubbed the back of his neck, looking away. “Dipper, I guess.”

“Whaaaaat?” Mabel said. “But I'm your favorite!”

“Mabel!” Dipper pushed his hand into the side of her head.

“Oh come on,” she smiled a little, pushing back. “Everyone knows it.”

“Yeesh, you kids are gonna make a whole thing of this, aren't ya?” Stan made a show of rolling his eyes, stood up and headed for the door. “I need to stretch my legs a little. Fill me in on anything I miss later.”

“Grunkle Stan, wait...” Mabel dropped her knitting and stood up to follow, but Ford halted her with a hand on her shoulder.

“Give him some space, Mabel...he probably doesn't want a bunch of questions about why right now. Opening your mind to someone is a frightening and personal thing. It has to be his decision.”

She hesitated. Ford was certain he could see her feet twitching with the urge to run after Stan and talk. But she didn't pursue him.

“Oh...” Mabel sighed. “Okay...I understand.”

Ford gave her shoulder a squeeze. “Stan will need people like you and Soos and the others here in the waking world to keep him safe. I'm going to do my best to teach him meditation. The more lucid and aware he is in his own mind, the better off he'll be.”

“Do you wanna call up Candy and Grenda?” Dipper asked. “I bet they know a lot about what's been going on here while we've been gone.”

“Yeah...that sounds like a good idea.” Mabel reached down to gather up her knitting, looking a little subdued. Ford hesitated, then called to her as she headed out the door.
“Mabel?”

“Yeah, Grunkle Ford?”

“I meant what I said. We'll need to be on our guard against Bill from all angles, inside Stan's mind and out. You'll play a vital role no matter where you are.” Ford said.

Mabel nodded, sighing. “Sure...I know.”

Her mood didn't seem to be changed much by Ford's assurance. He smiled weakly at her. “Would you like a hug?”

That seemed to have a better effect. She nodded and held her arms out for him. As he embraced her, he felt her arms tighten around him, squeezing the breath out of him and popping his back. Ooof. She'd gotten so strong over the years. But rather than wriggle out of the crushing embrace, Ford clung back with tenacity.

“I always want hugs, Grunkle Ford.” Mabel said.

“Me too.” Ford admitted, which made Mabel laugh. And for a moment, despite how irrational it might be, as baseless an assumption as he knew it was...for a moment Ford thought everything might turn out all right.
Dipper sat at the kitchen table, slouching back in his seat. His neck was craned forward over his book and his feet were up on the chair across from him. Not many people could stay in that position for very long without pain, but it was hardly the strangest pose Dipper had contorted himself into while reading.

He'd borrowed Soos's truck early that morning and stopped by the Gravity Falls Public Library where he loaded up on reading material, making copies of as many periodicals as he could find that pointed to Bill's presence in the town's history. He'd supplemented that with a few books that seemed relevant and secluded himself in the kitchen, where the lighting was good and he was in easy reach of snacks. He'd been sitting there since morning, plowing through the stack in front of him while Mabel was out conferring with the girls.

That's where she was supposed to be, Dipper thought, as his concentration was shattered by an excited scream by his ear.

“Eeeeee!” Mabel cried, leaning over his shoulder. “Yes! I knew it! I'm finally rubbing off on you, brobro!” She reached out and rubbed the palm of her hand on Dipper's cheek.

“Gah! Cut it out...” Dipper pushed her hands away, irritated at being startled. “What are you even talking about?”

“ 'A Romance of Many Dimensions'? I knew you had a secret stash of mush novels hidden away somewhere!” Mabel pulled the book out of Dipper's hands, flipping through the pages. “Does it have any hot werewolves? Sword fights? Is it a bodice ripper, you perv?”

“What?! No!” Dipper yanked the book back. “This is research. I'm trying to learn more about Bill. What he is...where he might have come from.” He muttered under his breath. “Bodice ripper. Seriously, Mabel...”

Mabel glanced around the room, eyes trailing critically over the pile of granola bar wrappers and empty energy drinks. “Have you been sitting here since morning? You're going to get bedsores on your butt again.”

“Aha, that's where you're wrong!” Dipper smirked, triumphantly pulling an inflatable doughnut out
from a bag beside the chair. “I came prepared this time!”

Mabel looked skeptically at the inflatable. “You need to get outside for a while.” She said. “Stretch those scrawny legs of yours.”

“Mabel, you know we can't fool around. Great Uncle Ford told us to find out—” Dipper's words were cut off by an authoritative finger pressed against his lips.

“This is research too. Me and the girls are heading out into the woods below where the Fearamid used to be to see if there's anything left behind. Candy says they've already found something out there that'll make our heads explode.”

“Really hope she didn't mean that literally.” Dipper sighed, closing the book.

“C'mon, Dip.” Mabel's voice softened a little. “This may sound silly, but...I don't feel like either of us should be alone doing this, you know? It's Bill. We...we should be facing this together.”

Dipper was quiet for a while. He still remembered that summer...how could he forget? But almost as clear and sharp in his mind were the memories of those first few weeks of school after they got back. Trying to get back to just being kids. Trying to fall into a normal routine, when 'normal' wasn't a word that made sense anymore.

There had been so many nights where one or both of them woke up screaming, heads filled with dreams of a glowing sky and images of their family falling away from them. Nights where sleep didn't come at all, where Mabel had to hold his hands and sing silly songs to him and remind him he was safe. Or where he was the one holding Mabel—running through “reality checks” with her. Checking the colors to make sure they weren't too bright and reading through boring books until she was certain she couldn't be trapped in Bill's bubble anymore.

Looking back, Dipper didn't think he'd have been able to get through it all without Mabel there. Without someone who understood what it all meant. He looked at the stack of wrappers and energy drink cans, and put a hand over his gurgling stomach.

“All right.” Dipper finally smiled, sliding off the chair. “I'll trust the silly.”

Mabel's face lit up. “Yeah. Trust the silly.” She grabbed Dipper's arm and started pulling him towards the door. “It hasn't led us wrong yet!”

“What about when we were fifteen and you convinced me we should stage a production of Hamlet using only cat noises?”

“Details, bro. Details!” Mabel smiled

Dipper felt laughter bubbling up from him as Mabel yanked him through the door and ran with him out towards the woods.

Stan leaned back in the mustard-colored easy chair that still hugged his butt like it remembered him, even after all these years. Soos and Melody had changed around a lot of the furniture in the Mystery Shack, made the place more baby-proof and better for a family. But Stan had a feeling that this old chair would be around as long as he was, and that was just fine with him.

A few feet away, McGucket was messing with some dials on the next machine he was planning to
use on Stan's brain, to see what he could learn about what the memory gun had done to him in the first place. Stan figured the fewer questions he asked about it, the better.


Stan wasn't sure whether the question had anything to do with the Data he was getting, or if it was just friendly conversation. Either way, he shrugged. “Now and then. Less than I did at first...mostly I just forget little things. Names and dates, where I left my glasses. Honestly not sure if that's the memory gun or just old age.”


Stan shrugged. He had tried keeping a journal of his own for a while, for that exact reason. But he always got bored and stopped after a couple of pages. Instead he'd learned to jot down little notes or comments in the scrapbooks that Mabel had sent him to help when he got forgetful. He expected that Ford had also probably noticed Stan's notes cropping up in his journal, but he never complained, either because he was glad it helped with Stan's brain troubles or he'd just given up resisting it.

“Sort of.” He said. “Ford's also got me eating some kind of weird seaweed we found near the arctic that he says is supposed help.”

“Sent me some of that hibber-gibber too, all ground up in powder.” McGucket said, making a face. “And Tate's been pushin' this ginko baloba stuff on me.”

“Think it's doing anything?” Stan asked.

“Gives me one more thing to forget to take every morning.”

Stan sNorted.

“Don't blink now, or your eyes'll pop clean outta their sockets.” McGucket said, holding the machine up to Stan's face.

“Wait, what?” Stan was blinded by a sudden flash of light before he could fully process what McGucket was saying.

“Done!” the older man lowered the device and set it down on a table. “All right. Next up we'll need to get a few of these suckery doodads on ya.” He grinned widely, holding out a handful of electrodes that attached to some sort of blinking monstrosity.

Stan frowned and reluctantly opened the front of his shirt, letting McGucket attach the suction cups to his temples, his forehead and the top of his hairy chest.

“Between you and Ford I'm starting to feel like a lab rat.” Stan tugged on one of the electrodes.

“Y'need to take a break for a while?” McGucket asked.

“Nah...if this is helping get Bill out of my head I'll deal. Let's just get it over with.”

“All righty. This next part should be easy enough anyway. Just sit back and relax while this whatchamawhozit reads your thinkin' waves.”

“Now that sounds more my speed.” Stan said. He decided that he was starting to like McGucket's brand of jargon. It didn't make any more sense than his brother's usual patter, but at least it was
short and to the point. Stan settled back in the chair, closing his eyes and distantly wondered if the old engineer would let him get up to grab a magazine.

“By the way.” McGucket said. “Thanks for the pancakes.”

“Hmn?” Stan opened one eye. Pancakes? He hadn't touched the stove since he arrived. He didn't dare with Soos's half-mad granny running the kitchen. What was this guy talking about?

“Maybe you don't remember. Wouldn't be surprising, given the circumstances and all.” McGucket chuckled. “I know I used to come back here a lot when my brains were all scrambled. Maybe somethin' inside my head was still trying to visit Ford, even after all I went through trying to forget him.”

Stan shifted uncomfortably. It was still difficult reconciling the man in front of him, the one who babysat Soos's kids, who helped Dipper with his multi-media projects at school and did nerd stuff with Ford with the crazy old man who'd been an on-and-off presence through all his years in Gravity Falls. Who'd been alternately a source of trouble and a sad reminder of how bad things could get. Of how cruel the world was to those who couldn't hack it. Of how he might have easily ended up himself; homeless and alone and raving on the street.

“I don't rightly recall all the times that I came up here or what I was lookin' for.” McGucket continued. “I think usually you chased me off. I was probably a nuisance.”

Stan shrugged, tucking an arm behind his head. “You weren't so bad.”

“Oh, no? I'm a little fuzzy on most of the details, but I do recall gnawin' the face off one of your taxidermy monsters at least once. Also recall a lotta you comin' after me with a broom.”

Stan grunted.

“But I also remember that sometimes if there wasn't anybody else around you'd come out the back with a pan or a plate and there was always something good in it. Usually pancakes.” He chuckled again. “If I'd had all my wits together I'd have started wondering if that was the only thing you could cook. Not that I was in a position to complain.”

“Eh...I always made too much. They've just gone bad.”

“And sometimes you'd ask if I was gettin' enough heat or had something to sleep on back in my shack at the junkyard. Sometimes I'd even find blankets or clothes left out on the porch, especially in the wintertime.”

“Probably Soos who left 'em. That kid's a big softie.”

“Was a big softie that left 'em there, that's for sure.” Stan could hear the grin in McGucket's voice. He kept his gaze averted, glancing out the window. “Well. Thanks anyway for the pancakes. They were good.” McGucket said.

Stan kept looking out the window. He didn't answer, but he felt himself smiling with satisfaction. The two of them sat in comfortable quiet for a while, McGucket occasionally humming a line from one of those nerdy space songs he and Ford liked to sing. Finally, the soft buzzing of a dot matrix printer broke the silence.

Stan looked towards McGucket and his row of machines. He was staring down at the printouts and frowning, saying nothing. Stan had a moment of deja-vu, remembering Ford looking at his notes with that same expression, just before suggesting they go back to Gravity Falls. It made him
“So? What's the verdict, professor?” He stretched out a leg and kicked the back of McGucket's chair to get his attention.

McGucket glanced back at him. “Welp, for your sake I hope you don't ever get a head injury.”


McGucket slapped the paper with the back of his hand. “There's a big ol' dark spot here where I can't get any readings. According to this, you're completely brain dead.”

“Hey, I'm not the one wearing socks with sandals. If I wanted to hear insults I didn't have to come all the way to Oregon for them.”

McGucket rolled his eyes. “Point is, you're obviously not. So how come there's no activity gettin' picked up here?” He sighed and set the paper down. “T'be honest, neurology wasn't my first field or my best. I kinda got into it for...practical reasons.” He glanced at the ground and fiddled with the ends of his beard, looking ashamed.

Stan frowned and kicked the back of his chair again. “Well, it worked, didn't it? That brain-scrambling ray of yours got rid of Bill.”

“Did it?” McGucket turned around so Stan couldn't kick his chair anymore. “If I'm not mistaken, that's the reason we're here. It didn't work. Your memories came back, thank all that's holy...but now....” He trailed off, drawing his arms around himself.

Stan was quiet. Of course, it hadn't been lost on him that the two things might have gone together. That the price he'd paid for getting his life back, getting his family back was bringing back something altogether darker. Life never gives you anything for free, after all. It always takes its price in time.

“...Do you think that he's coming because I got my memories back?” Stan asked.

“Who knows? I can't reckon for the life of me how you got your memories back.” McGucket spun the screen around, showing Stan a schematic of the memory gun. “By all rights they should have been gone for good.”

“Why? You got yours back...”

“My memories were in this cylinder,” he pointed to a spot on the schematic. “But Ford dumped yours. Destroyed them completely so that--”

McGucket hesitated. His right eye twitched and a full body shudder went through him.

“So that nothin' of that...thing in your head could survive.” He continued. He pushed a long, calloused finger into the center of Stan's forehead. “There was nothing to put back in there. So where did they come from?”

“I dunno,” Stan swatted the hand away from his face. “Isn't figuring that out your job?”

“T'be honest, Stanley....when I heard how it happened...” he sat down on the couch beside him, took off his hat and scratched at the scabby remains of his hair. “How everyone figured it was hopeless, but lil' Mabel just wouldn't give in, wouldn't let go of you....and then somehow, defying all the science it worked....Well, I started to think it was just a miracle.”
“That doesn't sound very scientific.” Stan said, sardonic tone unable to fully cover the warmth that grew in him at the mention of Mabel's determination.

“It's not.” McGucket smiled for a moment, but his face quickly turned serious. “Though now I'm wonderin' if I wasn't looking in the wrong direction. Maybe it wasn't that little angel that kept your memories from bein' destroyed, but a devil of the lowest order.”

Stan's smile faded at that. It would make sense. He'd given himself up to get rid of Bill, but his family hadn't been as ready to sacrifice Stanley Pines as he was. Maybe you didn't always have to shake Bill's hand to make a deal with him. Maybe you just had to avoid looking at a good thing too closely. Keep yourself from wondering what strings might be attached.

It wasn't like Stan to just accept a gift at face value. Maybe he should have seen this coming. Life always takes its price. Sometimes it takes years to catch up with you, but it always finds you in the end.
It wasn't very big, really. Barely taller than Mabel. A few feet on each side, more if you included the hat. It was half-buried. Moss grew on it, along with a few species of lichen. By the looks of things more than a few birds had perched on it and left their mark behind. It was just a statue. Immovable rock.

Why did it look so frightening?

Dipper inched a little closer to Mabel, putting a hand on her shoulder. She reached up and gave his hand a squeeze.

“How long have you known it was here?” Mabel asked.

“Not long.” Candy said. “We heard rumors for some time, but the woods are huge, and getting anyone to talk about Bill or Weirdmageddon is...difficult.”

“Everyone's either too scared, or just being dumb about it.” Pacifica said, arms folded. “Like they think if they talk about it enough it'll somehow bring all of the horrors back.”

“He was shaking Stan's hand when he was frozen.” Dipper said, eyes locked on the statue's outstretched arm.

“We noticed that too.” Said Pacifica. “And there's something else. That arm looks pretty thin, right? Like a solid hit with a hammer could break it?” Pacifica stood off to the side, one hand behind her back, the other gesturing at the statue. “Grenda, if you would demonstrate?”

Grenda pulled a mallet from her bag and let out a roar, leaping at the statue. “Raaaaaaaugh! I hate you! You! Big! Stupid! Triangle!” She swung the mallet at the outstretched arm, hitting it again and again with what had to be incredible force, but the arm didn't break and the statue didn't budge from its spot in the ground. “Stupid! Ugly! Rock! Why! Wasn't'! I! Born! An! Earthbender!?!”
“Okay...I think you've made your point...” Dipper said, as Grenda continued to shout, leaping on the statue and throwing the full weight of her body onto it, pummeling it with kicks and punches. “You can stop now.”

“She'll tire herself out.” Candy assured him. “It is good for her to express her emotions.”

“We can't dig it out either.” Pacifica explained, while Grenda continued to rage in the background and Dipper tried as hard as he could to ignore her. “Once you get an inch or so down, the dirt's solid as stone. Can't even get a shovel into it.”

Maybe you could bury it under rock?” Dipper suggested. “Or use some heavy machinery...I don't like the idea of it just sitting out here where anyone can find it. I mean...what if someone tries to shake its hand?”

“Maybe nothing happens if you shake its hand?” Mabel suggested, not sounding like she really believed herself. “Maybe it really is just a statue?”

“Or maybe if you shake its hand, Bill possesses you, he gains physical form again, and the world gets destroyed.” Dipper replied. “If there's even, what, a one percent chance of that will you be able to sleep at night?”

“We haven't tried heavy machinery...” Pacifica said “I don't know if it'll do anything, but I guess it can't hurt. The worst that can happen is we break some bulldozers on a dumb magic statue.”

“I have a license to operate a bulldozer!” Mabel volunteered.

“You don't need one in Gravity Falls...but thanks.” Pacifica smiled. “Yeah. We can look into it at least.”

“We should search the area around here.” Candy suggested. “In case there is anything else we missed.”

“What about...?” Dipper raised an eyebrow, pointing at Grenda who by this point was out of breath, holding the statue in a headlock and gnawing on the intransigent arm.

“I got her.” Candy said, walking up to Grenda and scratching at the back of her neck. “There, there. All done now. Time to go.” she said soothingly. Grenda's breathing slowly returned to normal, and her grip on the statue released. She slumped to the ground, where Candy and Pacifica went to help her up. They were very matter-of-fact in all this, in a way that made Dipper suspect they'd done it many times before.

Mabel gave his hand another squeeze and looked at him. “Yeah. We'll look for clues. It's like we're just solving a mystery together, right Dipper?”

Her smile was so encouraging. She was worried too, Dipper knew she was, but she still managed to smile at him. It was indomitable, that smile.

Mabel's smiles were sometimes forced, but they never were fake. Dipper knew the difference. So often when Mabel was scared or sad, she'd push a grin to her face and try to find a bright spot in the whole mess. It wasn't fake. It was the most earnest thing Dipper had ever seen. It was hope. It was a willingness to believe—a need to believe, that they would both be okay in the end. That they'd look back on this later and smile together, even if Dipper couldn't do it now. He grinned back and held out a fist for her to bump.

“Mystery twins?” he said.
“You know it.” She grinned and returned the fistbump, and the two of them helped Candy and Pacifica drag Grenda out of the clearing.

“You know it.” Ford said. “What does it look like?”

“Uh...I dunno. Pink? Squishy?” Stan replied.

“Not your brain, Stan. Imagine your mindscape. It can look like anything. What does it look like to you?”

Ford sat cross-legged on the living room floor, across from his Brother. He'd initially suggested they try this in his old meditation chamber, back in the room that used to be his study but was now mostly used for storing the more dangerous things those gIrls built in the basement. Stan had flat-out refused. It had seemed superstitious, even childish to Ford that he seemed afraid to step into the room. But the longer they sat there, the more relieved Ford found he was to be up here, in a house filled with light and the memories of life and family. Not down there, where the memories held a very different tone.

“...The Shack, I guess.” Stan said.

“All right. Imagine you're inside the Shack.”

“I am inside the Shack.”

Ford sighed. “Yes. Well. Not the one you're actually inside. Imagine the Shack in your mind. Visualize it around you. Focus on it.”

He heard Stan shifting a little.

“Try not to fidget.” Ford said. “Don't focus on any discomfort your body might be feeling. Turn your thoughts inward. Focus on bringing your mindscape into existence around you.”

“Okay.” Stan muttered. Ford tried to ignore the hint of annoyance he heard in his voice.

“Focus on the Shack in your mind. Can you see it?”

“Sort of.”

“All right. Now, I want you to start clearing it away. Bit by bit. Start out front. Start taking things away from it...the signs from the roof. The cars parked out front. Slowly start removing them.”

“Okay. Done. What next?”

“...Don't rush through it, Stanley.”
“It doesn't take long to stop imagining something that's not there.”

Ford opened his eyes, looked across the room at Stan. “The whole point of this is to slowly clear your mind. Narrow your focus to a single point. It isn't about what you're visualizing, it's about going through the process.”

“I don't...” Stan clenched his jaw. “I don't get how this is supposed to help. All I can think about is all the places where I itch. Isn't meditation supposed to be relaxing?”

Ford looked at his watch and sighed. “Well, we've been at it for nearly two hours now. Maybe this is a good time for a break.”

Stan slumped back onto the floor and let out a growl of frustration.

“I'm never gonna get the hang of this.”

“It's all right, Stanley. Just try to focus.” Ford said.

“I can't! Okay? I can't just focus. I've never been any good at this kind of stuff, Ford. You know that!” Stan threw his arms out in exasperation. “Even when we were kids, I couldn't sit still. Teachers kept tellin' me, 'just focus,' 'pay attention,' but I can't, okay?”

Ford slowly unfolded his legs from their position, his joints protesting a little as he stretched. He took a deep breath. He reminded himself that Stan was trying. He knew he was. Stan understood how serious things were.

“There must be something you used to do.” Ford prodded. “When you couldn't concentrate in class but really needed to get something done...”

“Yeah.” Stan muttered, turning his head to look at Ford. “I copied off you, remember?”

Copied off you. Ford looked down at Stan, stretched out over the carpet. It was easy to picture the fidgety little boy who did indeed always ask for a peek at Ford's worksheet when the trial of sitting down and doing it himself seemed too dire. Of course. Ford couldn't believe that it had taken him this long to realize.

“That's it.” he smiled.

“What's it? I need to copy off you?” Stan raised an eyebrow. “How would that even work?”

“No—that's the problem! You already are copying me.” Ford said, grinning with the satisfaction of uncovering a vital clue. “I'm trying to teach you to meditate the way I did. The way that's worked for me. But you've already got your own way, haven't you? You already know how to do this, whether you realize it or not. You cleared your mind back in the Fearamid. How did you do it then?”

Stan stared up from his spot on the carpet, giving Ford a look that told him he was missing something obvious.

“I thought I was going to die.” he said plainly.

Ford's spirits fell. It must have showed in his face, because Stan immediately started backtracking.

“Ahh, sheesh. It sounds so dramatic when I put it like that. You know what I mean...I...I mean, neither of us knew...”
“Knew that you'd ever come back.” Ford said quietly. Stan sat up, turning his gaze half away from Ford. Glancing back now and then to be sure his words hadn't stung too deeply.

“Yeah. I mean. I guess I was...resigned? Or something. It was easy to clear my mind cause there was nothing to think about. I just sorta...let go. Y'know?”

Ford understood all too well. He frowned deeply. “Well...that is not a state of mind we want to put you back into. That's for certain.”

“Yeah. I guess not.” Stan chuckled, rubbing the back of his neck. He stood up and started walking at a slow pace around the room. “I still remember it, y'know. What it was like in my mind, just before I went away.”

Ford's stomach turned at Stan's choice of words. He knew that Stan remembered it. Those last moments inside his own mind. Ford had been there with Stan when those particular memories had first come back.

The two of them had fallen asleep on the couch out on the porch after another long, late night conversation. Conversation was a generous thing to call it, frankly, since Ford was still doing almost all the talking at that point...bringing back old stories from their childhood...talking about familiar places in Glass Shard Beach and the people they'd known growing up. Apologizing for his mistakes.

He'd woken up slumped over the arm of the couch to find Stan awake, sitting up and staring straight into the distance. Staring hard and with focus, as if there was something there that Ford simply couldn't perceive. Then he'd smiled and chuckled to himself. Good for something after all, he'd said.

Even before he explained them, those words had sent a chill down Ford's spine.

That had been a rough night. Not for Stan, who'd fallen asleep again almost immediately after describing the returned memory to Ford. He had a peaceful smile on his face. But Ford's sleep had been fitful. And when he slept, he dreamed he was back on the beach from his childhood, watching helplessly as Stan stood in the water and let himself be swallowed by the tide.

“I mean, it wasn't all sad stuff. Y'know?” Stan took a framed photo off a nearby table and looked down at it, smiling. “I can still remember how good it felt to sock the little yellow bastard right in his big old eye. Watched him shatter into a million pieces.”

Ford smiled back at that. “I think I'll always envy you that punch, just a little.”

“Don't blame you. It was great.” He grinned, setting the photo down. “Hang on, I got an idea.”

Stan went over to the kids' toybox on the other side of the room and began rooting around. Ford crossed the room, curiously peering over his shoulder. He tossed aside a Hoberman sphere and a light-up ladybug until he Seemed to find what he wanted. He pulled out his prize—a wooden paddleball.

Ford frowned a little when he saw it, holding out a hand to take it from him. “Well....repetition in sound and motion isn't an uncommon meditation technique...” he said hesitantly. “Vajrayana mantras use repetitive noise, kudalani yoga uses movements of the limbs and hands...but...are you sure you want to use this?”

“Sure.” Stan took it back from him, smiling. “It's worth a try, right?”
“I'm just concerned about the associations you might have.”

“I'm not gonna collapse and curl into a ball over one of the kids' toys.” Stan said, rolling his eyes. “And like you said...I cleared my mind back then.” He demonstrated his comfort by flicking his wrist and sending the little rubber ball bouncing against the paddle, effortlessly keeping it in motion. “Ha! See, still got it!”

“I suppose it is worth a try.” Ford said.

Satisfied, Stan leaned back against the wall, settling into a comfortable position with his hand behind his head, and started hitting the paddleball. Ford crossed his legs again but kept his eyes open, watching Stan. After a while, Stan's movements started to slow and smooth out. Still quick enough to keep the ball moving, but more even and regular than before. His free arm lowered to his side and his breathing seemed to deepen. Ford was quietly amazed---the paddle really did seem to be working.

*I should have known* he thought with a smirk, *it would be something completely ridiculous and unexpected that ended up working.* He wondered if he should try guiding Stan's meditation again, or just let him be. The latter seemed a better bet at the moment. Best not to suddenly speak and risk breaking his concentration.

Ford began making plans internally. When the others returned with whatever information they'd managed to find, they would set a date. If Stan continued to do this well keeping his mind clear, Ford would be able to focus on preparing Dipper for the task ahead of them. They'd need to keep the Shack secure, of course. Despite the family's efforts he'd found that Bill still had a scruffy handful of worshipers scattered around, and it would be just his luck if...one of...

Ford's thoughts trailed away. He couldn't think. He couldn't move...he wasn't sure if he was breathing.

All he could do was stare at Stan's hands, still held at his sides, both of them engulfed in blue fire.
Stan wasn't moving. He didn't open his eyes, he just sat, seemingly oblivious to what was happening.

Ford couldn't move. He couldn't focus his thoughts enough to open his mouth and form words, or command his legs to stand. He could only stare at his brother's form, still slumped against the wall, both hands engulfed in blue fire.

Ford opened his mouth and something came out, barely audible. “S...Stan....”

It was like trying to scream in a nightmare. Was that what this was? Was it possible that this was all just....

“STANLEY!”

“Hmmn?” Stan's eyes slowly opened. He frowned, puzzled and disoriented, before looking down at his hands. The reaction was immediate—he cried out, dropped the paddle and shook his hands wildly, smacking them against the ground as if it were ordinary, mundane fire spreading up his arms. The blue flames vanished into the air.

The two of them stared at each other—STan with his back pressed against the wall, clutching his chest and gasping. Ford was stiff and still as a stone, barely breathing.

Stan's feet got underneath him and he hurried out of the room. Somehow, Ford managed to stand. Go after him. He managed to put one foot in front of the other while a dozen different parts of his mind were screaming. Go get him. Help him. Stop him, don't let him get away.

Ford made it to the door in seconds. Don't let him run away, he corrected himself. He might get hurt. Ford hurried through the door. He might hurt himself. He started down the hallway. He might be in danger he might be a danger don't—

Ford stopped, turned to the right. He saw Stan's hunched form, pressed into a corner, sitting on the ground and staring at his hands. He'd nearly run right past him.

“Stan?” Ford took a few steps closer. His head's down I can't see his eyes. I don't need to see his eyes I saw his face a moment ago and they were normal, it can be hard to tell, he was scared he's scared. I'm scared. I'm not scared. I am in control of myself.
“Stanley.” Ford managed to speak, his voice firm and controlled, so much so that the sound of it surprised him. *Focus. Breathe deeply. Concentrate on the facts in front of you.* “Let me see your eyes.”

Stan's head raised, his eyes widening slightly when he looked at Ford.

“Move....move your head up and down.” Ford tightened his grip on the object in his hands, trying to keep himself calm. He didn't want to frighten Stan—didn't want to show weakness in front of Bill—didn't want to upset his brother. “Slowly, so it catches the light.”

He did as Ford asked, saying nothing. His eyes were clear. There was no flash of yellow when the overhead lamp caught them at just the right angle. Not that that necessarily meant they were safe...at this point, they couldn't know what to look for. This wasn't a typical possession. Bill was still hiding in his brother, was using him, like he had for years. Who knew what kind of paths and corners Bill had spent the past seven years carving for himself inside Stan's mind?

...How dare he? How dare he grow himself inside his brother's mind, inside the memories that Mabel's love and determination had brought back all those years ago?

“...They're normal, right?” He asked Ford. “My eyes. They're normal...?”

Ford did his best to keep his voice steady. “I don't think I know what normal is at this point.”

“Okaaay.” Stan's eyes were clear. His voice was...almost normal. Something about it seemed off. Strained. Guarded. “So. Now what?”

“...Show yourself. You can't hide forever.”

“I'm right here, Ford...”

“I'm not talking to you, Stanley.” Ford said. “I'm talking to him.”

“All right.” Stan's voice was slow and careful. “But you realize you're pointing that thing at me, right? Just so we're clear about that.”

Ford looked down at his hand, squeezed tightly around the handle of the weapon he'd been keeping near to him since this all began. Yes. He was most definitely pointing it at Stan. *Focus. Breathe. First priority is making sure Stanley is safe. First priority is also making sure Bill is contained.* He would just have to hope these two goals weren't in conflict with one another.

“It won't harm you.” Ford said. “It'll only...stun you for a few minutes. Make it hard to move. And I'll only fire it if I have to.”

That was a half-truth. The purpose of the gun in his hand was to momentarily paralyze and disorient the victim. It was something he'd been working on, a modification of a weapon he'd brought back from his travels. It caused no tissue damage and was meant to be harmless, but he had yet to test it on a living human. He'd only ever run trials on zombies from the local funeral home, and while their reactions provided vital data one could only learn so much from them. He was worried what the shock might do to Stan's system. Stan wasn't a young man anymore, and his diet wasn't exactly heart-healthy. But he wasn't about to let Bill know how hesitant he was to use it. And there was no need to frighten his brother.

“Who exactly do you think is talking to you right now?” Stan's voice asked.

“You tell me—!” Ford bit his lip, hard. He hadn't meant to snap like that. Where had that come
There was a long pause. “...What do you need?”

And it had to be Stan, it had to be. What do you need. The way Stan spoke to him when he was sent into a panic after seeing something that would be innocuous to anyone but him—a bracelet on Mabel's wrist that happened to look like the prisoner cuffs of Jeerox Nine. A cube of Jell-O that sent his mind reeling back to red, red city—adults and children all engulfed in a questing slime that burned to the touch. An Eye of Providence spray painted onto a wall in a foreign city. It was so familiar, the quiet, questioning care in his tone. Bill could never sound like that, not even with his brother's voice. So why couldn't Ford just believe this was Stan? He was a scientist. He ought to accept the evidence in front of him. And yet...somehow...What did he need?

“I need...” Ford said “I need you to prove you're in control.”

“How do I do that?” he asked

“I don't know.”

“All right.” He shifted a little in his position against the wall, scratching his head. “...When we were kids, mom and pop would take us to the Pine Barrens. One time, we heard this horrible screaming noise out there and thought it was the Jersey Devil, so naturally we ran after it. Turned out someone had set out traps—probably illegally, come to think of it—and caught a bobcat in one. We wanted to let it out, but couldn't get near without it snapping at us.” He smiled a little. “You finally got impatient and just ran at it without warning, and I had to distract it so it wouldn't bite ya. I whacked it across the face with a branch. When it got out of the trap the first thing it did was chase me halfway across the Barrens.”

Ford shook his head. “Bill could have taken that kind of information from your mind. Or even mine, for that matter. It was a long time ago.”

“Says the guy who didn't get treed by a bobcat. Okay...how about last month when we found that island that turned out to be a giant turtle--”

Ford shook his head again, cutting him off. Bill had been there when that happened. They hadn't known at the time, but he'd been there, watching them, waiting. Right in front of them and Ford had never even suspected. Through Stan's eyes he could have seen everything they'd ever done together, their whole lives laid out for him. Just the thought of it was sickening.

Ford's grip on the weapon tightened and he tried to keep his hand steady. He'd never told Stan the equation that counteracts Gravity Falls's natural weirdness magnetism, had he? Stan wouldn't have asked about it, would never have been interested...but Ford talked about things like that in front of Stan all the time. Talking to himself as much as anyone, using his brother as a sounding board when he would tolerate it. It helped him think, and occasionally Stan would even chime in with a question or comment that showed surprising insight—or more commonly a smart-aleck remark about Ford's perceived nerdiness.

After seven years of travel together it was impossible to guess how many theories and ideas he'd babbled in front of his half-listening brother...impossible to know what vital information he'd been giving to Bill without...even...thinking....

“...You say that thing won't hurt me? It's like a stun gun?”

Stan's voice snapped Ford out of his thoughts, and he gave a nod. “Something like that.”
“Then hit me with it.”

“What?” Ford blinked. Was this a trick?

“Better safe than sorry, right?” He looked up at Ford, spreading his arms to make himself a bigger target. “If you really can’t be sure it’s me, knock me out and, I dunno, run some tests or whatever until you are sure. I trust you.”

I trust you.

The words shot through Ford like shrapnel. He felt sick with relief. Hands shaking, he holstered his weapon and threw himself into his brother's arms. Stan wrapped his arms around Ford and squeezed tightly.

“You okay, bro?” Stan asked softly.

“...I'm sure now.” Ford replied. “Bill has...limitations. He could use your voice, or your memories...imitate your mannerisms...but there are some things he would never think to do.”

A long, shuddering breath came out of Stan, exhaling tension. Ford should have realized the calm Stanley had been projecting at him was just that. A projection, a bluff. Ford must have been scaring him.

“I'm sorry.” Ford said.

“Don't worry about it.” Stan said. “Like I said...better safe than sorry.”

Ford tightened his grip around Stan, sinking into his sweater—one of Mabel's creations, a blue-green knit with an anchor on the front—and felt his heartbeat slowly return to normal. Stan's hands on his back still felt cold, unnaturally so. Poor circulation, that's all it was. And even if it wasn't...they were still Stan's hands. His brother was in the driver's seat of his own mind, at least for now.

“Ford...what the hell was that?” Stan whispered. “...Did...did I make that happen? How?”

“...I truly don't know.” Ford said. “...Any guess I made would be blind speculation.”

“First it was out on the porch, now this...” Stan mumbled. “I didn't even know it was happening.”

“I know, I know...” Ford muttered. He knew too well. All it took was one lapse in concentration, one brief failure of vigilance. One slip and suddenly you've lost an hour, and you've got a new scar, and you don't know whether you've hurt someone or destroyed something important.

Stan balled up a fist and ground it into his forehead. “I just wanna...crack open my skull and yank him outta there and bash him into the ground.”

“Don't do that.” Ford said, gently pulling Stan's hand away. “You'll hurt yourself.”

“Well I didn't actually mean---”

“I know.” Ford said, holding Stan's still-clenched hand between his own. “...I also know how you feel.”

“Yeah.” Stan muttered. “I guess you would, wouldn't you?”

“...You have something I didn't have with me then. You have people around you. People who
understand what's happening and can keep you safe. Remember that we're here.”

“Mmmnh.” Stan shook his head. “First I scare the hell outta Soos, now you. It's just gonna get worse, isn't it?”

Ford was quiet. He didn't really have an answer to that...it was a uniquely frustrating thing, to be so lacking in information when someone you cared about needed it so badly.

“...Ford?”

“Yes, Stanley?”

“I think....” Stan paused, trailing off. When he spoke again, it was slowly, quietly. Each word seemed difficult to drag out. “...Remember how you asked me to tell ya...if I thought I was maybe gonna do...y'know. Something reckless?”

“I do.” Ford said, tightening his grip just a little.

“I think...I'm getting close.”

Ford sat in the heavy silence that followed, his brother's arms around his middle holding him together as he tried to put words in order in his head.

“Thank you. For telling me.” he said softly.

“I mean. I'm not gonna...you know. Nothin' like that. But I feel like I'm backed against a wall here, and if something doesn't happen soon I'm gonna snap and do something stupid. I don't know what, even, just....”

“I understand.” Ford said. “And I mean it, thank you for telling me. I know that it wasn't easy to do. We'll figure something out. To...keep you from snapping.”

Stan nodded and sighed, head turned towards the ceiling of the entryway. Nearly forty years ago, Ford had met him under that ceiling with a crossbow, sleep deprived and desperate and afraid. Since their last visit here, someone had painted it a deep purple-blue and dotted it with big glow-in-the-dark stars. It was hard to believe sometimes that the same house could hold such profoundly different memories. But here they were. Living proof that terror and joy and pain and love could live in the same place, quite often at the same time.

“You're my hero, Stanley.” Ford said, quietly.

“I know it, bro.” Stan looked back at him and smiled. “You tell me all the time.”

It was the usual crowd at Greasy's Diner. Sawmill workers just off duty, looking for something hearty and carb-loaded to fuel them up for the next day. Truckers grabbing a bite on their way through town. A handful of locals, most of whom Dipper knew well after several summers spent in Gravity Falls. None of them quite as familiar as Mabel's former makeover buddy and the unfortunate recipient of one terrible date with Grunkle Stan. “Lazy” Susan Wentworth, coffee-slinger extraordinaire, inventor of Miscellany Pie and a notorious hub for local gossip stepped out from behind the counter as they entered.

“Well if it isn't my three best customers,” she said “and they've brought a couple of town celebrities with them!”
“Lazy Susan!” Mabel walked in ahead of the others. “We'd better get out of here, guys. If we stick around we might end up getting charmed to death.”

Dipper rolled his eyes, but Susan laughed at the compliment. “Aww, you. When did you two get into town?”

“Oh, don’t give me that innocent act.” Mabel grinned, leaning against one of the stools lining the counter in front of the kitchen. “You knew we were back in Gravity Falls before my car was off the highway! Nothing gets past this gal.” Mabel pointed a thumb at Susan, who chucked again. She was in fine form today.

“Well, maybe.” Susan smirked. “I do like to keep an eye out. Ha! ...So what are the five of you up to today? Another one of your monster hunts?”

“You could call it that.” Dipper said seriously. “...If you wanted to call an errand on which the ultimate fate of the world, even the universe rests a 'monster hunt.'”

“Sounds like you need pancakes.” Susan said.

“I'm afraid the only thing we're hungry for today is information.” Dipper emphasized his point by picking up a discarded cup of coffee and taking a dramatic sip from it. He gagged and spit it out. Why did he do that?

“You hear more about what's going on in this town than anyone.” Mabel said. “You were the first to hear about Janice and Tanisha's engagement, about the Gobblewonker being pregnant, the culprit behind the rash of mysterious shoe thefts--”

“It was a giant centipede!” Susan confirmed.

“If anyone can give us a taste of what's really going on in Gravity Falls, it's you!” Mabel concluded.

“Well, I'll do what I can.” Susan smiled. “What's the trouble?”

“We need information....” Dipper paused briefly for effect. “On Bill.”

Susan froze, her smile slipping. A dozen heads turned in their direction. Dipper shifted...maybe the dramatic pause had been overdoing it.

“Uh...Bill Wilkinson from the hardware store?” Susan glanced nervously to the side. “He...he goes by his middle name now—”

“I know.” Dipper cut her off. “And I know why he does. Just like you know who I'm really talking about.”

“I don't know if I do....” Susan said, twisting the dishtowel she held in her hands. “Maybe you're asking the wrong person.”

“...What are a couple of out-of-towners like you asking about Bill for?”

Dipper turned at the sound of a deep voice, frowning at the tone. He saw a portly man with a huge mustache, the kind you had to wax. Dipper wasn't sure if it was worn sincerely or ironically but either way he hated it.

know who these two are? If it weren't for them and the rest of their family, you'd still be a chair right now.”

“It's all right, Paz.” Mabel smiled, waving to the man. “Hi! Mabel Pines, pleased to meet ya. And to answer your question, we're gathering information for a top-secret mission to protect the town, and also probably the universe. So if there's anything you know that could be helpful, we'd really appreciate it. And if it sweetens the pot, I've got Halloween stickers for everyone who gives us info!”

She pulled a sheet of stickers out from the pouch in front of her sweater and peeled off one with a picture of a smiling vampire. The words “FANGS for the help!” were written on it in glittery writing. The stranger didn't seem impressed.

“You're stirring up more trouble than you realize,” the man warned. “It's only a matter of time before you awaken something that you'll wish you'd left sleeping.”

“Now, what's all this?” A new voice came from the door, a familiar one this time. “I'm not hearing someone asking questions about the you-know-what that happened you-know-when, am I?”

Dipper looked over the portly man's shoulder at the door, where two figures stood framed by the light from outside. Sheriff Blubs's voice had caused a murmur in the diner, as he and Deputy Durland approached.

“Y'all know that if we catch any of ya talking about the unpleasantness, we get to give you a zappy-zap!” Durland held out a tazer threateningly at the man who'd been talking to them.

“Oh, come on.” Dipper folded his arms. “Don't we have some kind of town hero exception here? This is important.”

“Maybe.” Blubs said. “On the other hand...as I recall most of the story about you saving the town is part of the stuff we don't talk about any more. And Durland gets cranky when he doesn't get to use that thing. So...” he shrugged.

“Zappy-zappy!” the deputy shouted enthusiastically.

Grenda sighed, rolling her eyes. “Don't you two ever get tired of being buzzkills? You're making my fists angry!”

“Nope! Never.” Blubs turned towards the back of the diner, addressing the people assembled there. “Remember—what do we say when someone goes around asking about Bill?”

A slow, reluctant mutter spread through the room. “Never mind all that,” the collected diners said.

“That's right. C'mon treasure, let's go turn the siren on and chase geese in the patrol car.”

The two of them linked hands and exited, and the diner went quiet. Dipper gazed down the row of booths and barstools and watched as one person after another refused to meet his eyes. They looked down at their plates, at the wall, anywhere but at him, all muttering agreement. The man with the mustache shook his head, left some money on the counter and walked away.

“I'm sorry.” Susan said. “I'd love to help, but I really haven't heard anything. Besides, I don't need any more zaps of electricity. I've already got one of these.” She lifted the lid of her lazy eye.

“They're really serious about the whole 'never mind all that' thing, huh?” Mabel asked, turning to the others.
“Ugh, I know.” Grenda replied. “And they've been coming down harder lately. Mayor Tyler's no help. He's nice and friendly, but if you ask him about anything to do with Bill he just tells you to get out. Twice!”

“Is it just me, or are those two a thousand times worse ever since they tied the knot?” Pacifica asked, looking out the window at Blubs and Durland's retreating figures.

“Love is a powerful force.” Candy said, adjusting her glasses. “One that can be used for good or evil.”

“Psst!”

The five of them turned to see a small, spikey-haired figure poke his head out from behind one of the booths.

“You want to know about the triangle guy?” Toby Determined said in a stage whisper that was in no way quieter than his normal speaking voice. “I ain't scared of no johnny law!”

“...Do you know something about him?” Dipper asked. “About what's happened since Weirdmageddon?”

“I might.” Toby leaned back in the booth, affecting a casual pose. “It might be that I have a whole stash of information on him! But it'll cost ya.”

“For the last time, T!” Grenda growled. “Candy and I are not joining your roller derby squad! We're done with that lifestyle! Finished!”

“Ha! I've moved on from that.” Toby replied. “No, my price is simple.”

He pointed towards Grenda. Dipper was confused for a moment, until he realized he was indicating the leather jacket that she wore.

“Aww, man.” Grenda said. “But I like this jacket. It took me forever to stick all those carpet tacks through the shoulders.”

“Exactly. It's just the edge I need to complete my look!” Toby grinned. “If you decide you want to pick up what I'm laying down, meet me outside the old rusty silo on Oak Hill. That's where I live now!”

“Can't you just tell us now, or...?” Dipper asked, but Toby cut him off, leaping out of the booth.

“Oak Hill!” he shouted, running for the door. He'd left half a sandwich behind and Dipper was fairly sure he hadn't paid.

“Okay. That happened, I guess,” Dipper said. “Any chance he actually knows something useful?”

“Who knows with that guy?” Grenda said.

“It should be illegal to be him,” Pacifica added.

“Sometimes I see him outside my bird feeder, fighting the pigeons for dominance,” Candy said. “He loses. Often.”

“Well, I don't think we're going to get any more information here.” Dipper said. “Maybe this is a good time to head back...see what the others managed to figure out.”
The rich, spicy smell of pozole coming from the enormous pot on the stove mingled with the sweet scent of chocolate as Abulita poured hot cocoa from a saucepan into large metal thermos. She set the heavy thermos on the TV tray that Melody had prepared, set up with mugs, spoons and a bag of mini marshmallows, ready for consumption.

“Thanks mama.” Melody said, planting a peck on her grandmother-in-law's cheek and carrying the tray into the den, where Wendy was sitting on the floor beside Chestaur.

“...So technically, you're supposed to use a climbing axe for this,” she said, gesturing while Chestaur listened intently. “But frankly those are for wimps. Anything sturdy with a hooked blade'll work. You just reach back, and....”

“Are you giving him ideas again?” Melody asked.

“Hey, it got him to sit still,” Wendy replied. “You told me he already knows how to get up on the roof, I'm just making sure he knows how to get down next time.”

“Mmmnh. How's the protective circle coming?” Melody asked, setting the tray down and pouring.

“Almost finished. Soos went out to cut more rosemary and mummybane,” Wendy said, twirling her pocketknife between her fingers. “But the carving is done.”

Melody looked at the fruits of Wendy's labor. She'd pulled up the carpet surrounding Stan's easy chair in the den and carved a wide circle into the floorboards, etching in the spirals, notches and runes that she had copied from the book Dipper had left with her. It matched the picture in the book almost perfectly, but Melody noticed a few new symbols around the edges.

“What are those?” Melody pointed.

“Good luck charms, mostly.” Wendy picked up a cup of cocoa and blew the steam away from it. “Some band logos. The book said to add runes of power, and I can't think of anything more powerful than the badass guitar chords of Death by Murder.”

“I'm going to be a lumberjack when I grow up!” Chestaur said as Melody passed him his own cup. “Or a bear-puncher. Bears are wimps!”

“You can be anything you want to be, but you shouldn't punch bears except in self defense. Remember what happened last time?” Melody said. Chestaur reluctantly nodded. “And don't call people wimps. It's unkind.”

“If you're a wimp, maybe.” Chestaur muttered under his breath.

Melody sighed and pretended she hadn't heard that. “Here, why don't you bring a cup upstairs to Fiddleford?” she passed some cocoa to Chestaur. “He's working very hard trying to map out Grandpa Stan's brain, I'm sure he'd like something hot to drink.”

“Yes mama.” Chestaur grabbed the cup and headed upstairs. Melody watched him go.

“...I know he's a tough little guy.” Melody said, turning to Wendy. “And his skull's a lot thicker than most, but he is still only five. Please don't teach him any weapons proficiency.”

Wendy smirked, twirling the knife in her hands. “You were the one begging me to teach you knife throwing when Sad Redheads was touring up here.”

“What can I say, I was bored and pregnant. It's a dangerous combination.” She shrugged. “And
again. Not five.”

Melody looked down into her mug and fiddled with her spoon, scraping the half melted smears of chocolate from the bottom and stirring them in. She wondered in the back of her mind if it might be a good idea to send the kids off to her mother's house for a while, until all this business died down. She was pretty sure Soos would go along with the idea. Though she suspected there was a reason he hadn't suggested it himself. He always felt safer with the kids near him, even if he knew they might be better off elsewhere.

Would they be safer elsewhere? That was the question, wasn't it? She had no idea, really. No one really knew where this Bill business would lead, least of all her.

“Hey.” Wendy was poking the handle of her knife into Melody's shoulder, snapping her out of her thoughts. “You hanging in there, girl?”

“Me? Oh, I'm fine.” Melody said. “...That's the thing really. All this Bill stuff...it happened before I even moved here. One day Soos just called me and started talking about how the town had been taken over by monsters for a week. I thought he'd gotten a video game confused with reality again.”

“You didn't miss much. Mostly a lot of me being awesome and some flying baby heads that shot acid from their eyes.” Wendy smiled, but her gaze was fixed on the floor.

“No...I know it was bad. People don't talk about it in public, but I've heard a hundred stories over the years. Soos still has nightmares about seeing me and the kids get turned into statues.” She picked up a couple of marshmallows and dropped them into her cup, watching them dissolve. “I believe it was as bad as everyone says it was. But it's all so hard to wrap my head around. I mean...a talking triangle? In a top hat? That's the guy everyone's so afraid of? He doesn't even sound that smart.”

“I know. It all sounds crazy, doesn't it?” Wendy idly stabbed the tip of her knife in the floor, pulling up little splinters of wood. “Sometimes it feels like the whole thing was just a huge nightmare. But then sometimes, out of nowhere, you start thinking—maybe this is the dream. Maybe everything since then's just been some crazy fantasy where we actually win, while the real world's still on fire somewhere.”

“...Do you really believe that?” Melody frowned.

“...Nah. Not for long anyway. If this were a fantasy world I'd have like, six direwolves and way fewer annoying drummers in my life.” Wendy smiled. “...Mabel's the one who had a hard time with that stuff for a while. But, y'know, she's a fighter. Did Stan ever tell you how she punched the doctor when she was born?”

“Psht. Only about a hundred times.” Melody rolled her eyes. “He's hopeless.”

“Totally.” Wendy sighed. “...I dunno. When I was a teenager, I worried about everything. It got worse after mom died. I was just...so sure that one day, something else would happen. Something so huge and terrible that it would destroy me. But then it did happen. And it didn't break me.” A smirk crawled up her face. “I did better in the apocalypse than I ever did in high school. Weird, huh?”

“Not that weird.” Melody smiled back.

“As bad as that whole end of the world deal was, I feel like it helped me find myself a little, or
“something?” She raised an eyebrow. “Is that, like, super gross and touchy-feely?”

“Incredibly.” Melody deadpanned. “Never open up to me again, Courdory. Your earth emotions are grotesque to me.”

Wendy snorted and punched Melody on the arm. The sound of the front door opening made them both turn, and Soos's voice filled the den.

“I got the the herbs! Found these dudes while I was looking, too!” Soos called. He walked in, wiping the mud off his shoes. Behind him, Melody could see the others trudging in behind him. They looked tired.

“You're Timing's great. Dinner's almost ready.” Melody says. “And you five look like you could use some.”

“How'd the search for clues go?” Wendy asked.

“Eh.” Dipper shrugged. “Kinda crappy, to be honest. We got maybe one possible lead, two if you count that statue.”

“I called Aleksi and had him send a crew with equipment up there.” Pacifica said, barely glancing up from her phone. “By morning we'll have a bulldozer and a crane on site if we want to try the heavy machinery idea.”

“Hey, one lead is better than nothing! Don't get down on yourself, dawg.” Soos said, setting the plants in place around the circle. “Should we call the old guys and tell em to come downstairs?”

“The 'old guys' are already downstairs.” Soos jumped as Ford's voice came from the stairwell. “...We have an announcement to make.”

“What's up, Grunkle Ford?” Mabel asked. “Did you discover that Bill's weakness was the power of love all along?”

“No.” Ford said. He turned to Dipper and put a hand on his shoulder. “Dipper, after dinner I'm going to have to talk to you. We'll need to prepare as much as we can with the time we have. Because tomorrow, we'll be going into Stan's mind.”

“What?” Dipper's brow furrowed. “I thought we were going to wait a few days...gather information.”

“We were.” Ford said. “But certain...developments...have led me to believe that the best course of action is to move forward quickly, before Bill has any more time to gain power. Hit him hard, with a precise, controlled attack as soon as we can.”

Melody glanced at Soos, hoping he had a better idea than she did whether this was wise or not. He looked back at her and shrugged.

“...Is...is that what you want, Grunkle Stan?” Mabel asked, looking at Stan with concern. He'd been standing beside his brother, uncharacteristically quiet. His eyes were on the ground.

After a moment of silence, he said. “I want him out of my head. The quicker the better.”

“Well...okay.” Dipper said. “I guess if you both think so....”

“Good. I don't have to give Bodacious T my jacket.” Grenda said.
“Yeah. Getting this over with sooner instead of later sounds good to me too.” Pacifica added.

Melody nodded and set down her mug. “...I'll go and get the kids down for dinner. You all relax. The cocoa's still hot and there's plenty of it, so help yourselves.”

“...Do you need any help?” Soos asked hesitantly as she passed him.

“That's all right.” she said, planting a peck on his cheek. “You just do what you've been thinking about doing for the last two and a half minutes.”

Melody headed up the stairs, smiling, and didn't even turn when she heard the squawk of protest that came out of Stan as Soos pulled him into a crushing hug, gushing dramatically about how brave he was, and how everyone was rooting for him. She only chuckled behind her hand and walked the rest of the way upstairs, where she knew she'd find her children.
Chapter Summary

In which a poor night's sleep is had.

Chapter Notes

Thanks as always to Scribefindegil for betaing!

HDFK FKDSWHU ZLOO VWDUW ZLWK D ULGGOH
WKH ILUVW OHWWHU RI WKH ULGGOH'V DQVZHU LV ZKUH BRX SODFH WKH D
WKH ILUVW RQH LV VLPSOH. WKHB ZLOO VORZOB JHW KDUGHU
IDW DQG SLQN, DQG ORYHG EB PDEHO
WKH RQOB SHUVRQ KUH ZKR'V VWDEOH
ZKDW'V PB QDPH?

* * *

Dipper stepped into the darkened kitchen, yawning as he filled a glass with water from the sink. Between the day he'd had looking for clues, the news he'd gotten before dinner and then a couple hours of what Great Uncle Ford had called “debriefing” (which had been a mishmash of information about the mindscape that he'd had to absorb quickly and a number of long rambling tangents that he still couldn't connect to anything) Dipper was thoroughly exhausted.

He grabbed an apple from the basket by the window and took a big bite, looking out the window as he munched on his snack. He'd finish this, then get ready for bed. One way or another, tomorrow was going to be a big day.

Some noise from the back porch attracted his attention, and he opened the door, looking out. He saw Waddles first, ambling around in the moonlight. When he was smaller Mabel wouldn't take him outside unless he had his leash and harness on, but by now he'd grown so massive that she reasoned any flying archosaurs or viking hordes that had a mind to carry him off would be slowed down by his weight enough that she'd be able to catch them. Besides, there wasn't a harness or leash on the market that would fit him now.

A few steps further out and he saw Mabel watching her pig from the porch. At least, she seemed to be watching him. Her gaze was distant, and her knees were drawn up against her chest. Even through the material of her sweater, Dipper was pretty sure he could see the tension in her shoulders...or maybe he just recognized the pose.

He walked out onto the porch and whistled. “Here, Waddles!” he called. The pig glanced in his
direction, then looked away. Typical. He held his hand out in front of him. “I've got, like...a third of an apple for you.”

Waddles's ears lifted up and he made his way over, sniffing the air. Dipper sat down beside Mabel, holding the apple out.

“Don't feed him too much, or he won't sleep well.” Mabel muttered beside him.

“I won't.” Dipper promised. He nudged her with his elbow. “How about you? Think you're gonna get any sleep tonight?”

Mabel sighed. “I should be asking you that. You're the one who's gonna have to face down Bill. I'm just gonna have to watch. And wait. From the outside.” She threw her arms in the air and flopped back on the porch. “Totally helpless and unable to do anything about it! I'm! Fine!”

“I can tell.” Dipper smirked. “Since you sound so fine and cool with it.”

“Super cool!” Mabel said, raising her voice to a near shout. “Never been better!”

Dipper smiled a little, then his smile slipped. “...Is that what you're upset about? Grunkle Stan picking me to do this instead of you?”

“No!” Mabel said, pulling the neck of her sweater over her face. “That would be totally dumb and childish.”

“...You know he probably only picked me because he doesn't want you to see all the gross, embarrassing stuff in his head, or something. I mean, you said it yourself, you know you're his favorite.”

“I know.” Mabel muttered. “And it's okay to say that because you're Grunkle Ford's favorite, and it's okay to say that because even if they have favorites they love us both very much. And we can both have favorites too, because fair's fair.”

“So what's the problem?” Dipper asked.

Mabel was quiet for a long time. Dipper sat beside her, letting Waddles gnaw on the apple core in his hand. When there was nothing left, he wiped his drool-covered palms on Waddles's back. By the time they were halfway to clean, Mabel had begun to poke her head out of the top of her sweater neck.

“...I think Grunkle Stan made the wrong choice.” she said quietly.

Dipper frowned. “Oh, thanks.”

“No! Not like that!” Mabel sighed. “I know you're totally badass, Dipper. That's not what I meant. It's just...if it were you and me, that'd be one thing...”

“...It's Grunkle Ford you're worried about?” Dipper raised an eyebrow.

“Yes! And also no!” Mabel sat up. “We're all scared of Bill. But it's different with Grunkle Ford. And with you. You know that, right?”

Dipper went quiet. He nodded. It was different with them. Bill might have kept Mabel prisoner in that bubble, but the whole time she was in there, she never saw his face. She had bad dreams about Mabeland, and once in a great while she'd wake up screaming about the monster that chased them
in the Fearamid. But usually when she had Bill nightmares, they weren't about him hurting her.

Usually, they were about that note. About her not noticing that he was possessed in time.

Dipper held out a hand for her to squeeze, and she took it. Her grip was tight as a vise, and he winced, but didn't pull away. She looked him in the eye.

“What if something scary happens in there,” she said, “and it's just you and Grunkle Ford, and you're both too scared to think, and there's no one to make you laugh or remind you to be brave?”

Dipper squeezed back, even though the ache in his own hand was beginning to spread up his arm. Mabel had cried for a day and a half after the two of them split up to go to separate colleges. He knew because he'd kept calling her over and over, just to say goodbye one more time. It had been a while since then, and a lot of things had changed. But some things would always be the same.

Dipper thought for a moment. “Give me your hair thing.”

Mabel unclipped the barrette from her hair, handing it to him. It was one that she had made—a fuzzy, little green monster with one eye, felt feet, and a big, goofy smile. He clipped it onto his shirt.

“There. I'll wear this, and if I get too scared I can just look down at it, and I'll remember to be brave. It'll be just like your glitter.”

Dipper saw a weak smile start to spread across Mabel's face, and then he saw the roof of the porch as he was grabbed and knocked back by one of her full-body hugs. He laughed and rubbed the back of his head.

“Ow. You gotta stop doing that, you know.” He said, a smile still on his face. “You're way too old for it to still be cute.”

“Liar.” Mabel's voice wavered, and even from his mid-hug vantage point Dipper could see her eyes were tearing up, but she was smiling too. “I'll never stop being cute, ever.”

“You're gonna cutely give me a concussion one of these days.” Dipper reached up and ruffled the back of her head. “C'mon. We've got a long day tomorrow.”

Mabel's grip around him tightened a measure, but she nodded and reluctantly let go. Waddles followed her as she stood and headed for the door, with Dipper walking behind them.

“Think either of us will sleep tonight?” Mabel asked as they headed upstairs.

“Maybe, I dunno.” Dipper shrugged. “I heard Grunkle Stan snoring when I passed by his room earlier. With all that's going on his head, if he can still sleep, I guess anyone can.”

* * *

Stan heard Bill's voice deep in his dreams. It came from everywhere, echoing in his head even when he tried to cover his ears. It echoed in a way that wasn't natural, that had nothing to do with acoustics or ordinary sound. And why would it? The voice wasn't in his ears. It was in his mind.

It was so, so, so damned annoying.

“The game is called three-card Monte.” Bill's voice came from a spot in one of the corners of the room. “Find the lady! Nothing to watch, a dollar to play, who's interested?”
“I'm ignoring you.” Stan said, pulling the newspaper up a little higher in front of his face.

The newspaper was a prop, there was nothing to read on it. The letters on it swum and danced the way writing usually did in dreams, blurring as his eyes ran over them. Still, it was either look at that or look at Bill, and Stan didn't feel up to that. Not tonight.

When he'd first seen him in the dream, Bill had said they'd had that same conversation over and over a thousand nights before. Stan thought that was at least partly true...there was a deep sense of familiarity to this place, and not just because it looked like a room he knew so well in reality. Everything had a sense of deja vu to it. He'd shouted in surprise when he first saw the little demon, but his heart had barely been in it. On some level, he'd already known he'd be there.

Tomorrow they'd take care of all of this. He just needed to get through one night.

“Find the lady, find the lady!” Bill hovered over the card table in the corner, flipping a deck of cards between his tiny hands. “C'mon, there's gotta be a wagering man out in the crowd today!”

“I told you, I don't play rigged games.” Stan muttered.

“I gotcha, cards too complicated for your tiny human brain, huh?” Bill tossed the cards in the air and they vanished in a puff of smoke. He set three walnut shells down in front of him. “I've got something easier for you, then. Just find the pearl. Even an idiot can find a pearl hidden under a shell.”

Stan grunted with irritation and flicked the newspaper while Bill held a tiny black pearl out and placed the middle shell over it. He kept pretending to read while he heard the click of shells being moved around behind him.

“So, muppet-face, you think you know where the pearl is?” Bill asked.

“It's in your hand.” Stan muttered without turning around.

“You aren't even looking.”

“Don't need to. I know how that one works. You pinch it between your middle and ring finger and slip it out from under the ridge of the shell. Then you wait for the sucker to turn over an empty shell and you load it next to the one he picked when you turn it over. That trick's even older than I am.”

“Ahh, I see we've got an educated man in the crowd!” Bill said. “Tell ya what, smart guy. I like your face, so for you we'll wave the fee. Just tell me if you can spot me palming the pearl.”

Stan sighed and put the paper down. With a grunt, he hefted himself out of the chair and walked over to the table Bill was playing at, sitting down in front of it. Hell, it was a way to pass the time. Besides, he didn't feel up for a brawl, and the little glowing bastard probably wasn't going to stop talking unless he indulged him.

Stan watched Bill's fingers move with unnatural speed and deftness as he flipped the walnut shells back and forth.

“There.” Stan said, pointing. “When you moved the middle one forward.”

“Not bad. Think you can do that again?”

“Let's see.”
Bill moved the shells back and forth, twirling them around. Stan kept watching for the palm, waiting for him to lift the back of a shell just slightly while moving it forward. But it never seemed to come.

“Well?”

“...No idea. Didn't see you palm it.”

“That's because I didn't. It was under the middle one the whole time. If you'd been watching the shells, you'd have found the pearl.”

“That's not how the con works.” Stan protested. “Only a sucker watches the shells.”

“Unless the guy moving them knows you're paying attention to his hands, waiting for him to slip the pearl out. Then his best bet is to play the game straightforward.”

“You're nuts.” Stan said

“Sure I am, but I don't see what that has to do with anything!” Bill stacked the shells in his hand. “I still had you looking in the wrong place.”

“Fine, fine, I see your point.” Stan grunted. He smirked a little, “kinda like what Ford and I did with you, eh?”

Bill's eye briefly glowed red. He resentfully closed his hand around the shells, crushing them to powder which vanished in a puff. He produced three cards again. “You still remember how to play this one?”

“It's been a while.” Stan took the cards and started shuffling them between his hands. He was a little shaky at first, but muscle memory soon took over and he was throwing them down naturally again. “Okay. Here's the queen. Keep your eye on her. Easy enough for you with that big boiled egg in the middle of your face.”

“Sticks and stones can break your bones, meatbag, but I haven't got any handy!” Bill leaned forward on his hands, watching Stan flip the cards back and forth in an imitation of rapt attention. The pose was deliberate, Stan was sure of it. Something to make him look more childlike. He wasn't buying it for a second. This thing wasn't a child, and it sure as hell wasn't cute.

“Three-card Monte's all in the throw.” Stan said, tossing the cards back and forth. “It's best if you've got another guy in on it to help work the crowd, but in a pinch you can do it alone.” He stopped and spread his hands, inviting Bill to pick one.

Transparency playing along, Bill pointed to the card on the left. Stan flipped over a joker, then turned over the queen on the right. He stacked the cards and started shuffling them again.

“I look like I'm throwing down the queen, but I'm really throwing the top card down. That's what the sucker keeps his eye on while I'm shuffling.” Stan said. “Of course, half of it is working the rube. Keeping him entertained with quips and games so he doesn't see what you're really up to. Y'know. Like what you're trying to do with me right now.” Stan said, fixing a hard eye on Bill.

Bill ignored the bait and pointed to the middle card. Stan turned over a joker.

“Technically, unlike a shell game it's possible to beat three-card Monte if you know the trick and have a sharp enough eye to see the throw.” Stan said, shuffling the cards again. “Of course, if the dealer sees you're onto him he'll start throwing down the bottom card instead of the top. If he's fast
and has a smooth technique it's almost impossible to see which he's doing.”

Stan spread the cards out and leaned forward, looking down at Bill pointedly. “The real con isn't in
the throw itself, it's in making you think you can win. The dealer tries to convince you that you're
the smart guy who's onto him, and that's how he beats you. The only way to win is not to play.”

Bill glanced up at Stan, looking irritated, and flipped the queen of hearts over with a gesture.
“That's if he's trying to con you.”

“Why else would he be playing the damn game?” Stan folded his arms.

“Maybe he's bored.” Bill twirled his finger and the cards floated around it.

“So, what game are you playing, huh?”

Stan swore he saw a playful glint in the monster's eye as he picked the cards up again and shuffled
them.

“The game's called three-card Monte. Find the lady.”

* * *

SDAJ JK KJA SWO HKKGEJC, IWXAH GJEPPAZ W OSAWPAN WNKQIJS PDA OPWPQA
EJ PDA SKKZO. EP DWO PDA SKNZ “HKOAN” SNEPPAJ KJ EP. PDA K EJ HKOAN EO W
DWLLU OQJ.
“All right...family, extended family and close friends.” Ford stood in the center of the Mystery Shack den, clapping his hands for attention. “Let's go over everyone's roles.”

The minor crowd that had assembled in the Shack quieted down and turned to him. Candy and Grenda had arrived mid-morning, and Pacifica had gotten a ride with Fiddleford. By the time everyone was gathered and ready, it was nearly noon.

“This will be a delicate and dangerous mission.” He continued, “and any number of things could bring it to disaster, so the safety of the Shack is of paramount importance. The unicorn hair barrier is still functioning, but there are a great many threats that can get through it. That's why we'll need a security force patrolling outside. Wendy, Grenda, Mabel. You three are the most formidable fighters we have.”

“Darn right.” Wendy said.

“We'll need you to circle the perimeter of the Shack.” He unfurled a map of the surrounding woods spreading it out on the table. “You'll spread out in three directions and circle counter-clockwise to ensure as few open spots in our defenses as possible. This pattern is the most efficient use of our ground forces, and the unfortunate fact that it resembles a triangle is just something we'll all have to deal with.” He added, gritting his teeth. “In particular you'll be keeping an eye out for Cipher cultists, government interference--”

“Those guys do have the worst sense of timing.” Mabel said.

“--And anything else that might pose a threat to what's happening in the Shack. Now, formidable or not, if you do encounter something dangerous it will be better if you aren't alone. So Grenda, you'll be with Candy. Mabel, because you insisted he be counted as an individual and not a pet, you'll be
“Going with Waddles.”

“All right!” Mabel opened her arms as her beloved pig waddled up to her. “Who's gonna help me defeat the forces of evil? You are! Yes you are! Yeeees youooou aaaaare!”

“And Wendy, you'll be paired with Pacifica.” Ford finished.


“Eh.” Mabel said, still scratching the pig's cheeks. “Waddles responds to all pronouns.”

“...Soos, since you're CPR-certified, your task will be to stand by and monitor the three of us in case something goes wrong in the mindscape. In the event of an emergency, I'm trusting you to handle any necessary first-aid that may be required. Melody, your job is to ensure Soos doesn't faint in the event of an emergency, to provide additional aid, and to make any difficult decisions he may not be emotionally equipped to handle.”

“...Difficult decisions?” Melody frowned.

“You'll know them if they come up. Fiddleford....” Ford began.

“I already know, dangit, y'don't have to remind me!” Fiddleford said, holding up the device in his hand. “I'm s'posed ta keep an eye on Stan's brainwaves, because for reasons I won't understand if I live to be a hundred, you think I'll be able to tell if somethin' weird is happening in there. Weirder than all this, anyway.” He shook his head. “I'll do it, for whatever it's worth, but you know I'm getting nothing but static from that man's skull.”

“...It's worth trying all the same. Thank you.” Ford turned to Dipper. “You know well what our role is. Enter Stan's mind, find Bill, and destroy him by whatever means necessary. I can't predict exactly what we'll find in there. We'll have to be prepared for anything.”

“I know. I won't let you down.” Dipper said. “...You either.” he added, turning to Stan.

Stan grunted, glancing away. “Yeah, yeah. Just stay outta that one year where I worked as a party clown and we'll be fine.”

“Stanley...from your point of view, this will likely all feel like a dream. If we're lucky, you'll be able to focus enough to consciously aid us while we're inside your mind. We'll hope for the best.”

Ford finally turned to the three remaining figures in the room. He knelt down in front of Lee, Sephiroth and Chestaur, who were lined up nearby.

“Small, defenseless children—I have a special task for you.”

“Oh, oh!” Lee hopped up and down on her heels. “Do we get to man the giant laser canon that's gonna shoot Bill in the face?”

“That was my original plan, yes.” Ford said. “Due to your small size and manual dexterity. But there wasn't time to rebuild the quantum destabilizer and at any rate, we're not presently dealing with Bill's physical form. Also your mother expressed some concerns and a number of disturbingly specific threats when I brought the idea up to her, so instead your task is to go upstairs and watch this video--” he pulled a VHS tape from behind his back and presented it with a flourish. “--about brightly colored animals that emit personality-altering mind control beams from their stomachs.”

The children groaned.
“Now, now, it'll be fun! You can look for animation errors and analyze the influence of Regan-era conservatism on the narrative!” Ford grinned. “Up you go, come on.”

With some reluctance, Lee accepted the VHS tape and took it upstairs, her brothers following behind her. Mabel approached Dipper and pulled him into a tight hug.

“Good luck. You're gonna do great, I just know it.” She said softly.

“So are you.” Dipper replied. He let go of her and held out a fist. Mabel held one out parallel to his and made a *nyyyyoo* sound effect as they collided. The two of them made explosion noises and wiggled their fingers together.

“Mystery twins?” Dipper asked.

“Mystery twins for life, bro.” Mabel replied. She turned to Stan and Ford and wrapped an arm around each of them, pulling them both into a tight hug. There were a number of audible popping noises as she squeezed.

“Oouf.” Stan smiled, voice tight. “You're gonna snap these old bones in half one day, you know that?”

“S'okay. I'll glue you back together.” Mabel smiled back. “I love you.”

“You too, pumpkin.”

Mabel pulled back a little and looked at Ford. “You and Dipper'll take care of each other in there?”

“Of course.” He replied.

She nodded and reluctantly let them go. Wendy put a hand on her shoulder as she turned back towards the others. As Candy hopped onto Grenda's shoulders and ran out the front door towards the woods, Mabel took a last look back, before following after her friends.

Ford pulled the pendulum on a metronome that had been placed on a nearby table (a compromise, after last time he wasn't eager to put a paddleball in Stan's hands again.) The rhythmic clicks filled the room, and he gestured to the mustard-colored easy chair that had been surrounded by runes and protective herbs the night before.

“Welp. Here goes nothing.” Stan took a deep breath and sat down, leaning back and closing his eyes. Soos hit the lights. Ford and Dipper knelt down on either side of the chair, each placing a hand on Stan's forehead.

Ford looked at Dipper, who nodded back, and began reciting the incantation. “Videntus omnium, magister mentium...”

The others crowded around the three of them, Fiddleford watching the device in his hand with a frown, Melody resting a hand on Soos's shoulder as he fidgeted with the fez in his hands.

“...Inceptus Nolanus overratus...” Ford chanted. “Magister mentium! Magister mentium! **MAGISTER MENTIUM!**”

* * *

Dipper's vision was taken over by white light, and his other senses quickly followed suit. For a moment, he was nowhere. Then, he was kneeling on a soft patch of grass, he heard the sound of
wind in the trees, and felt a six-fingered hand on his shoulder.

“Stand up slowly.” Ford advised. “Just because you don't have an inner ear right now doesn't mean you can't get vertigo.”

Dipper nodded and rose slowly to his feet, lifting his head to see his uncle standing beside him, and the mindscape spread out in every direction.

“Oh!” His breath caught.

“What? Do you see something?” Ford asked.

“No, no, it's just...” Dipper stared out at the scene surrounding him. “It looks so...different than it did before.”

He and Ford were standing on a bluff, overlooking the Mystery Shack. It was whole, not the broken building floating over a void that Dipper had seen before. A soft, warm light was coming from its windows. On one side, there was the forest. On the other side, the ground gave way to gently lapping waves where the Stan-O-War was anchored, beyond which the water stretched on for miles, eventually curving up into the sky. A swarm of bats flew by, dipping and circling near the Shack, but they didn't seem ominous, really...they were just the kind of spooky touch Grunkle Stan would like.

It was night. The moon was still shaped like the 8-ball from Stan's cane, but the sky around it was filled with countless twinkling stars.

Ford smiled down at him, warmly. Then he turned and pointed. “We ought to get moving. No sense in dawdling.”

“Right.”

There were floating rocks, chunks of the bluff that seemed to have been yanked away from the bulk of it, revealing dinosaur bones and veins of precious metals underneath, and they made for an easy climb down to the Shack. Ford reached into his coat and drew out a weapon that Dipper didn't recognize...maybe some sort of alien technology, or something he had made. It was always hard to tell with Ford. Had he brought a gun into Stan's mind?

“...It's a projection.” Ford said, answering Dipper's unasked question. “...This was a favorite weapon of mine before I lost it in Dimension 833-7...or was it 733-8? Whichever one was underwater.” he shrugged. “It's just a mental image, but in here things like this have a degree of power.”

“Oh yeah! I know all about that.” Dipper beamed. “It's how we defeated Bill before—we gave ourselves weapons and superpowers from our own imaginations.”

Dipper reached behind his back and pictured a laser canon that he'd seen in a movie once, a huge, intimidating thing. He felt his hand close around something and pulled it out, over his shoulder, letting the weight of the giant weapon rest there. He grinned proudly, hoping he looked cool.

“...Very nice.” Ford said mildly. “There's just one problem.”

Ford reached out and tapped the side of the laser canon with his gun. With a loud clang, the weapon fell apart, breaking into rubble and becoming lost in the grass. Dipper looked down at the pieces.
“But...” Dipper frowned. “How?”

“The more you believe the projection, the stronger it will be. Tell me...have you ever held a weapon like that in real life? Do you know how much it weighs? What kind of kick back it has? Do you have any idea how it might work? Whether it radiates heat or cold? What kind of textures are on its surface?”

“Well, no....” Dipper admitted. “I...just thought it looked cool.”

“Exactly. You only had the image of it in your mind. It wasn't real to you. And so, it fell apart when confronted with something that was imbued with a more powerful level of belief.” Ford indicated his gun. “That's why the strongest projections are always things you've actually used in real life. It takes a powerful imagination to imbue a fictional weapon with that kind of reality.”

“Geez...maybe Mabel should have been the one to go...” Dipper muttered.

“Now, now, don't get discouraged.” Ford put a hand on Dipper's shoulder. “Remember. In here, a weapon doesn't need to be literal. You don't need a giant gun to fight with...you just need something that makes you feel strong. That makes you powerful.”

Dipper nodded, thoughtfully. Right. Okay. He could do this....He reached into his coat and closed his eyes, trying to think of something that made him feel strong. Something that made him feel powerful against the supernatural. He concentrated on that feeling until he felt his hand close around something solid, and he pulled it out. Looking down, he saw a thick book with a dark red cover, the number three standing out on top of the gold six-fingered handprint in the center.

“Whoops. Uh, how'd that get there?” Dipper said, stuffing the journal back into his coat, cheeks reddening with embarrassment.

“Don't worry about it, Dipper.” Ford said, smiling, looking a little bemused. “You'll find something that works for you. For now, let's just get moving. Remember to stay close to me.”

“Right....yeah, of course.”

The two of them closed the distance between themselves and the porch. Dipper couldn't help but notice Ford pausing on the way to glance at a swingset—old and rusty, but in surprisingly good condition—stuck in the ground between the porch and the water. Something about it looked familiar, but Dipper couldn't quite place what it was. He supposed it didn't matter.

Ford entered the Shack first, his eyes sweeping nervously over the twisting halls and shadowy corners. Dipper looked around. The entrance felt a little more welcoming than it had on his last trip into Stan's mind, but it was no less of a labyrinth. Halls and stairs still twisted in every direction, like paths in an Escher drawing.

“Do you remember anything about this place from your last visit?” Ford asked.

“I think so...this part looks kind of similar...” Dipper closed his eyes and listened carefully. From a hallway to his left, he heard the soft but certain sound of a film projector. “That way!” He pointed. “Memories are down there!”

The two of them hurried down a hallway, through a door marked “memories,” and into a long room lined with doors. Hallways branched off from the sides, twisting and turning out of sight, extending out of the ceiling in defiance of gravity and opening into long, winding staircases at the floor.
“...Looks like we've got a lot to search.” Dipper said, walking out into the center of the room. There was one thing, it seemed, that was different about these hallways than before...in addition to doors, the walls were lined with framed pictures of the family. Dipper pressed his hand against one that he recognized, and found that his fingerprints went through it. He took a breath and stuck his head in.

“Mabel, duck!”

Dipper flinched at the sound of his own voice, as a blast of cold air hit his face. His past self’s warning had come an instant too late. His poor sister never even saw it coming—she was sent reeling backwards by a barrage of snowballs, a sneak attack from behind the outhouse.

Dipper could see her out on the lawn of the Shack, laughing as his past self pulled her to her feet and the two of them ran back towards the porch, pursued by Stan and Ford. Based on his vantage point he thought he might be watching this from one of the Shack’s windows, but no one out there seemed to be able to see him.

He remembered this. It was from that year they'd all gotten super competitive about gift-giving at Hanukkah, and ended up having a big snowball fight for some reason. He watched as Ford and Stan cornered himself and Mabel by the eastern wall of the Shack.

“Had enough?” Stan tossed a snowball from hand to hand.

“Ready to admit defeat?” Ford asked.

Dipper saw his past self and Mabel look at each other and smile. In unison, they shouted “Now!”

Their grunkles realized their mistake too late to do anything about it. The sound of Wendy’s laughter came from the trees, followed by a hail of ice and snow aimed squarely at the elder twins. Even from a distance, Dipper could hear their squawks of surprise.

“Oh, man...” Dipper muttered. “I remember this next part, too.”

Sure enough, he saw Soos at the top of the roof, struggling to roll a giant boulder of snow over the peak. The second he successfully pushed it over, it started rolling, picking up the snow that was still stuck to the rooftop, growing and growing until it fell on all four of them, burying them under the powder. There was a brief, worrying silence before four heads and eight hands dug their way out of the pile. Wendy was the first to laugh, pointing from her perch in the trees, then Mabel, then the rest of them. It had been a good day.

Dipper smiled at the memory, until something caught his eye, making his smile slip. It was easy to miss, tucked away in a corner of the porch. Carved into one of the boards crudely and clumsily, but still unmistakable, was a triangle with an eye in the center.

That carving wasn't supposed to be there. It wasn't on the porch in the real world. Dipper had spent last night sitting on that porch with Mabel, not far from that very spot. He’d have noticed immediately if something like that had been carved into it. Besides, they’d all gone through the Shack with a fine-toothed comb after Stan got his memories back and dug up everything that had Bill on it. Anything they couldn't burn or smash had been painted over or scratched out or something. Which meant that the carving wasn't part of this memory. It was...an invader.

Dipper pulled his head out of the picture frame, frowning, and turned back to Ford. His uncle was peering through a doorway with a tense expression. When he realized he was being watched, he quickly shut the door.
“There's no organization to any of these memories.” Ford muttered. “It's like Stanley's closet—a jumble of random things defying all rationality and sequential occurrence.”

“You might want to take a look at this one.” Dipper said. “I think I saw some sign of Bill in there.”

Ford nodded. “In the background, easy to miss unless you're looking for it?”

“Yeah, actually.”

“There's a few of them in there, too. Bill's had a long time to dig his way into Stan's mind.” Ford frowned, eyeing the walls. He walked towards the end of the room, gesturing for Dipper to follow as he headed towards one of the hallways branching off. “For all we know there might be traces of him everywhere. What we really need is some sort of trail. Something more obvious than—oh.”

Dipper turned the corner an instant after Ford, and was nearly clothesthlined as his uncle held his arm out protectively, blocking him from what was in the hall ahead. It started in a corner and crept across the floor, peeking through the boards, growing upwards and clinging to the walls like kudzu. Long, twisting vines with nasty looking thorns that sprouted yellow, three-sided leaves. The vines were spotted with concentric circles that gave off the unnerving impression of being eyes.

“...That wasn't here before.” Dipper said, unnecessarily. He looked back at Ford, to find that the older man had frozen in place, and was staring at the weeds with a distant, panicked expression. “Ford? Hey...you all right?”

“Hmm? Yes, I'm fine.” Ford snapped back to attention, withdrawing his arm and placing his hand against his holster. “We're going to have to clear this out as best we can. Do you have any experience with gardening?”

“Not really.” Dipper said, looking down the hall. The growth seemed to get thicker the further down it went. “I had a cactus once, but I over-watered it. I think I'm not very good at keeping plants alive.”

“Keeping these plants alive is frankly the furthest thought from my mind right now.”

Ford fiddled with a dial on the back of the weapon he was carrying and aimed it down the hall. Green-yellow fireballs shot out of it, spreading over the vines wherever there was contact while leaving the walls and floors untouched. Dipper swore he heard a high-pitched whine as the plants caught fire, burned and blackened.

“Stay close behind me. If there's anything you can think of that might help in tearing these things down, use it.” Ford said, sprinting down the hall.

Dipper closed his eyes and tried to remember the weight and heft of the hedge trimmers in grandpa Shermie's gardening shed. When he opened his eyes again, they were in his hands. He tucked them in his belt and hurried after Ford.

***

It was hard to tell how much time was passing. Dipper could at least say with confidence they'd been in Stan's mind long enough for the adrenaline rush to wear off and the process of hacking through what seemed like miles and miles of these vines to go from creepy and exciting to monotonous and dull.

He dug the broken half of Shermie's hedge trimmers into the base of a vine, sighed and wiped his brow. He didn't feel tired, not physically at least. Probably he couldn't get physically tired, or
physically anything in here. But he was starting to feel worn out in a way that was hard to put his finger on.

“Do we actually know where we're going?” he asked Ford.

“Hard to say.” Ford pulled a small notebook out of his pocket and scribbled something on it. “I've been keeping track of our turns, but spatial relationships in the mind aren't the same as they are in reality.”

They turned the corner again and found themselves in a hall that had already been cleared. Chopped, burned and blackened vines stretched out in either direction in front of them. Dipper groaned.

“Aw, seriously? After all that we've just been going in a circle?! This sucks.”

“We're on the right track, at least.” Ford said, crumbling the charred remains of a vine in his fist. “Bill's here, somewhere. But these things are superficial. We could spend hours pulling up and destroying them and still make no progress...if we want Bill out of Stan's head, we'll have to find where they're coming from.”

“How?” Dipper frowned. “There's so many false doors and dead ends here...I'm not even sure which way we came in anymore.”

“I was hoping that by now we would have run into Stan. Or rather, a localization of his consciousness.” Ford sighed. “Though if these dead ends are part of Bill’s tricks, he might be just as lost here as we are.”

“I don't know...I think it might just be Stan. I think his mind is just...sneaky or something.” Dipper muttered.

He remembered how Stan's mind had hidden the code to his safe under the rug from the gift shop...someone who didn't know to look there would have run past it without a second thought. In all the time they'd spent searching Stan's mind that day, none of them had found any memories of Ford or the portal. He hadn't even seen Stan dealing with the monsters in the forest, or anything else that would've given away the fact that his skeptic act about the supernatural was just that, an act. Stan's mind hid his secrets well.

Hmm. Last time, they'd found the code because they knew enough about Stan to guess where he'd hide something like that. Maybe they were thinking along the wrong lines.

“...You know more about Bill than any of us, Grunkle Ford.” Dipper said. “Where do you think he'd be? I mean...if Bill had a whole lifetime's worth of memories to hide in, where would he choose to anchor himself?”

“If I know Bill's methods, he'd find the place where...his host was vulnerable.” Ford said, hesitating a little before pointedly avoiding Stan's name. “He'd look for the single most important thing in his mind, whatever was truly precious, and then coil himself around it. That would allow him to use that weakness to hurt the host mind, either to discourage anyone trying to stop him, or just...because that is the sort of thing he does.”

The most important thing in Stan's mind...Dipper's eyes widened.

“Where on the Stan-O-War do you keep Mabel's scrapbooks?”

Realization spread over Ford's face. “By the Axolotl, you're right. Quickly! Let's get to the exit.
The two of them sprinted back down the hallway, back to the entrance of the Shack, hoping that they hadn't been turned around enough that they'd be unable to find their way out. As they ran, Dipper began to notice something wrong with the walls and floorboards. They were shifting and shaking, cracks were widening between them. Before long, it was like running through an earthquake, the floor shuddering under them, doors flying open and closed on either side.

“He's trying to stop us!” Ford shouted back at Dipper. “That means we're on the right track! Keep running!”

“Right!” Dipper shouted back, pumping his legs for all he was worth. He focused all his attention on running. *Keep moving forward, don't look back.* He told himself. *Not always great life advice, sure, but good in the literal sense right now.*

Still, he probably should have looked down. If he had he might have seen the trap door that had been flung open by the shaking before his foot went through it. Off-balance, still mid-stride Dipper barely had the chance to process what was happening before he'd tumbled forward completely into darkness. He was falling. Above him, he heard Ford calling his name in a panic, and saw the light of the trap door shrink into nothingness. He reached up reflexively though there was nothing to grasp, and when he shouted back to Ford he couldn't hear a response.

He hit the ground with a thud. Painful, but not the bone-shattering impact it should have been, which was a plus. He'd only just barely gotten to his feet when something heavy slammed into his side, knocking him down again. Somewhere in the room, he could hear mocking, high-pitched laughter, and a chill ran up his spine.

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EFMZA FTQ OXAIZ' E OMDQQD IME NDAGSTF FA MZ MNDGBF TMXF MRFQD M PQYAZEFDMFUAZ AZ TAYQYMPQ RUDQIADWE. FTQ QIBXAEUAZ FAAW AGF FTQ NAGZOQ TAGEQ MZP YAEF AR FTQ MOFGMX TAGEQ ME IQXX. UF IME FTQ IADEF NUDFTPMK QHQC.

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