Summary

Happy endings are messy, and the Arctic winter is more difficult than either Stan or Ford want to admit.
On the Briny Ocean Tossed

The cabin of the Stan o’ War II was dark when Ford awoke from a fretful slumber, blankets twisted around his legs and the pattern of his sweater impressed into his cheek. He lay silently for a moment, clenching and unclenching his fists and letting the calm rocking of the ship lull away the wisps of nightmares that hung about his mind. Quietly, he repeated the mantra that had seen him through his time in the portal. *You’re here. You’re real. You can make it through this.*

This time, he couldn’t actually remember what he’d dreamed about, and in a way that was worse than the alternative. Dreams that he remember could be analyzed, explained away, he could assure himself that they weren’t real, or, more usually, that they had been real, but they were over now. When the only thing in his head was a lingering sense of terror with no rationale behind it, there was nothing he could do except wait. And his thoughts, treacherously, always wondered, if losing the memories of his dreams was this disconcerting, memories of things that hadn’t actually happened, how much worse it must have been—

No. He couldn’t think about it. Stanley was fine. He had his moments, had things that were still hazy, and sometimes Ford would find him sitting at the table clutching the scrapbook that Mabel had left with them, but, miraculously as it seemed, he was fine. Even Fiddleford was doing well for himself these days. There was no use dwelling on it.

When his breathing was steady again, he groped for his glasses, squinting through them at the glow of his watch. 4:28am. Well, that could be worse. In fact, one of the nice things about being on a boat in the middle of nowhere is that it really didn’t matter what happened to his sleep schedule. Stan would grumble, sometimes, but it wasn’t like he was much of one to talk. Pathetic, sleepy old men, the both of them. Anyway, time seemed more or less optional now that they were this far north; it had been three weeks since they’d seen real sun, and the blue-tinged twilight that hung around at midday reminded him of dimensions that he’d rather forget. No. Not forget. Dimensions he’d rather not dwell on.

Ford swung his stockinged feet out of bed and onto the floor and padded toward the kitchenette. His eyes strayed toward a particular cupboard, and for a moment he was tempted to open it, see if its contents could lull him back to sleep, or at least make him care less that he was awake. But no. He couldn’t make it a habit, and besides, Stan always noticed the empty bottles and gave him a Look that made Ford squirm. He’d put the kettle on, make some hot chocolate, and then see if there was any chance he was going back to sleep. If not, there was always research to do. They’d been approaching what his readings told him were the source of the anomalies, and the ocean was packed with strange creatures and mysterious artifacts. He hummed idly as he flicked on the light, pulling his research notes from their shelf and placing them on the table along with the amulet they’d recovered from the latest ghost ship. They’d been so busy over the past week that he’d barely had a chance to start deciphering the inscriptions. He really did need to get to them soon; after the incident with the Chalice of Yrocsis they’d learned that it wasn’t a good idea to keep magical artifacts on board until they had some idea of what they did. They were still finding bits of undead fish people lodged in the woodwork, and it had been months.

He poured himself a cup of water while the kettle heated up, adding some chips from the iceberg block they kept in the freezer. This time the iceberg definitely wasn’t sentient, they’d checked, but he waited a few moments before he took a sip anyway, just in case. The frigid water drove the last vestiges of weariness from him, and by the time the kettle began to sing he was already engrossed in the amulet, its Latin inscription neatly transcribed into his journal. The volume was filling up quickly; next time they were on shore he’d have to pick up some new bookbinding supplies and see if there
were any Earth knives that could sharpen a cockatrice quill. He’d managed to distort the tip of his fending off a giant man-eating lobster. Stanley had bought—well, Stanley had obtained—a perfectly nice fountain pen for him, but it wasn’t the same.

He was puzzling out a particularly badly worn verb form—some type of participle, but he wasn’t sure of the root—when he heard a loud splash from outside and the gulls that roosted on the wheelhouse started screaming.

Ford jumped up from the table, dropping his pen and splattering ink across the floor. Instinctively, his hand flew to his side, where he usually kept the blaster from Dimension D~47, but there was nothing there. Of course not, he chided himself, forcing down the wave of panic in his chest at being caught unarmed. You don’t sleep with it anymore, remember, not after the first time Stan tried to wake you up. He shuddered at the memory. Good thing he kept the weapon set to stun, although that had been bad enough. He’d awoken to a blue energy beam and seeing his brother fall, and it was only when he noticed that Stan was wearing his own clothes and it was the wrong gun in his hand that he’d realized it wasn’t just another part of the nightmare.

The birds were still shrieking. Ford drew in a deep breath, held it for a count of twelve, and then breathed out slowly through his nose. There was no reason for him to be this jumpy. There were plenty of things in the ocean that startled gulls. Most of them weren’t of much interest to him, and others were only of interest because of how much Mabel squealed when they sent her pictures of marine mammals, and if, by some chance, the thing was actually threatening, well, they could be threatening right back. He looked at the harpoon gun on the wall and the wards he’d carved into the hatch and smiled grimly. The Stan o’ War II might be old and rickety, but she was a fighter, just like them. And Ford hadn’t been able to resist making a few modifications before they sailed off. Technically his captain’s license was for class Omega starships, so it could be argued that several of his additions were just confirming to regulations, although he doubted anyone on this planet would buy that excuse.

He retrieved his pen from the floor and sat back down, squinting at the inscription. It had probably been a challenge to read even before it had spent centuries immersed in sea water—the letters were shallow, angular scratches, and it didn’t help that parts of them had been worn away by ghostly rituals. He stared at the mysterious participle again. Wait, what if the letter he’d been assuming was a two-compartment A was actually an alternate form of S? That would mean . . .

“Ha!” he shouted, “Consumptis, of course!”

As his words echoed back at him he glanced guiltily at the wall that hid Stanley’s bunk. It wouldn’t be the first time he’d woken his brother with his, ah, enthusiastic response to a particularly thorny research problem, but he was trying. He’d gotten too used to working alone over the years, being able to talk over problems to himself whenever he needed to.

To his relief, there was no sign that Stan had heard him. Trying to keep his voice down, and also being careful not to read the Latin out loud in case it summoned something best left buried, Ford poked at the words with his pen and muttered, “So, with the cities having-been-destroyed, we called—um, called on? Invited? Invoked? We, invoked the . . . most atrocious, well, that’s fun . . .”

A few moments later, he was interrupted by a loud ringing from the control panel. Pushing his chair back across the floor, he swung around to examine the screens. His watch, which was synced with the rest of the ship’s tech, let out a matching chime, and he silenced it hurriedly.

Something was caught in their net. Not anything that would put the boat in danger—more than once they’d snagged a monster so big they’d had to cut the lines to keep from capsizing—and not anything that had tripped the magic sensors, although plenty of the anomalies they’d discovered
weren’t actively magical in a way that would show up on their scans.

The Stan O’ War II had begun her life as a commercial fishing trawler, and when the brothers bought her they’d held on to most of the gear. Not that most of it would be recognizable now that Ford had had his hands on it for a few months, but the midwater trawling net was mostly untouched apart from the extra sensors and a device that Mabel’s merman penpal had helped them rig up. It broadcasted warnings in whale song so that no whales or sentient cryptids would approach the net and get caught in it. Ford was sure that it did scare away some things that they would be interested in, but they’d also found a number of creatures that approached the boat to ask them how a couple of humans had managed to make something like that. They didn’t usually leave the net down overnight, but the anomaly sensors had been so high the previous day that Ford had decided to see if they picked anything up.

After one last glance at the screens, Ford muted the alarm and pulled his coat off the peg on the wall. He could already feel the excitement welling up inside of him, the call of unknown knowledge just out of reach. He slid into his boots and pulled a headlamp over his forehead.

He could bring the net in himself, but it was easier with two people, and although Stan might grumble about being woken up in the middle of the night he would certainly grumble more if Ford found something interesting or dangerous without him. He was surprised that the alarms hadn’t roused his brother already, but while Ford was always a hair trigger away from awakeness, Stan slept like a log.

“Sorry to wake you,” he began, rounding to corner to Stanley’s bunk, but the bed was empty, blankets knotted in one corner and the pillow half-shoved under the headboard. Ford stared for a moment in shock. The boat’s hold was small, he hadn’t heard any movement since he woke up, it wasn’t like there was anywhere else Stan could be except—

“Shit,” he muttered, turning around and running for the deck. “Shitshitshitshitshit.” How long had it been since he’d heard the splash that set the gulls off? Five minutes? Ten? Too long, you’re too slow, you should have looked—

He skidded through the cabin, throwing open the hatch. As soon as he did so he was hit with a blast of cold that left him gasping. Breathing stung his throat, and he could feel the hairs inside his nostrils freeze. He should have dressed more warmly, put something over his head, but there wasn’t time.

“Stanley!”

He stared around at the deck, a part of him hoping desperately that he’d see his brother standing there watching the sea, that he’d laugh and say “Woah, Sixer, calm down! What is it this time, another lost fish civilization?” that he’d chide Ford for not wearing a hat even though he almost certainly wouldn’t be dressed warmly enough himself.

He scanned the boat with the beam of his headlamp. Nothing.

The sensors could be set off by something hitting one of the warp lines. It didn’t need to be far down enough to impact the net itself. It wasn’t likely, but it was possible, and possible was all he needed. The alternative was something he wouldn’t think about until he had to.

“Stanley!” he yelled into the wind, leaning over the rail and desperately searching the water.

There was no reply except the cries of the wheeling gulls.
“Stanley!” Ford screamed again, and when once again there was no response he forced himself to slow down. He was gasping so hard that all the lamp illuminated was the fog of his own breath. He bit down on his tongue, letting the sensation ground him, and breathed in slowly, the way he’d taught himself in college when he’d first started getting panic attacks. It seemed silly now, after everything he’d seen, that he could remain perfectly calm in the face of a bloodthirsty monster, but thinking about his freshman biology class still made him hyperventilate.

Or rather, as he’d learned over recent months, he could remain completely calm in the face of a bloodthirsty monster if he was the only one in danger. Having other people around, especially people he cared about ... complicated things. He hated the way the fear welled up, pushing his other thoughts aside. It made him slow and useless and he couldn’t think.

He let the breath out slowly. It caught in his throat, coming out in shuddering bursts, clouds that hung in the air in front of his face. Come on! he chided himself. Think logically; it’s all you’re good for anyway. He couldn’t afford to panic. It would only make him lose time, time he didn’t have. Time that Stan didn’t have. He had to be methodical.

They were anchored for the night, so that was one less variable to worry about. He stood at the stern and carefully ran his headlamp in a grid pattern over the water, tamping down the part of him that was threatening to scream with every fruitless pass he made. The sea was choppy and despite his best efforts the fog from his breath still blocked his view. With every second that passed, he could feel the terror mounting inside him.

He could feel something else, too. While at first the cold had bit most at his fingers and his uncovered face, now the worst of it was localizing at the crown of his head. He could feel the outline of the metal plate under his skin, a deep ache spreading out from it until his entire head was throbbing with cold and pain. Pain he’d learned to ignore, but he could already tell his thoughts were slowing as the cold leached into his brain. He couldn’t afford any more lapses in judgement.

Or was he already too late? That thought, and its associated statistics, were one thing that the cold seemed unable to numb. It burrowed into his brain, whispering too slow, too self-absorbed, he’s going to die and it will be your fault. They’d fished each other out of the ocean countless times, but the longest either of them had been in the water was five minutes, the time when Ford had fallen trying to get a closer look at a juvenile lion-headed octo-beast and the mother had decided their boat was a threat. He’d clung to one of the trailing lines and managed to keep his head above the waves,
but by the time Stan had fended it off and pulled Ford out of the water, he could barely move his fingers, and he was shivering so hard he couldn’t speak.

He didn’t know how long it had been since he’d heard the splash, but it had definitely been longer than five minutes. How much longer he wasn’t sure, and in a situation where every second counted the uncertainty was agonizing. Even if it was the lowest end of his estimate, there were so many things that could go wrong—inhaling water from the immediate gasp reflex, the cold and shock triggering cardiac arrest, loss of consciousness from overexertion—and that was before taking into account the anomalies that lurked in the water. Even the ones that weren’t actively hostile didn’t always understand that humans needed to breathe air, and the ones that were—

Ford shook his head. He couldn’t think about that, couldn’t think about what he would do if this rescue mission had to turn into a revenge quest, couldn’t think about all the creatures sketched in his journal with their mocking smiles and their claws and stingers and teeth, couldn’t think—

And then he saw it—a shift, a bubble in the water that wasn’t part of the pattern of waves, and a red woolen hat broke the surface. Stan tilted his head up, gasping for air, but even the gasps seemed lethargic, as if he was moving in slow motion.

Not too late not too late thank Moses he’s alive he’s alive he’s alive.

“Stanley! Hold on!” Ford yelled.

He backed up, feeling for the life preserver on its hook but not wanting to turn his head, terrified of losing sight of his brother. Terrified of what else he might lose. Even as he watched, the crest of a wave broke over Stan’s head. Ford held his breath as the red hat vanished for a moment, dipping beneath the foam, and then slowly, almost imperceptibly, it rose again.

His groping hand, now nearly numb even inside its glove, found the flotation device, and he tossed it over the side as hard as he could, crying his brother’s name.

Stan seemed barely able to keep his head above the surface. His face drooped down into the surf, and then when he breathed it craned up, desperately, for a moment.

Ford cursed himself again for not checking earlier. He could barely feel his own fingers, and he’d only been outside for perhaps a minute. He doubted Stan had any manual dexterity left. Honestly, between his age and his time in the water it was a miracle he was even conscious. If they got out of this, he was never teasing Stan about his weight again; his heavier build was insulating his core from the freezing water and may well have saved his life.

If they got out of this, they were also going to start wearing their damn life jackets.

“Come on, Stanley, please!”

The life preserver floated towards him. Ford held his breath. It was so close now . . .

Stan turned his head to look at it. With excruciating slowness, he reached out a hand towards it, but as he raised his arm his head sunk lower, and this time it didn’t re-emerge. The outstretched arm grazed the side of the float, and then it, too, vanished.

Ford screamed as his brother’s hand slipped beneath the waves.

Too slow too slow too slow this is all your fault. He’d swung one of his own legs over the rail, ready to leap to the rescue, before he stopped himself. Cold-water shock. You’ll be useless for at least a minute. Probably more with this damn plate. There’s no time.
With a growl low in his throat, Ford spun and ran for the winch that would raise the net. He only had one chance left. They’d done this maneuver with anomalies before, but it had been daylight and he’d had his brother with him and he’d been able to see—

His feet slipped on the icy deck and he crashed to the ground. As he scrabbled to regain his footing he tasted blood in his mouth. He shook his head, spat, and kept stumbling forward until he reached the wall of the wheelhouse where the winch was housed.

He grabbed it with stinging, frozen fingers, and began to pull with all his might. The machinery creaked under its coat of ice, then released with a groan and a crackling shiver, slowly winding in the warp cables.

Ford pulled. His arms were aching and he didn’t dare look behind him. Part of him was screaming and part of him was reciting statistics about cold water survival and part of him was counting the seconds since Stan had gone under. The plate in his head burned with cold.

He heard the splash as the first floats broke the surface and redoubled his efforts. *Come on come on come on.*

It hurt to breathe and his muscles burned and he could barely feel his hands, but he couldn’t stop. With excruciating slowness, the net rose. It was heavy—was it heavy enough? He couldn’t tell—and he had to reposition his feet on the icy deck, arms straining as he worked.

He could only spare quick glances behind him, and the first two times he looked there was nothing there. He told himself that the net was long, that he couldn’t give up yet, that he just had to keep pulling.

Then he looked again, and he saw, tangled in the netting, a stiff outreaching hand. In the light of his headlamp it looked bone-white. He couldn’t let himself focus on it. The light washed out everything. It would be okay, it had to be okay. He kept working.

Finally, the net dangled above the water, swaying slowly back and forth. Frost was already glinting on the upper portions. Stan’s body was tangled in the mesh, unmoving. Somehow, he managed to seem stiff and limp at the same time. His skin was very pale.

Ford really, really wished that the net wasn’t red.

He lowered the net to the deck as gently as he could, wincing at how little Stan’s limbs bent. Then he fell to his knees, reaching out desperately to his brother. He needed to get him inside, get him warm, turn this into another adventure that they would laugh about later. He needed to make sure he was breathing. *Please, please, let him be breathing.*

And then he needed to establish whether this had been an accident or if some creature was involved, and if it was the latter Ford was going to mount its head over his non-existent fireplace, their non-aggression treaty with the Trans-Oceanic Mer-Kingdom Alliance be damned. Nothing hurt his family like this and lived to tell the tale.

At least Stan had no obvious further injuries—no rips in his clothes, no blood. With clumsy fingers, Ford tried to pull the net open, but his hands wouldn’t co-operate and the seconds ticked by as he fumbled helplessly with the equipment. Clouds of fog from his breath hung in the air around him.

The air in front of Stan’s face was completely clear.

“Come on, come on!” Ford cried in frustration. The net only grew more tangled as he struggled with it, until he felt like he was wrestling with the Gordian Knot itself.
He shook his head, “Of course, stupid . . .” and reached into the pocket of his coat where he kept his pocketknife. He wasn’t thinking clearly. He was going to screw something up, make things worse, he wasn’t going to be able to save his brother because all he had was his brain and his brain wasn’t working.

Knife in hand, he slashed at the netting, pulling coils of it out of the way until he could reach Stanley’s still form. Then he threw the knife aside and wrapped his arms around his brother, pulling him out of the netting and toward the hatch.

*Have to get him warm,* Ford thought. *Have to get inside.*

Stan’s waterlogged clothing was already stiff with frost, and there was ice forming in his hair. His body was rigid as Ford dragged him across the deck, threw open the hatch, and tried to maneuver them inside.

He slipped as he crossed the threshold, ending up sprawled on the floor with Stan on top of him. He gasped as the impact knocked the air from his lungs. From the ringing noise as they landed he thought he’d hit his head on the floor, but it was so cold that he couldn’t feel anything. He squirmed, trying to extricate himself. Stan was heavy and unyielding.

Ford had supported his brother’s weight plenty of times, after minor injuries or particularly intense bouts of monster-punching, and a few times on shore when they’d stayed too late at a bar and had to stagger home with their arms around each other, Stan singing very loud, very off-key pop songs and Ford discovering how hard it was to harmonize with someone who cared more about volume than pitch. Stan had never felt so heavy before.

Of course, he’d always been at least semi-conscious before, Ford’s brain reminded him. There was a big difference between supporting someone who could work with you and, well, dead weight.

He’d always hated that term.

“Shut up!” Ford hissed. He was aware that talking back to his own brain didn’t bode well for his mental stability, but it didn’t matter. He was going to bully his mind into co-operating and helping and not catastrophizing if it was the last thing he did. Which it wouldn’t be. Because they would be fine. Okay?

*You don’t know if he’s breathing you don’t know if that fall hurt him or if the net hurt him or if something in the ocean hurt him you don’t know you don’t know—*

Ford shoved the thoughts away. The sudden temperature change had caused his glasses to fog over so that all he could see was a blur. After a moment of struggling, he extricated himself from underneath Stan by feel, gently laying his brother’s body on the floor, and slammed the hatch shut before turning back and wiping his glasses off on his sleeve, terrified of what he might see.

Stan’s lips were blue and his limbs were stiff. He didn’t move as Ford fell to the floor, lifting his brother up into his arms. Ford bit back the panic welling up in his chest and felt desperately for a pulse. His eyes widened as he saw that the fingers he was pressing to Stan’s neck were slippery and stained red.

No . . . There hadn’t been any blood, he’d checked, how had he missed it? Unless it was his own fault, a slip of the knife, but no, he would have noticed, he couldn’t have been that careless, he couldn’t—

A choked sob escaped from his throat.
He pulled his hand away, wiping the blood from Stan’s neck with a corner of his coat held in trembling fingers. The skin was smooth, unbroken.

He looked at his hand in confusion. His panic subsided slightly as he realized that the blood was his own, oozing from a deep cut in his left hand. He must have cut himself trying to free Stanley from the net. He hadn’t even noticed.

Hastily pressing the sleeve of his coat to the cut to staunch the blood flow, he returned his fingers to the pulse point at Stan’s throat. He tried to still his own breathing so it wouldn’t interfere, blocking out the ache in his muscles and the tremor—whether it stemmed from cold or fear he didn’t know—that was beginning in his right hand, and staring down at his brother’s still form as if he could force his blood to circulate through willpower alone.

He felt something. Biting his lip in case he had imagined it, he forced himself to wait. You need more data points . . .

There it was again. A heartbeat. Weak and slow, but present.

Ford nearly sobbed with relief. For a moment he buried his face in his brother’s freezing shoulder, murmuring, “I’ve got you. I’ve got you, it’s okay. You’ll be okay.”

Then he straightened up and shook his head, wiping his eyes. He won’t be okay unless you can get yourself together and take care of him.

All right. First priority was getting Stan dry. He wasn’t out of the woods yet. Even inside, his wet clothes were leeching more heat out of him.

Ford ran through the boat, grabbing every blanket they owned, and dropped them in a pile on the floor. Gently, he pulled the hat off Stan’s head and unfastened his coat. He was trying to remove the sodden garment without putting too much pressure on Stan’s stiff arms when his brother’s eyes fluttered open and he muttered something that was barely recognizable as words.

“Mmmleemelone.” He seemed to be trying to push Ford’s hand away, but his arm barely moved.

“Come on, Stanley,” said Ford gently. “Let me help you. We need to warm you up.”

“Mfine.”

Ford would have laughed if the circumstances were less dire. “Ah, yes, ‘fine,’ exactly how I feel after nearly freezing to death. No—” Stan was trying to sit up, but Ford placed his hands on his shoulders and gently lowered him back down. “You can’t try to move yet; it could make things worse. Just stay still.”

Stan blinked. He’d lost his glasses in the water and his eyes were cloudy and unfocused. He stared blearily at Ford’s face.

“Who’reyou?”

Ford swallowed. Confusion was a common side effect of low body temperature. This was a fact, he knew it, just because Stan didn’t recognize him didn’t mean, well, what he was afraid it meant. Ford’s heart refused to listen to his rationalizing and began to beat frantically.

“It’s me,” he said. “It’s Ford.”

“What?” Of course it was that word that came out clear and unambiguous.
“I’m your brother. Do . . . do you remember your name?”

Stan’s eyes were wide and frightened as he shook his head.

“Listen to me,” Ford said calmly, his tone belying the tempest of emotions in his head. “Your name is Stanley Pines. I’m your brother, and I’m also a doctor.” White lie, twelve PhD’s didn’t mean he was medically qualified, but having to take care of himself during his time beyond the portal did. It was just . . . more difficult to explain. “You’ve had an accident. I need you to do as I say. Please.”

A sound that may have just been a rush of breath but that Ford was going to pretend was “Okay.” Even if it wasn’t, it was audible proof that Stan was breathing.

“Your body temperature is dangerously low. We need to get you out of these wet clothes.”

Stan made an incoherent noise that sounded like “mdonwanna.”

Ford rolled his eyes, fond exasperation mixing with his fear. “Stan, you walk around in your underwear all the time. This is a fine time to develop a sense of modesty. Now come on.”

“Nnno. ‘Smine.”

“Stanley!” Ford knew his brother was in no position to resist if he had to resort to force, but the thought of actually doing so made him feel sick. He didn’t have time to bring out the scrapbook, and there was no guarantee that without his glasses and with the additional hypothermia-induced confusion the photos would have any effect. “I’ll bring you new clothes that are dry and not in danger of actually killing you!”

Stan blinked again. “Mmgonnadie?”

“No!” Ford squeezed Stan’s shoulders. Both his hands were shaking now. “You’re not going to die! You’ll be fine! Just please, please, let me get you dry. Let me help you.” Don’t make me fight you while you’re like this.

“’K.” This time the admission was unambiguous, and Ford let out the breath he’d been holding, feeling a great wave of tension release from his body. He had a splitting headache, but at least he could feel his head now. That had to be an improvement.

Begrudgingly, Stan allowed his brother to remove his coat, and even raised his arms to help as Ford pulled off his sweater. They piled up on the floor along with boots, socks, pants, and a disgusting old undershirt that Ford was tempted to throw back in the ocean.

By that point, Stan was shivering violently. Ford reminded himself that it was a good sign—it was all right, it was his body trying to warm itself up, it was when he’d stopped shivering that they really had to be worried—as he draped every blanket they owned around him, tucking one over Stan’s head until only his face was exposed.

Ford took a moment to remove his own wet outer layers, and then grabbed his half-full mug of hot chocolate, which was now only warm, from the table. He knelt and held it in front of Stan’s face.

Before he could say anything, Stan’s eyes widened, and he opened and closed his mouth a few times before stammering, “F-Ford?”

“Yes!” The mug in his hand forgotten, Ford flung his arms around his brother. “It’s me. I’m here. I’ve got you.”
He felt pressure at his sides as Stan tried to return the hug with limbs that were stiff and swathed with blankets.

“Wha’ happened?”

Ford paused for a moment, wondering what to say and how to convey that there were still important details that he didn’t know, but eventually he settled on, “You nearly drowned. But you didn’t.”

“Oh. Um. Good.”

Ford drew back from the embrace to see his brother staring, nonplussed, at the air. He remembered the hot chocolate in his hand and checked the contents of the mug. Miraculously, he’d managed not to spill any. Once again, he held it out to Stan.

“Can you drink this?” he asked.

“Dunno,” said Stan. His speech was still slurred, but the words sounded real, and his eyes were much more alert.

“Well, can you try?”

He tilted the mug up and Stan sipped gingerly at the drink. Some of it dribbled down his chin, and Ford dabbed at it with a corner of the blanket.

“M not ‘n invalid, Ford,” Stan complained.

“Could have fooled me. You don’t want to be treated like you’re ill, don’t fall in the Arctic Ocean. At night. Without telling me.”

He wasn’t sure if the noise Stan made was supposed to be words or if it was just a general exclamation of disgust.

He held out the mug again, keeping it still until Stan had managed to drink the rest of the hot chocolate. “Now don’t come out until you’ve warmed up or I won’t rescue you next time.”

He’d been expecting a snarky comeback, but instead Stan shrunk away from him as if he’d been struck.

“Kidding! Kidding. You know that.”

“Haha,” Stan croaked unconvincingly. “Yeah. O’course.” The drink seemed to have done him some good. The shivering was worse, but the blue tint had left his lips.

Ford got out a second mug and refilled the kettle. He looked at his brother, who was resolutely trying to pretend that his body wasn’t still shaking like a leaf, and sighed.

“What’re ya doing?” asked Stan thickly, as Ford pulled his sweater and T-shirt over his head. Even though he knew Stan had seen them before, he was glad that without his glasses, his brother wouldn’t be able to make out the scars scattered across his body.

“What’re ya doing?” asked Stan thickly, as Ford pulled his sweater and T-shirt over his head. Even though he knew Stan had seen them before, he was glad that without his glasses, his brother wouldn’t be able to make out the scars scattered across his body.

“So you’re not invalid, Ford,” Stan complained.

“Could have fooled me. You don’t want to be treated like you’re ill, don’t fall in the Arctic Ocean. At night. Without telling me.”

He wasn’t sure if the noise Stan made was supposed to be words or if it was just a general exclamation of disgust.

He held out the mug again, keeping it still until Stan had managed to drink the rest of the hot chocolate. “Now don’t come out until you’ve warmed up or I won’t rescue you next time.”

He’d been expecting a snarky comeback, but instead Stan shrunk away from him as if he’d been struck.

“Kidding! Kidding. You know that.”

“Haha,” Stan croaked unconvincingly. “Yeah. O’course.” The drink seemed to have done him some good. The shivering was worse, but the blue tint had left his lips.

Ford got out a second mug and refilled the kettle. He looked at his brother, who was resolutely trying to pretend that his body wasn’t still shaking like a leaf, and sighed.

“What’re ya doing?” asked Stan thickly, as Ford pulled his sweater and T-shirt over his head. Even though he knew Stan had seen them before, he was glad that without his glasses, his brother wouldn’t be able to make out the scars scattered across his body.

“Sacrificing my own precious body heat to save your sorry skin,” said Ford. “Now let me in.”

Stan looked perturbed, but lifted up a corner of the blankets. Ford sat down, cocooning the blankets tightly around them, and wrapped his arms around his brother’s chest, pressing their torsos together.

He yelped. It was like hugging an ice floe. Stan laughed until he coughed. “Serves ya right,” he said.
“For what?”

“Bein’ a smarty-pants nerd.”

“Your mind must be going. That was weak, even for you.” The banter was comforting.

Stan responded by pressing himself backwards, bringing more of his freezing skin in contact with Ford’s. He laughed as Ford squawked.

“Are you sure you didn’t get replaced by some kind of ice doppelganger?” Ford gritted his teeth and thought wistfully of how warm his sweater was. Also how warm the air was. Or pretty much anything inside that wasn’t what he was currently hugging.

“I can’t believe you!” scoffed Stan. His speech was less slurred now—that was a good sign, as was the fact that he was feeling coherent enough for sarcasm. “How could ya say such a thing ‘bout your own brother!”

“Sounds like something an ice doppelganger would say,” Ford grumbled, resolutely not moving.

* * *

By the time the kettle went off again, the nest of blankets was pleasantly warm. Ford shivered as he stood up and quickly pulled his shirt and sweater back on. He poured them both new cups of hot chocolate and found dry clothes for Stan.

As Stan struggled into the sweater Ford had brought him (blue, with a cabled giant squid design, one of Mabel’s finest), Ford sat back down with his mug in one hand and his journal in the other, and said, “All right, what happened?”

“Hmm?”

“You nearly drowned, Stan. You’re lucky I was even awake. What happened?”

Sitting in the warm pile of blankets, like the forts they’d made as children, made Ford feel calm and safe, but as he asked the question his throat tightened. What if he hadn’t been awake? How long would it have been until he noticed, until he thought to check his brother’s bunk to chide him for sleeping the day away? How long would he have searched the ocean, even knowing that no one could survive in water that cold for more than a few minutes?

It wasn’t that the possibility of either of them dying was anything new. They’d both had their fair share of close calls since they left port, but there was something about the idea of not being there that made Ford freeze up in a way none of the other dangers had.

“Don’t know,” said Stan.

“You don’t—what do you mean, you don’t know?”

Stan shrugged. “Don’t remember. Not all of it. I woke up, thought I’d stretch my legs. Went up on deck for a smoke, and as I was standin’ there I saw . . . something in the water, coming towards me. Next thing I remember is you insisting I take my clothes off, which was not the most pleasant thing to wake up to, let me tell you.”

Ford flipped through his notes. “Interesting. It may have been some variety of siren. Of course, in your circumstances it’s difficult to tell if the amnesia is a function of the creature itself or the state of your own mind. Or it’s possible you hit your head when you fell, but that seems less likely. Now, it’s
very odd that whatever lured you into the water doesn’t seem to have tried to do anything further with you once you were there—we can check again, but I didn’t see any unusual marks, and I don’t think the resistance I encountered when I pulled you up was more than can be explained by your own weight.”

Stan snuggled down into the blankets, curling around his mug of hot chocolate. “It’s a mystery, I guess.”

Ford clicked his pen, paging back through the information he already had on the cryptids in their area. “Well, regardless, neither of us should go up on deck alone until we get to the bottom of this. We can’t risk something like this happening again.”

“Mmm.”

“Stanley, I’m serious.”

“I know, Sixer, but I ache all over. I think my brain is mad it’s stuck in this creaky old body and is taking it out on the rest of me. I’ll talk about it all you want in the morning, I swear.”

“Technically, it is—”

Stan threw a pillow at him. “Ah, shut up, you knew what I meant.”

Ford smiled despite himself and turned back to his journal. After a few minutes, he heard the loud, rumbling noises of his brother’s snores. He picked up the half-empty mug and placed it on the table with his own empty one, then tucked the blankets closer around Stan. He was lying on his back, snoring like a buzzsaw. As Ford pulled the remaining blanket over himself, Stan muttered something in his sleep and rolled over, his head flopping onto his brother’s shoulder and one arm draping across Ford’s chest. Ford tried for a while longer to work on his notes, but the blankets were warm and Stan’s head was heavy.

He closed his journal, the inlaid brass pine tree on the cover glinting in the light of the cabin, and slid it under his head. His hand found his brother’s, and he linked their fingers together, bony knuckles locking them in place. Stan’s skin was cold, but he squeezed Ford’s hand in his sleep and snuggled closer, reassuringly solid. Ford moved his thumb to Stan’s wrist, pressing it gently to the vein, and dozed off feeling the slow but regular beat of his brother’s heart.
No More on the Docks I'll Be Seen

Chapter Summary

Ford has coffee with his brother and tea with a seal, and makes some discoveries.

Chapter Notes

The overall content warnings start to come into play in this chapter. Please stay safe, and feel free to message me if you need more details.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“It says you’re still at 99 degrees. That can’t be right, you’ve been better for ages!”

“You gotta tell Ma! I’m too sick ta go to school, Ford said so. Cough, cough.”

“Did not, you sissy!”

“Well, maybe it’s broken. That’d be great; play our cards right and we could stay home whenever we want! Try yours!”

“Hmm.” Ford peered intently at the cheap thermometer in his hand. “We do need to take calibration error into account. I don’t think this is the most scientific instrument.” He wiped off the bulb and popped it under his tongue.

Next to him, Stan rolled over and made a series of increasingly ridiculous faces, trying to goad Ford into laughing. Ford rolled his eyes and smacked his brother’s shoulder, and Stan fell back, giggling. He tumbled into one of the blankets that formed the main wall of the latest incarnation of Fort Stan, and Ford sighed as the other blankets fluttered down on top of them.

“Heh ha,” said Stan. “Whoops.”

He didn’t need to say that he would rebuild it—they always did, at least once a week on average. Ford was working on designs for a blanket fort with better structural integrity, but mostly that was because then it was more fun to knock down. Demolitions was part of science, too, after all.

The blanket over his eyes heaved, and then it was pulled away, revealing Stan’s grinning, gap-toothed face.

“So what’s it say?”

Ford pulled the thermometer out of his mouth and checked the reading. “Huh. 97.8. Well, one of them is wrong.”

“Or I am still sick,” said Stan unconvincingly. “Or maybe you’re secretly a lizard man!”

Ford laughed. “Or maybe we’re developing complimentary superpowers!”
“Yeah!” Stan punched the air. “I’m gonna shoot fireballs and you’re gonna grow gills and have to live in the bathtub!”

“Hey! You’re the one who stays in the ocean until you turn blue!”

“’Sokay,” said Stan, puffing out his chest, “I can handle it with my volcano powers!”

“That why you always attack me with your ice hands until I give you my towel?”

“Look who’s talking! At least when I been in the ocean I got a reason for ice hands; yours are like that all the time!”

“Oh, really?” Ford looked down at his hands and grinned wickedly.

“Nonono!” yelled Stan in mock despair. “Take them awaaaayyy!”

But Ford had already lunged at his brother, wiggling his fingers threateningly. Stan shrieked and giggled as Ford tackled him, the two of them rolling across the floor in a flurry of laughter and tangled limbs.

The memory blurred as Ford drifted back into consciousness. For a moment he wondered if he was still dreaming; he was laying on a hard surface and as he moved he could feel the textures of at least three different blankets, far more than he usually slept with. He opened his eyes muzzily. He’d fallen asleep with his glasses on again; the lenses were squished against his face, and he was sure Stan would laugh at the marks they left. His head ached. Actually, most of him ached, and there was a dull, throbbing pain emanating from his left hand. Oh, right, he’d cut himself when—

Recollection came flooding back and he sat bolt upright, fighting against the blankets swathed around him. To his left, Stan groaned and rolled over, and Ford relaxed, thinking, Safe. He’s safe. We’re safe, until his heartbeat slowed. He had to reach out and touch Stan’s hand again, just to be sure. The skin was rough but warm under his fingers, the way it was supposed to be.

He extricated himself from the nest of bedding and stretched, feeling his shoulders crack as he raised his arms above his head. The cut on his left hand twinged. He examined it properly for the first time—obviously, he’d had higher priorities the night before. The slash ran across the back of his hand, from the base of his thumb to the knuckle of his first finger. It wasn’t as deep as he’d feared, but it probably still deserved some medical attention.

He got as far as pulling out the bottle of hydrogen peroxide from their heavily-used first aid kit before being distracted by the control panel. The weirdness readings had been steadily increasing as they approached the source of the anomalies, but there hadn’t been any spikes or other signs that they’d encountered anything more unusual than their baseline the previous night. Of course, tracking anomalies was an inexact science—he was developing the technology as he went, with occasional input from Fiddleford—so while positive results usually meant something was out there, negative results were extremely unreliable.

The hatch to the deck was tempting. He had been serious when he’d suggested that they not go out on deck alone, but he wasn’t going to just sit there twiddling his thumbs when there was a dangerous anomaly—potentially a new one!—to study. There was only so much he could do from the cabin. The magical fauna were changing rapidly now that they were so far North. If only they had more sources that were familiar with them . . .

A-ha. Ford enjoyed conducting his own research, but this looked like one of those occasions when collaboration could be key. He twisted a dial, sending out another of the pre-recorded whale song
signals they had on file. Then he busied himself for a few minutes brewing coffee, spread his notes out across the table, and sat down to wait. This particular contact was always remarkably quick to respond, and hopefully by the time they spoke he would have a better idea of what, exactly, he needed to ask.

It was several more hours before Stan awoke. Ford was on his second pot of coffee and his third re-read of potentially relevant material in his journal—the book, and his loose-leaf notes, bristled with post-its and torn notepaper bookmarks, and he was attempting to connect to the internet on the custom laptop Fiddleford had given them as a parting gift. Ford was pretty sure that if he pressed the wrong button—or, well, the right one, depending on your point of view—it would transform into an improbably large attack robot or turn out to double as a flamethrower, but thus far they hadn’t had any incidents.

“Morning!” said Ford cheerfully, as Stan finally emerged from his nest on the floor. “Well,” he added, checking the time on the computer’s clock, “Technically it’s mid-afternoon, but I’m sure you needed the rest.”

“Stop being so awake,” grumbled Stan, squinting up at his brother. “S not allowed.”

Ford poured the remainder of the coffee into another mug and pushed it across the table as a conciliatory gesture. Stan took his with enough sugar to send a flock of pixies into a diabetic coma, but he could see to that himself.

Stan patted the floor and blankets around him blearily. “You seen my glasses?”

“Oh,” said Ford. “They’re at the bottom of the ocean, probably.”

“Well that’s great,” grumbled Stan, “I’m sure I’ll have loads of fun running into walls now. Typical.”

“Oh, I’m sure I can rig something up,” Ford answered, waving one hand dismissively. Optics wasn’t exactly his strongest suit, but there must be something he could do to tide Stan’s eyes over until they next made port. “Now, first things first! It’s not-actually-morning, which means, per your promise, that you have to help me research the creature that lured you into the water for, and I quote, ‘as long as I want’.”

Stan grunted and looked surly, but he did move to the table and start dumping sugar into his coffee cup.

“So!” Ford gestured at the piles of notes spread out before him. “I found everything I could on sirens; obviously there are a number of supernatural sea creatures who use some type of hypnosis to lure their victims to their doom, but I think we should be able to narrow it down! Now, tell me again what you saw.”

Stan gave him a sidelong glance. “You’re enjoying this too much.”

“Yes!” Ford caught himself. “Well, I mean, obviously I’m not enjoying the fact that you fell overboard, but if it’s some kind of anomaly that I’m unfamiliar with, that is always exciting, even if it is the kind that tries to kill us. I almost wish that I’d been the one on deck . . .”

“No, you don’t, Sixer,” grumbled Stan. “And I told you, I don’t remember anything useful. I was up on deck having a smoke, went to toss the cigar end over the side, and there was this . . . thing in the water. And then that’s it, until you found me. Don’t know what it was, don’t know what it did, not sure I want to. Happy now?”

“Well,” Ford looked down at his piles of notes and frowned. “Not very. But that does give us
something to work with. Feelings of confusion are a commonly reported side effect, but actual amnesia is less well established. Of course, the data is very insubstantial at this point, so we can’t rule out it being an already-documented species, but we should also be aware of the possibility that it’s something entirely new. Siren sightings are unheard of this far north, so it may be a different species that has adopted a similar hunting strategy but is better suited to the Arctic waters. We should be looking for something that either has a very strong personal magical field or a thick blubber layer. Or possibly both!”

Stan sipped at his coffee. “That doesn’t sound like much to go on. Why are you so jazzed up about this anyway? We run into plenty of things that we never see again.”

“I mean . . .” Ford fiddled with the pages in front of him, rolling the corner of one piece of paper into a tight scroll as he tried to focus on the brother in front of him, cranky and tired and glowering as he stirred his coffee, and not his memories from the previous night, still and cold and barely breathing. “It hurt you.”

“Yeah, big deal. This ain’t the first time. And some of ‘em hurt you, too. How’s that wrist doing?”

Ford barely glanced down at the splotches of shinier skin scattered across his right wrist and forearm. All they knew about that creature was that it was serpentine and its blood burned like hot oil. “Fine, fine. The damage was quite superficial.” If he was being totally honest, there was something . . . almost comforting about that specific injury, the way it blurred the clear outlines of Bill’s shackles, turning his skin into a palimpsest with the old mistakes overwritten.

“Fine, sure. Go on your goose chase if you like, but I doubt you’ll find anything.”

And that, it seemed, was all he was going to get.

* * *

The seal swam fluidly around the boat, poking at the green bottle floating beside it with its nose. “Ah, thank you,” said Ford. He wasn’t sure if Mermando’s network (which was fast, even up here—barely more than a day had passed since Ford sent out the signal) used regular animal messengers or if the seal was some kind of anomaly itself. It looked, as far as he could tell in the low light, like a regular harp seal, but as his research had taught him time and time again, looks could be deceptive.

He did feel a little guilty about going up on deck without Stan, but when he’d first heard the familiar soft knocking against their hull, his brother was “reading” in his bunk, and Ford would have felt more guilty for waking him. Besides, he was wearing a life jacket! And he’d tied a line around his waist with the other end knotted to the base of the wheel so he could only walk as far as the rail. He knew that Stan was in no condition to rescue him if anything happened, and he was determined to ensure that nothing did.

He leaned over to grab the message and realized he may have made the line a bit too short. The seal picked the bottle up in its mouth and raised its head from the water, and Ford stretched his fingers as far as he could, but there was still a good foot of space between them and the message.

He huffed impatiently. Try to worry about self-preservation for once in your life and see where that got you. He unhitched the line from his waist and leaned over further. Just as his fingers were about to close around the bottle, the seal dove back down into the ocean.

“Hey!” he yelled, as it resurfaced, barking and flapping its flippers. It lifted the bottle up again, and this time Ford grabbed it hastily before the seal had a chance to decide it wanted to play with him
He popped out the cork and excavated the roll of paper from inside. “Dear Stanford,” it read, “Alas! You have journeyed beyond the bounds of my realm. Merpeople cannot survive in the Arctic waters. But fear not! We have diplomatic ties with the selkie kingdoms to the north, and I have passed you message along to one of their number. Fare well, my friend, and send my best wishes to Mabel!”

Ford looked from the letter to the seal, which was still swimming in languid circles, and then back to the letter. The animal rolled over and regarded him with a look of cool amusement.

“You're a selkie!” he exclaimed. “That’s amazing!”

The seal did a little spin that managed to imply that yes, it knew.

“So,” said Ford, “Can you talk when you’re in your seal form?”

The seal shook its head.

“But you can understand me?”

A great splashing dive that Ford interpreted as a nod, which covered his face in sea spray. He giggled.

“Well, would you like to come up? There’s so much to discuss! Ah, if you’re willing.”

The seal gazed at the steep sides of the boat, seeming to imply that it might be willing if the means could be found.

“Ah, yes.” Ford looked around at the coils of rope and other equipment stowed around the deck, his mind racing. “Let me see . . .”

Several minutes and some creative canvas- and knotwork later, the seal flopped onto the deck. It barked at Ford until he backed away several paces, and then stared at him until he got the hint and turned his back. He had to admit that he was itching to witness a selkie transformation first-hand, but the comfort of their guest was clearly the pre-eminent concern at the moment.

He heard a soft, drawn-out shuffling noise, then a crackling of joints, and then a young, high, voice said, “You can turn around if you want, but I’m stealing your coat.”

“Oh!” Ford unbuckled his life jacket (so inconvenient! No wonder he never bothered with the blasted things) and shrugged off his coat. He held it out behind him and felt it plucked from his hands.

“Hmm,” said the voice. “Cozy.”

He turned around to see the selkie woman finish fastening the buttons on his coat and then stretch, shaking out her mass of long dark hair. Her seal skin was wrapped around her waist like a skirt, empty flippers dangling around her knees.

“Hey!” she said. “First things first: you can call me Nuala, your friend Mermando sent me, and if you touch my skin I’ll eat you.”

Ford had been in the midst of extending his hand to shake when she spoke, but he drew it back, patting at his pockets for pencil and paper.

“You eat humans? Fascinating!”
She cocked her head at him. “No, actually. Do you write down whatever people say? Sheesh, talk about gullible. Although I do know some people who’d be perfectly happy to eat you, so don’t get too comfortable.”

“Yes, good!” Ford had extricated one of his tiny pocket notebooks and was scribbling furiously. “That’s excellent, exactly what I wanted to know. Do come in!”

“You know,” said Nuala as she followed him to the hatch, “Mermando asked me to make sure you and your brother don’t die out here, but if that’s your reaction to ‘man-eating sea creature’ I might have to just write back and tell him that it’s a lost cause.”

Ford laughed. “Then clearly you’ve never met a scientist!”

“Sure I have. They stick little trackers on us and get excited about migration patterns.”

She stumbled her way to the chair nearest the door. Ford noticed that, although she looked completely human apart from her unusually large, dark eyes, she walked like it took effort to remember that she could move her legs separately, and she kept her arms stiff, with all of her fingers pressed together. A holdover from the shape-change, certainly, which was intriguing because of how many creatures he’d encountered that could shift their form without any apparent adjustment period. He’d have to make a note of whether her body language changed over the course of the conversation, if she got more comfortable with being a human or if the awkward gait and hands held like flippers were reliable tells.

“Well?”

Ford realized that he’d been staring and shook his head. “Sorry! Can I offer you a drink? Um,” he added as he noticed the only bottle on the table, “Not hydrogen peroxide. Water? Tea? Hot chocolate? Something stronger?”

“Tea,” said Nuala. “Also you can offer me food. Anything that isn’t fish.”

Ford rooted through the cupboards and presented her with, in order, a bag of withered apples, a box of instant mashed potatoes, a variety of canned goods, and, finally, a half-empty box of chocolate cookies.

“That’s the stuff,” she said as she tore a sleeve of cookies open with her teeth. They didn’t look sharper than regular teeth, but they felt sharper somehow, as if his eyes and his brain were in disagreement about what he was seeing. Fascinating.

Ford sat across from her, balancing his journal on his knee and tapping his pen on the table in excitement. “So, Nuala, thank you so much for agreeing to this conversation! I just have a few questions, well, perhaps a few dozen . . .”

“Hold up,” the selkie replied, spraying cookie crumbs across the table. “Things are a little . . . politically tenuous around here. Getting in the good graces of the Queen of the Manatees and her consort will make everything way smoother. But I’m not here to be one of your experiments, so cut to the chase.”

Ford’s face fell. “Very well.”

And it was true that she had a point; if he wanted to find whatever had lured Stanley into the sea he needed to focus, not get distracted by every other anomaly they came across, no matter how legitimately distracting they happened to be. He leaned forwards and steepled his fingers. “I’m trying to find a particular creature; one that tried to drown my brother.”
Nuala listened placidly as he explained, chomping her way through the sleeve of cookies and periodically slurping at her mug of tea.

“Look, mister,” she said when he’d finished. “You’re a human, so I get that you’re gonna be self-centered, but really, there’s so few of you up here that nobody’s going to bother having special human-hunting strategies. Plus most of you are scrawny and you fight back. Not worth it.”

Ford frowned, flipping through his notes in such haste that he almost overturned his own cup of tea. “No, that isn’t right, we’ve seen a number of hostile creatures, and you said yourself—”

“Well, sure there are things that’ll go after you if they get the chance, but that siren love song business is warm water stuff. Nobody’s got the time to lounge around on rocks making goo-goo eyes at humans. It was probably something more opportunistic, thought your brother looked like an easy target and tried to nab him. The thing that confuses me is why they let you get away with rescuing him.”

Ford opened his mouth to protest that anything that thought Stan was an easy target clearly had no idea what it was dealing with, but his brother chose that moment to emerge from his bunk, yawning as he shuffled into view. He stopped when he saw Nuala and blinked warily behind the light blue backup glasses that Ford had created for him, not a perfect substitute, by any means, but better than nothing.

“Hey Ford? Why is there a beautiful woman sitting at our table? And why is she wearing your coat?”

“This is Nuala,” said Ford. “She’s helping with my investigations. Mermando thought some local assistance might be useful.”

“I’m a selkie,” Nuala added. “I stole his coat because humans need so many weird layers over their skin, otherwise you get cold and people try to steal you off to the mainland to marry them.”

“Well, ah, that definitely won’t be a problem here, I can promise,” said Ford uncomfortably. “For a variety of reasons.”

Stan grunted. “Have fun. I guess.”

“If there’s anything else you remember, she might be able to . . .” Ford trailed off as his brother pulled their laptop off the shelf and then turned and headed back to his bunk. “Or not.”

“Look.” Nuala leaned forward conspiratorially, “I may not have the answers for you, but I do know about something that does. It’s a tough order, but you’re smart, right?”

“Yes,” said Ford. “Very.”

Nuala appeared to consider this for a moment. She was definitely more comfortable in her humanity now, leaning back in the chair with her arms draped behind her head. She stroked her chin. “You got any more cookies? I am very open to bribery.”

* * *

“Stanley!”

Ford threw open the hatch and stomped in from the deck, brandishing a heavily modified fishing rod, to find his brother sitting at the table with the slashed trawl net spread out in front of him and a mending needle in his hands. From the look of it, he’d been working for a while; the smallest hole
had already been patched with sky-blue nylon and Stan was winding more rope onto the needle.

“Look!” said Ford triumphantly, holding his catch aloft. “Finally, the Oracle Fish! It’s just like Nuala said. I admit, I thought the silver hook and the golden line would be the most challenging aspect of its capture, but its riddles were really quite impressive! I haven’t had an intellectual foe like that, since, well, no matter. The important thing is, I’ve got it!”

He sat down, proffering the small silver fish, nondescript except for its vortex eyes. “Now all we have to do is prepare a sufficiently unambiguous question to ask it and set it in tetrameter verse, and it will tell us exactly what happened!”

When Stan didn’t respond, or even look up from his work, Ford laid a gentle hand on his shoulder.

“Stanley?”

Was he having another one of his fuzzy moments? He’d seemed fine a few hours ago when Ford had last been inside, but the memory lapses could come on fast, and Stan often put himself to some sort of manual work until the confusion passed. He whittled their net-mending needles himself, and he was working on carving Mabel a pig out of a piece of enchanted driftwood they’d picked up in their early weeks at sea.

Stan shrugged Ford’s hand off, and said, “Put that thing away. You don’t need it.”

Ford laid the Oracle Fish down. “I know you’ve been . . . concerned about me pursuing this, but I just want to make sure that you—that both of us are safe out there. If whatever it was comes back—”

“There wasn’t anything there.”

Ford blinked. “Wait, what?”

“I lied, okay. There wasn’t any siren or monster or anything in the water.” Stan glanced briefly at his brother and then stared back down at the table. “There was just me.”

Ford stared at Stan’s impassive face. “Stanley, I don’t understand. What are you . . . ?”

“I don’t want you wasting your time chasing after things that ain’t there. I didn’t fall in the water because of any supernatural thingawhatsis so you don’t have to keep looking for one.”

“What . . . ” Ford stared at his notes as if they might contain a solution. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Stan rolled his eyes. “Because I’m an idiot, all right?”

“All . . . right.” Ford paused a moment to get his bearings. He rallied, “So, you’re saying it wasn’t an outside force. We do have to consider the possibility that Bill, or some part of him, might still be in your mind somewhere. If that’s the case, he may very well try to drive you to self-destructive behaviors—”

Stan slammed his fist down on the table so hard that the needle he’d been holding shattered in his hand. “Damn it, Ford, you’re not listening!”

Ford blinked. “I, um . . .”

“I’m telling you, it wasn’t magic and it wasn’t demons and it wasn’t any of your sci-fi mumbo jumbo! It’s just my own damn brain, and I didn’t tell you because I didn’t want you to know that I’m still this broken.” Stan’s voice trailed off at the end. He still didn’t look up.
Ford stood there, mutely opening and closing his mouth, his breathing coming fast and shallow. A pit of dread had opened up in his stomach, cold and heavy and slippery, and he couldn’t talk, couldn’t find a single word that would make what his brother was telling him come untrue.

When Stan next spoke, it was barely more than a whisper. “I didn’t want to fall. Not really. It’s just . . . you remember when we were kids and I wouldn’t climb to the top of the breakwater with you? I was never afraid that I’d fall; I was afraid that I’d jump.”

Ford swallowed. “I don’t understand.” And that was a lie; he knew what Stan was saying, but he didn’t, he couldn’t—

Stan laughed hollowly. “Yeah, I figured. That’s the other reason I didn’t tell you.”

“All . . . are you saying you tried to . . . ?” All his usual eloquence had dried up, and Ford was left stammering his way around words he didn’t want to acknowledge.

“Off myself? I honestly don’t know.”

Ford threw his hands up in frustration, trying to mask the fact that they were shaking. He almost wailed, “But you’re happy now!”

Stan finally looked up, a small, sad smile on his face. “I know,” he said. “Funny, isn’t it?”

Chapter End Notes

All right, I know most of you called it, since unlike poor Ford you have the benefit of content warnings. Be assured, there’s a long way to go yet (my original four-chapter estimate was a long way off) and next chapter we’ll have the chance to get inside Stan’s head for a while.

Also, spoilers, but I do want to say this because things will probably look grim for a while:

They’re going to be okay.
And He Swore He'd Never Leave Me

Chapter Summary

In which there are several difficult conversations, and a promise is made.

Chapter Notes

This shouldn't be a surprise if you read the last chapter, but very strong warnings for depression/suicidal ideation in this one.

Stan paced across the deck of the Stan o’ War II and puffed at his cigar. It was a beautiful night. The sky was crisp and clear, occasional wisps of cloud swirling across and blocking the stars. The waves broke gently against the hull, and the sea glimmered in the starlight as it stretched out to the almost imperceptible horizon. A seagull of some kind roosted on their radio antenna. A few nights ago they had spent hours at the telescope, Ford explaining to Stan all the faint constellations that they could only see this far North with no other lights around them and which stars he knew supported alien civilizations. Tonight Ford was asleep, and tomorrow he’d wake up and they’d go fight some new monster or explore the ruins of an underwater city or maybe just sit and fish all day. In the evening, Ford would hum as he entered the day’s findings into his journal and Stan would work on the wooden pig he was trying to carve for Mabel. Everything was perfect.

And everything was wrong.

He had been happy at first, he was sure, giddy with the newness of it all, with the way Ford smiled at him like he meant more than all the anomalies in the world, with the feel of sea spray on his face and even the way his hands cracked and calloused from the unfamiliar labor of working the boat. He and Ford were family again, were sailing together, laughing like the children they’d been when everything fell apart the first time. It was a dream come true.

And then slowly, somehow, it turned into just a dream, gray days bleeding endlessly into each other. It took forever to fall asleep, and when he did it never seemed to take any time away from the changeless Arctic night. He was losing track of the days so badly that he’d almost missed their last video chat with the kids, convinced that it couldn’t possibly have been a week since the last one. He told himself that the reason food always tasted bland and forgettable, when he remembered to eat it at all, was because they had so little variety on the boat. It was bound to get boring living mostly on fish and potatoes. But that didn’t explain why the cigar in his mouth—one of the good ones, too—was about as satisfying as sucking on a ball of lint.

He stubbed the cigar out in disgust and dropped it over the side of the boat, watching as it disappeared into the water without even a splash.

What was wrong with him? Why couldn’t he just be happy?

He leaned his elbows on the rail, watching the fog of his breath vanish in the bitter night. It wasn’t even that he was sad. He just . . . wasn’t anything. It was like after the decades of hurt and
disappointment had been taken away, there wasn’t anything else left to fill him up, like he’d made some fairy-tale deal where the price for getting his memories back was not being able to feel what they meant.

Sometimes the early days felt like a fever dream. He knew he’d been happy then. He thought he knew. His mind was so jumbled now that it was hard to tell, but he must have been. Mustn’t he?

The dullness in his head had to mean something. It had to, or else he was so broken that he just didn’t know how to feel good things any more, and that couldn’t be true. It had to be something else.

Maybe he’d accidentally invoked a curse from some vengeful spirit on one of their port calls, or, given how most of his life had turned out, during his infancy. Maybe this whole thing was some kind of spell, or trap, or dream—

Or dream.

His eyes widened as the thought struck him. It was only after Weirmageddon that he’d been feeling this way—or rather, not had a reason for feeling this way. He’d been miserable, but his life was miserable so it made sense. It was only after . . .

Stan cursed himself inwardly. Idiot. Of course he’d been ready to believe this. Waking up from some hazy battle to find the entire town hailing him as a hero, his brother wanting to sail off into the sunset with him, the kids safe and happy. It was everything he’d ever wanted, and if life had taught Stan Pines anything, it was that any time he looked like he might get what he wanted it just meant the universe was gearing up to kick him in the teeth.

If this wasn’t real, then it was okay. He wasn’t supposed to be happy. His brain was helping him, not buying into the illusion. He should have seen through it before, especially this version of Ford, who was everything Stan had wanted in his brother and nothing he’d ever gotten. He’d wanted it to be true so badly, but now thinking that it might not be filled him with desperate relief.

So what did that make this? Some kind of ship in a bottle?

Stan looked up at the sky again, but this time with suspicion. It was too clear and the stars were too bright, like a galaxy scene painted on the inner glass of a snow globe. For all he knew, it was just as thin and fragile, and just as unreal.

It had been months. Would there be anything to go back to if he did manage to break out? Would there be any family left? It didn’t matter. As long as there was a chance that the kids needed his help he had to try. And if it turned out he was too late, well, he’d cheated death long enough anyway. It might almost be a relief . . .

Stan pinched himself, sharply, on the web of skin between his left thumb and index finger. Nothing. Not that he’d been expecting that test to work; if pain was enough to jar him out of whatever this was he would have awoken long ago. If he was going to be trapped in a dream, the least that filthy triangle could do was give him a few days without joint pain, but nah. Probably would have given things away.

Again, he remembered Mabel’s description of her dream bubble, the way they had all escaped.

“This isn’t real,” he told the night sky. “I want to go back to reality.”

The sky didn’t respond.

He looked down at the dark, swirling water below his feet, the waves beating hypnotically against
The fog of his breath billowed out over the water and then dispersed into nothingness. He paused for one breath . . . two . . . three. In the hush of the night, even the sound of the waves seemed to still as he swung one leg over the rail.

There was only one other way he could think of to wake up from a dream.

***

The splinters of the net mending needle bit into his hand and Ford looked like he was about to cry and Stan couldn’t feel any of it.

He knew he should have said something the first night after Ford had pulled him from the water (though he still couldn’t decide whether he was grateful or not), but it had been so easy not to, just like every other time. To let Ford keep thinking he was happy.

“Why?” Ford was saying, and it was far away, like it was coming from underwater. “Why would—you could have—”

Stan watched impassively as Ford raised a shaking hand to his face, biting down on the knuckles. He didn’t know what to say. There was nothing to say. He was just messing everything up again. Existing or not existing, all he knew how to do was hurt people. He was afraid to speak or to touch Ford in case he made things worse—there was certainly no way anything he had to say could make them better.

Ford swayed, and then his knees buckled and he sunk to the floor.

“Hey—” Stan slid out of his chair, still feeling strangely distant, like he was watching himself from far away as he knelt next to his brother, his hand floating over Ford’s shoulder without quite touching him. “Hey. Ford. Stanford. It’s okay. I’m okay.”

The words came automatically, and Stan was sure that if he let himself think for a moment, even with a lifetime of lies behind him, his tongue would rebel and refuse to shape itself into the empty reassurances.

He didn’t let himself think.

Ford made a strangled noise, shaking his head and biting down harder on his knuckles. His entire body was trembling.


Ford turned and buried his face in Stan’s chest, throwing his arms around his brother and squeezing him so hard that Stan felt his back crack in at least two places as the vertebrae re-aligned. They stayed like that for a long while, Stan muttering words he didn’t believe and stroking Ford’s hair, and Ford shaking, his face hidden and his hands clutching desperately at the fabric of Stan’s shirt.

“I can’t believe you’re the one comforting me,” he finally choked out.

Stan shrugged, though he wasn’t sure if Ford could see it. “You’re the one this is news to.” You’re the one who still knows how to feel things.

Ford shook his head. “I should have known. I should have noticed. You could have—” And then he sat bolt upright, staring into Stan’s face with wide, terrified eyes. “Is it something I did? I’ll fix it, Stanley, whatever it is. I’ll do anything. I can’t—I can’t lose you.”
“Hey.” Stan clasped his brother’s shoulders until he felt some of the tension ease out of them. “Hey. Of course you didn’t notice. I’ve been lying to everyone about everything for over thirty years. Got pretty good at it, I’ve gotta say. And you didn’t do anything, I promise. That’s the problem, everything’s fine. Hell, everything’s great—”

Ford laughed hollowly. “Well, that’s the biggest fib you’ve ever told.”

Stan shook his head. “Everything’s fine except for me. I know I should be happy, but I don’t know how. I thought maybe this whole thing was fake, but—”

“Wait, why?”

“Come on,” said Stan, laughing bitterly. “You’ve seen enough of my life to know what passes for normal. In what kind of world do I get a happy ending?”

The look in Ford’s eyes was something Stan couldn’t place—heartbreak and fear and desperation and moments of denial all swirled together. “This one,” he said.

Stan looked away.

Ford drew in a deep, shaky breath, and when he next spoke he managed to sound more like his normal analytical self. “All right, we’ll turn around. It’s a long way to the coast, but we’ll hurry, there’s nothing on this boat that can help you. We need—dammit, even just better lightbulbs. The low light we’ve been experiencing must have exacerbated your condition. I should have realized earlier—”

“Stop. Did the places you were for the last thirty years even have sunlight?”

“. . . Not all of them,” Ford admitted.

“There ya go. Not your fault.”

“But I should have—”

“Can it, Sixer. And we’re not turning around. I’m not letting you waste all this progress. Who knows if we’d even be able to find this place again if we left now; you said yourself it makes all your nerd maps go haywire.”

“Stan,” said Ford gently, “Your life is more important than whatever anomaly is out there.”

“Well it shouldn’t be!” Stan snapped.

“All right,” said Ford after a lengthy pause. “We won’t turn around. But you have to talk to me. How long have you been feeling this way?”

Stan considered. “About forty-five years, give or take.”

Ford froze, and Stan was afraid that he would fall apart again. “But—” he stammered, “But you never—”

He didn’t need to finish the sentence.

“Thought about it,” said Stan. He didn’t want to go into details—the late nights when he would swerve into the wrong lane of the road and wonder whether he’d have the guts to swerve back when he saw oncoming headlights (or was it the guts not to?), the way he couldn’t go near high places because he was afraid (or was it hopeful?) that his legs would take him over the edge, the times when
he was so exhausted from hunger or injury or illness that all he wanted to do was stop, but some stubborn (or was it just selfish?) part of him had always won out and forced him to keep going.

Ford swallowed. “Why not while I was in the Portal? Why now?”

“That’s easy,” said Stan, not meeting his brother’s eyes. “Couldn’t die until I got you back.”

“You can’t die now!” Ford wailed. “I need you, the kids need you—”

Stan shook his head. “You don’t. You might want me around for whatever reason, though for the life of me I don’t know why. But you don’t need me.”

Ford swallowed, and Stan could see his mind working, searching for some kind of solution. “I don’t suppose there’s much point in trying to hide away potential weapons, given . . . circumstances.”

Given that the icy water around them was as good a weapon as you could find.

“No,” agreed Stan. “I don’t think that would do much.”

Ford looked at him helplessly. “What else can I do?”

Stan shook his head and shrugged. “If I knew I’d tell you. If there was anything for you to fix . . . but it’s just me. I’m sorry.”

“Listen,” said Ford, “If you feel like that again, just come talk to me. We’ll work it out. Please? Can you promise me?”

Stan nodded, not sure whether or not he was lying. Ford seemed to know better than to ask.

***

He felt almost all right (he felt awful, but he’d always been good at pretending) until the next day, when, during their video call with the kids, Mabel said, “I’m so happy you’re all right, Grunkle Stan! Grunkle Ford emailed us all about you falling in the ocean!”

Stan rounded on his brother, his face burning with fear and shame. “You told them!”

“Just about the first night!” protested Ford, waving his hands. “Just that you fell in the water but you were all right! Nothing . . . nothing after.”

“Told us what?” asked Dipper.

“Nothing!” both older twins chorused.

“You’re obviously lying,” said Dipper. “And you know we’ll figure it out on our own one way or another, so you might as well tell us.”

There was an awkward silence.

“Woah!” said Mabel, “Awkward silence! What’s wrong? Do we need to do . . . the Communication Dance?”

“Mabel, no one ever needs to do—” Dipper began, sinking his face into his hands, but Mabel had already begun to bob back and forth, singing “Comm-un-i-caAAAAA-tion!” and doing jazz hands at the screen.

“That never works,” mumbled Dipper through his fingers.
Mabel blew a raspberry at him. “Silly! It worked all the time. It worked when we went to that big underwater gala with Mermando and Barb and everyone kept arguing about ‘trade disputes’ and ‘border violations’ instead of dancing with me, and it worked when Candy and Grenda were mad that Pacifica tried to trade their souls for a manicure at the fairy nail salon, and it works with you, like, constantly!”

She turned back to the screen, grinning knowingly. “He usually tells me whatever he’s been worrying about so I’ll stop.”

Seeing his niece and nephew bantering, so effortlessly energetic and content, made a lump rise in Stan’s throat. Mabel must have noticed, because she stopped her bouncing and said, “Grunkle Stan, what’s wrong? Are you sick or something?”

She didn’t try to dance away the next long pause.

“Something like that,” Stan choked.

He told them. Not everything, but enough. Mabel cried and Dipper looked shell-shocked and he felt like a monster.

“You’re okay now, though, right?” said Mabel. The video was grainy, but the concerned expression on her face was clear.

“I’m fine!” insisted Stan. “Fine. Really. You don’t have to worry about me.”

“Grunkle Stan, we always worry about you,” said Mabel. “You’re way far off and there’s monsters and no one to make sure you’re getting enough sleep!”

“Have you been taking your medicine?” asked Dipper.

In the heavy pause that followed, Stan could feel Ford’s eyes on him.

“You were on medication?”

“Yeah,” said Stan. “For a while. I ran out right before you came back, and what with one thing and another I never got around to refilling it.” The night after Ford’s return he’d found all the old bottles that littered his room, scratched his name off before he threw them out. He couldn’t let Ford see, couldn’t let him know that he was even more pathetic than he looked.

Ford let a hiss of air out through his teeth. “Really, Stanley, you should have told me. It’s going to be next to impossible to get it without heading back to shore, and we’re weeks away from any meaningful port. Will the doctor you were seeing still have your prescription? Maybe we could call him.”

“Well,” said Stan, “We could. But I also may have broken into his office and burned my own medical records when I thought you were gonna kick me out so I’m not sure how well that would go. Probably badly, that would be my guess.”

The records, of course, were under the name “Stanford Pines,” so they had to go before Ford took the name back. He didn’t want to give his twin even more evidence of his failures. And there was another reason to blot out his spotty psychiatric history, as well. He’d found himself looking through his active fake identities, trying to decide if any of them were established enough to take out a life insurance policy. Car accidents were easy enough to rig, and if he was careful not likely to be looked too far into. At least he’d be able to leave the kids something.
“You burned your—you know what, never mind.” Ford shook his head. “We’ll have to find some other way of doing things.”

“Do you need us to rob a pharmacy or something?” asked Dipper. “I bet we could pull it off.”

“Yeah!” yelled Mabel, punching the air with both hands. “We’d make great criminals!”

Dipper clamped a hand over his sister’s mouth and made shushing noises, staring meaningfully out in the direction that Stan assumed their parents were. “What did we say about criminal activity?” he hissed.

Mabel rolled her eyes and said something, which of course was illegible since Dipper’s hand was still over her mouth. He removed it, and she said, “To only talk about it in secret, I know. I just got so excited!”

Ford appeared to give the matter serious consideration, but then he shook his head and said, “No, that won’t do. Not that I doubt your abilities, but there would be little point. We can’t get back to shore for several weeks, and the Weirdness readings are so high where we are that I doubt anything besides your sea-folk friends would be able to find us. We’re stuck to video and bottle messages for the time being, I’m afraid.”

***

When the call ended, Mabel waved and grinned at the screen until their webcam light blinked out, and then her face fell and she flopped sideways into Dipper’s shoulder.

“Dip, what are we gonna do?” she asked.

Dipper stared blankly at the empty laptop screen. “I don’t know,” he said finally.

“Cause when people are sad I have to make them happy, but everything’s good and he’s still sad and it’s scary and they’re far away where I can’t hug them, and I should just, just be able to keep them safe if I love them enough! But it doesn’t work!”

Dipper patted his sister’s hair. He knew it would be no use to tell her that she couldn’t be responsible for everyone’s happiness, given that she was spending her spare time trying to convince several warring factions of sea-folk to reopen diplomatic relations (or, in her words “just be friends again!”) because Mermando was stressed about it.

“We’ve got to fix it,” said Mabel stubbornly.

“Mabel . . .” said Dipper, “I don’t think depression is the kind of thing you can just fix.”

“Well, not all the way, but there has to be something we can do. Some kind of . . . emotional duct tape or something!”

Dipper didn’t respond. He was torn between wishing that he had her confidence and being afraid of how she would handle it if, as seemed likely, this turned out to be something she couldn’t help with.

“Do you think they’re gonna be okay?” Mabel asked.

Dipper considered lying to her. He was sure that if he said yes she would bounce up, bright and sunny and certain again, but instead he sighed and squeezed her shoulder and said, “I don’t know, Mabel.”
“Well,” said Mabel, with a set to her jaw that reminded him of Stan, “We’re gonna make sure they are. Somehow. We’re gonna fix it. But I think I need some brain food first. You wanna help me make a batch of Sad Times Cookie Dough?”

***

Two days later, Nuala knocked on the hull with a pair of dark glass bottles, bound together with rope that was frayed from being carried in her teeth. As he shook the sea water off them, Ford saw that they had been etched with the numerals 1 and 2.

“Delivery from the children?” he asked.

In her seal form, Nuala couldn’t really shrug, but she raised both flippers up at her sides and splashed backwards into the water, which he supposed amounted to something similar.

“Look,” said Ford, “Can I talk to you for a moment? Or rather, would you mind talking to me? I’ll bring you up and then you can change while I take these inside.”

Nuala looked up at him pointedly.

“Also I’ll bring you food.”

At that, she nodded.

Ford left her his coat as he slipped into the wheelhouse, depositing the bottles on the table. “New delivery,” he said. “I think it’s from the kids but Nuala wasn’t sure. Also, can I borrow your coat?”

Stan shrugged noncommittally, and Ford grabbed the coat, stuffing its pockets with treats from their cupboards.

He returned to see Nuala sprawled out on the deck, wrapped in his coat, wiggling her bare toes in the air. She didn’t seem at all bothered by the cold, an indication that even in their human shape selkie biology was adapted for life around cold water and pack ice. When he held out the bag of chocolate bars he’d brought, she wriggled forward a few feet on her plump stomach like a hauled-out seal before seeming to remember that she could use her limbs.

“So,” she said, propping her chin up on her hands, “What’s up? You ever figure out what went after your brother?”

Ford winced. “Yes. Well, in a way. That’s actually what I wanted to talk to you about . . .”

***

Stan set the bottles down on the table and stared at them. They were different than the usual message bottles, heavier, with the dark glass obscuring their contents. When he lifted bottle 1, whatever was in it shifted like sand. Certainly not a letter then, unless Mabel was experimenting with some frightening new medium of expression.

He twisted the cork, slowly working it free of its wax seal. It was stuck fast, and he frowned as he shifted his grip. The damn thing must have been hammered down extra tight. If Mabel had done it herself, he was proud that she’d managed to work it in so well. She was a strong little thing.

The cork released with a loud “Pop!” and suddenly the world went multicolored and sparkly. Reflexively, Stan drew back and shielded his eyes from the explosion. What had Mabel done? Was it some kind of spell, another genie? He hoped not. Surely not even Mabel would think that she could
fix everything with a wish (wouldn’t think that he could be trusted with a wish). But there was no
booming voice or other sign of magic, and he slowly cracked open his eyes and peered into the cloud of . . .

. . . Glitter. It was glitter.

He stared in confusion and no small amount of horror as clouds of the stuff filled the air and then slowly settled on every available surface, including him. Too late, he thought to close his mouth, sputtering as he tried to wipe the tiny flecks off his inner lip with the relatively unaffected corner of his sleeve.

“What the hell,” he muttered, reaching for the second bottle. This time he was careful to open it facing away from him, his eyes squinted shut as he uncorked it. There was usually some amount of glitter in Mabel’s packaging, but this was excessive, even for her. It was like a tiny sparkly bomb. Didn’t she know had hard it was to clean up that stuff? They were still finding flecks from the sweater she’d worn on her first visit to the boat, and that had been two months ago.

The second bottle did nothing unusual when he opened it. Still wary, he tipped it up and a standard rolled letter fell out onto his palm.

He unrolled it, trying to brush the glitter off his hands and spreading it on the paper instead. It was a note, in Mabel’s handwriting. He shook the glitter off his temporary replacement glasses and read,

Dear Grunkle Stan,

I know you said that we shouldn’t worry about you, and I promise to try even though it’s really really hard. But will you please (see, it’s a good word!) promise something for me too? I know it’s hard to say that you won’t EVER try to do anything bad, but can you promise that whenever you find a piece of this glitter on you, you won’t hurt yourself? Just for that day, or even just while the glitter’s still there. Pretty please can you do that for me?

Love, Mabel

And then, penciled in “and Dipper, who told her this idea was nuts."

At the bottom of the page, she’d drawn a picture of the family. Everyone was hugging Stan and smiling, and there were multicolored sparkles all around them, with labels saying “Magic Glitter!” and “We Love You!”

The image blurred as Stan felt his eyes prick with tears. He held the paper so tightly that he was afraid he might rip it.

“What on earth?”

Ford had returned from whatever he’d been doing on the deck and was looking around at the cabin in dismay. “We’ll never get rid of this! Not in a million years!”

At that, Stan couldn’t stop himself from letting out a sound that was somewhere between a chuckle and a small, choked sob. He passed the letter over the table to Ford and as he did so he could see, even with his blurred vision, the kaleidoscopic shimmer of the glitter that coated his hands.
There was a rustle as Ford took the letter, and then a soft, almost sighed, “Oh, Mabel . . .”

And then Ford’s arms were around him, hugging him tightly as the sparkling expanse before him blurred into abstract galaxies. He leaned back against his brother’s chest, laughing through his tears as he realized that the contact was transferring glitter to Ford’s previously clean coat, so when he did let go the whole front of his body sparkled like stars.

When Stan woke up the next morning, he found that Ford had taped the note above the table. There was glitter in his coffee that day, but he didn’t care.
Chapter Summary

In which sleep deprivation, astonishingly, does not solve everyone’s problems.

As I’ve established in NUMEROUS previous posts (detailed above), you’re all massively overstating the influence of reptoids on the world government. All evidence suggests that the vast majority of lizard people have no interest in earthly politics and are just hiding out on our planet after fleeing uprising of giant robot flies that they instigated with their own hubris. The fact that one prominent individual is now running for national office is of negligible importance in the long term and should be of less concern than the fact that no less than three current members of Congress have ties to the Shadow Bloc and may actually be abstract concepts projected into this dimension by a group of bored hyperdimensional beings from Alpha Centauri. Some of us are trying to have important conversations here, but it’s challenging when the rest of you keep derailing every time someone mentions the lizard people! Stick to the “Reptoid” and “Non-Human Politicians” threads where this discussion belongs.

Dipper huffed at his computer screen as he pressed the “Enter” key. There was just no helping some people. You would think that people who spent their time on conspiracy forums would be more receptive to this type of evidence, but he was having a hard time convincing anyone of the things he’d learned over the summer, even with the notes he’d taken on Ford’s research.

The cursor spun on his screen as the website processed his comment, but then instead of being directed back to the main thread as he’d expected, a popup appeared, reading, “This thread has been temporarily frozen due to off-topic discussions and personal attacks. BE CIVIL, people! Are we the true inhuman monsters here?”

Dipper growled and flopped back on his bed. Well, that was a three-page forum post he was never getting back. Also—he checked the time and groaned—several hours of his life that he really should have spent sleeping. How was it 3am already? Time sure flew when you were arguing with conspiracy theorists on the internet. That gave him, what, three and a half hours before he had to be up for school? If he was lucky he might be able to sleep for three of them. He could feel the fatigue building as a subtle ache behind his eyes, but he knew he wouldn’t be able to sleep until he could calm down and stop fuming about his fellow conspirators.

With a sigh, he closed the laptop and set it down beside him.

Dipper had never had an easy time falling asleep, and after everything that had happened over the summer there was a whole slew of new reasons for him to be wary of closing his eyes. At least homework and the forums and Mabel drafting him to do tech for the school play kept him busy, so his sleep was more likely to be deep and dreamless. At least now that their school district provided all the students with laptops, he didn’t need to keep stealing the family’s flashlights to read under the covers. At least he didn’t have the dreams every night anymore.

He stared up at the underside of Mabel’s bunk, eyes tracing the familiar worn mattress and the bits of string from old projects dangling from several of the springs. A while ago he’d worked out a way to use the position and color of the string to create a code alphabet, and when he was lying awake he
would spell out messages to himself. G-O T-O S-L-E-E-P . . .

Slowly, he became aware of a soft sound, barely audible over the whirring of the computer’s fan and the occasional rumble of cars passing by outside. Still, he had slightly over thirteen years of practice listening for it.

Mabel was crying.

Not only that, but she was trying very hard not to be heard. Most of the time, Mabel cried in big, gulping sobs and blew her nose like a trumpet and didn’t mind if people noticed, but now he mostly heard the sound of ragged breathing interspersed with quiet hiccups and occasional sniffs.

“Hey!” he called.

The noise stopped.

“You okay?”

“I’m fine,” answered Mabel in a trembling voice.

Dipper rolled to the edge of his bed and stood up, peering over the edge of Mabel’s mattress. His sister was curled up into a ball with the blankets pulled tight around her, and from the size of the dark stain on her pillow she’d been crying for a while.

“Are you lying?”

In the pause that followed, Mabel raised her head just enough to look at her brother. Her eyes were red and puffy, and her hair was pulled over part of her face.

She sniffed. “. . . Yeah.”

Dipper clambered up to her bunk, finding his footholds by the light of the glow-in-the-dark stars plastered on every inch of their ceiling, and sat down next to her.

“Bad dream?”

She nodded, her lower lip trembling.

“Bill again?”

Mabel shook her head furiously, shutting her eyes tight as if it would help to contain the quiet, hiccupped sobs. Dipper rubbed her back and waited patiently until she calmed down enough to speak.

Finally, Mabel whispered, “I had a dream that my glitter didn’t work.”

It took Dipper a moment to parse the sentence, but then his face softened with understanding and he wrapped his arms around his sister, holding her tight as she curled against him and hid her face in his shoulder.

“Your glitter was a great idea,” he said. “It’s going to help so much.”

Mabel sniffed and half-heartedly headbutted him. “You said it was silly.”

“Of course it’s silly. You’re silly. That’s what makes it so great.”
“You sure?”

“Of course I’m sure, silly-face.”

She nodded hesitantly. “I am that thing.”

But she’d barely gotten the words out before her lower lip started shaking again. “I’m scared,” she said at last. “I’m scared and I don’t know what else to do and I k-keep having dreams about it—”

She broke off, her body shaking with a fresh round of sobs. Dipper held her and made gentle shushing noises.

“Hey,” he said. “I know what you need.” He hated that they’d had so many nights like this that he was starting to build up a category system for nightmares the way that Ford categorized ghosts. Category One meant you could fall right back to sleep; Category Three needed hugs and reassurance; anything beyond a Category Seven meant you probably weren’t getting any more sleep that night. Category Ten was when he couldn’t tell that he’d woken up and lay there convinced that the world was still ending until the high mad laughter that haunted him was displaced by Mabel telling him over and over and over again that he was safe and they sat clinging to each other until sunrise. Category Ten days were when Mabel asked him, “Do you need to stay home?” and then ran around rigging thermometers and faking coughs when he nodded—for both of them, although he never dared ask her to stay—and they spent the day curled up together on Dipper’s bed, swaddled in blankets, with soup and cartoons and Mabel’s laughter just barely managing to hold the screaming irrational terror at bay.

He guessed Mabel’s dream had been around a six.

“W-what?”

“You need hot chocolate and a hug from Waddles. And I need to email Grunkle Ford so he can tell us that everything’s okay.”

Mabel sniffed. “Can I have sprinkles and squirty cream in my hot chocolate?”

Dipper laughed. “It’s 3 in the morning. You can have whatever you want. Sound good?”

Mabel nodded, sitting up straight and wiping her eyes on the sleeve of her nightgown.

“I got boogers on your shirt,” she said ruefully.

Dipper shrugged. “It’s seen worse. I need to wash it anyway.”

Mabel bumped playfully into his shoulder. “Dipper Pines admitting he needs to do laundry? Stop the presses!”

“Yeah, yeah, very funny,” grumbled Dipper as he climbed down to the floor, but he was glad to see Mabel smile again.

The two of them crept downstairs, Mabel still wrapped in her quilt and Dipper with his laptop tucked under one arm. With all the streetlights outside, their house never got as dark during the night as the Mystery Shack had, so they cast faint shadows as they skirted the upstairs windows. Mabel still occasionally sniffed and hiccupped softly, and when they paused at the top of the stairs she reached out and clasped Dipper’s hand.

Waddles was asleep when they reached the kitchen. Their parents had, all things considered, been
more understanding about the pig than Dipper had been expecting, but they did insist that he had to stay in the kitchen during the night. Mabel probably would have fought more if she didn’t sleep five feet in the air. As it was, she gave Waddles a kiss on the snout every night before their parents closed the child gates that blocked the kitchen door, and he stood ready to meet her every morning when she came down for breakfast.

When Dipper flicked on the kitchen light, the pig grunted and twitched in his sleep. Mabel scampered across the floor to his side, curling up in the oversized dog bed he slept in. Waddles oinked as he awoke, licking the remaining tears from Mabel’s face. She giggled and hugged him tight.

As his sister reconnected with her pig, Dipper filled the electric kettle and plugged it in, got out two mugs and the hot chocolate mix (in deference to Mabel, the kind with extra mini marshmallows), and then opened his laptop and began to draft an email.

“Great Uncle Ford,” he typed, “We’re trying not to worry too much, but Mabel had a bad dream. Can you please check and let us know that Grunkle Stan’s okay?”

“There!” he said, glancing across at Mabel, who was still lying on the floor. “Sent! They change time zones so often up there that it might be a while before Uncle Ford gets a chance to look at it, but I’m sure he’ll answer as soon as he can.”

Mabel looked up at him from where she lay upside-down with Waddles clasped to her chest.

“Thanks,” she said.

When the hot chocolate was ready, Dipper set their mugs and spoons and the various sugary substances Mabel garnished hers with on the kitchen island and pulled up a stool. He poured a splash of milk into his mug and stirred it thoroughly.

Mabel, with Waddles snuffling contentedly and rubbing up against her legs, perched in the other stool and pulled her mug close to her.

“Did you stir it?”

Dipper shook his head. “Nope. Clumpy hot chocolate mix sediment is all yours.”

“Good.” Mabel decked her mug out with a towering mound of whipped cream, almost emptying the can, and topped it with a generous helping of sprinkles. Dipper laughed as she licked up the drips of cocoa that immediately began to overflow from the mug. By the time she had it under control, there was a blot of whipped cream on her nose and her lips were stained from the chocolate and candy.

She took a deep slurp from the edge of her mug, and then eyed Dipper suspiciously. “Wait. Did you sleep at all? You were typity-typing and grumbling at yourself when I fell asleep and you were still doing it when I woke up.”

“I’m fine,” Dipper insisted.

Mabel fixed him with a look of determined skepticism. “That’s not what I asked you. You can’t just keep doing this whole not-sleeping thing. Mom and Dad are getting worried.”

“And you?”

“I just don’t want all the cute boys at school thinking I come from a family of zombies!” Mabel insisted, but her eyes belied the casual tone.
"I didn’t mean to this time," Dipper said. "Really."

Mabel lapped up the last of the whipped cream from her cocoa and said, "Have you been having bad dreams again?"

Dipper shrugged. "A few." Nothing about a Category Five for at least a couple of weeks. Nothing he’d needed to wake Mabel up over for ten days, not that he was counting.

"About Bill?"

He sighed. "Yeah. I know it’s silly. I know he’s gone. But . . ."

"It’s still way scary," Mabel finished. "I know."

Dipper sighed. "You’re not the one who had to run away and hide for two whole periods because a girl winked at you."

"No," said Mabel, tilting her stool so that she could punch her brother’s shoulder gently. "I’m the one who found you."

Dipper flashed her a small smile. "Yeah. You are."

Mabel dug her spoon into her cocoa, extricating a lump of undissolved mix and dumping the sugary mess into her mouth. She swallowed the spoonful with every sign of enjoyment, but then sighed and slumped onto the table.

"I just wish I could give Grunkle Stan a hug. And Grunkle Ford. He must be so scared. And I know hugs don’t fix everything, but they should! And at least they help a little."

Unsure of how else to respond, Dipper handed the whipped cream canister back to her and she emptied the rest of it into her mug. But then, instead of drinking it, she just sat there staring at the cream as it slowly dissolved into her drink.

". . . Dipper?" she said.

"Yeah?"

She drew the mug in close to her and stared into it instead of making eye contact. "If you ever feel bad like that, you gotta tell me. Okay?"

He hadn’t—for all his brain seemed to hate him, it usually got stuck on ‘scared’ instead of ‘sad,’ and awful as the dreams were he hoped it stayed that way. "Okay."

She looked up, her eyes wide and uncertain. "Promise?"

"I promise, Mabel."

Mabel didn’t seem convinced. She frowned and held out one hand with her little finger extended. "Pinky promise?"

Dipper held out his own hand. "I solemnly swear." A thought struck him. "But! You have to promise me the same thing. No hiding because you think you have to be happy all the time."

"I only have to because all the rest of you are grumpy-faces," she muttered.

"Mabel!"
“Okay,” she said, nodding as Dipper hooked their fingers together. “I promise.”

As they shook their intertwined fingers, the laptop chimed. Mabel almost knocked over their mugs in her haste to see the message, but Dipper got there first, swiveling the screen so they could both read it.

Ford had written, “He’s fine. Snoring loud enough to wake the dead (probably not in this dimension, but remind me to tell you about G/47 sometime). -F”

“See?” said Dipper, as Mabel hugged him so hard he almost fell off his stool. “Told you.”

***

On the other side of the world, Ford sighed and navigated to a new tab on his computer. Part of him wished that they hadn’t involved the kids. He knew first-hand how terrifying nightmares could be, and he’d been taking precautions to ensure he wouldn’t have to deal with any of his own, but he hated to think that the children were suffering. At the same time, he had to admit that nothing he could have come up with would have worked half so well as Mabel’s glitter trick.

He took a swig from the mug of coffee at his elbow. Their stash was running low. Ford wasn’t sure what he’d do once they ran out.

He hoped this was the last late-night reassurance he’d have to send about this particular topic.

He doubted it.

***

Stan awoke, slowly and reluctantly. He lay in his bunk with his eyes shut, hoping against hope that if he just stayed still for long enough he’d drift back off. Sleep was a blessing, was the only time he didn’t have to think, the only time his brain shut off. The welcome oblivion was the closest he could get to, well, the other kind of oblivion. The kind he had to tell himself was off the table.

Eventually, he had to admit that no matter how long he stayed there he wasn’t falling back to sleep. He yawned, stretched, winced at the creaking in his joints, and padded down the narrow hall in search of coffee.

He was greeted, instead, by an extremely enthusiastic Ford, who came bounding up to him as soon as he rounded the corner and clasped him in an embrace so tight that it almost lifted him off the floor. Stan stiffened at first, taken aback by the change that had come over his brother; ever since his confession Ford had been quiet and careful around him, treating Stan like he was made of glass until all he wanted to do was scream. This was different. Better. Much better. This was how Ford used to act, before . . . what happened. It was possible that he hadn’t ruined everything after all. Stan returned the hug, patting Ford’s shoulder with one hand.

“Stanley!” Ford cried, practically vibrating with barely-contained energy (and possibly something else as well; Stan wondered just how much caffeine his brother had consumed that morning). “I was taking some samples up on deck and you’ll never believe what I found!”

Stan grunted. “Lemme guess. Another magic fish?”

“No! Well, sort of! Well—oh just come let me show you!”

Stan let himself be led to the table, which was covered in notes and half-empty coffee cups, and, yes, glitter, which made a soft, sweet ache bloom in his chest. Lying in the center was a strange disc-
shaped object about the size of a dinner plate. It appeared to be the source of Ford’s excitement. Stan, with his bleary morning eyes and his inexpertly crafted glasses, couldn’t make out any details, but the sheen certainly was familiar.

“You found a magic gold nugget?”

Ford actually jumped up and down. “Better than that! It’s astonishing, I—Oh, sit down!”

Stan sat.

Ford sat down across from him and pushed the golden . . . thing into his hands. It was heavy—not heavy enough to be solid gold, but there was still an impressive, and expensive, heft to it. He could feel whorled ridges along its surface, spiraling in towards the center.

“I don’t suppose this is a ‘sell the thing and not worry about funding for a couple years’ kind of astonishing?” he ventured. The whole ‘treasure hunting’ aspect of this expedition had a tendency to fall by the wayside; most of the potentially valuable things they found turned out to be cursed or sentient or too big to move.

To his complete lack of surprise, Ford laughed and shook his head. “Stanley, if you had any idea—the value of this to the scientific and paranormal communities simply cannot be overstated!”

Stan smiled despite himself. Typical Sixer. Dug a giant lump of gold out of the ocean and all he could do was go on about the “scientific community.” Still, it was good to see Ford this . . . carefree. It was really good.

“So tell me.”

Ford turned the object, which seemed to be some kind of large golden seashell, around in Stan’s hands, and pointed at a row of symbols inscribed along the edge.

“So . . . some kind of nerd writing?”

“Not just any nerd writing! Stanley, it’s Atlantean!”

“What now?”

“It’s the writing system and dialect developed by the citizens of the lost city of Atlantis!”

There. That was simple enough even for Stan to understand, and did, he had to admit, sound pretty impressive. He squinted at the script. It was flowing and beautiful, and, to him, completely illegible.

“So what’s it say?”

Ford deflated, but only slightly. “I’m not sure. There are so few extant examples, and much of the writing system has been lost. That’s part of what makes this so fascinating!”

Stan hefted the thing in his hands. “So, uh, follow-up question: If this thing is made of gold, which as even I know has a tendency to sink, how’d you find it? Caught in an iceberg or . . .”

Ford flapped his hands delightedly. “That’s the most exciting part! It was swimming! It came right up into my net!”

Stan regarded the large, and, again, really quite heavy, object. Sure, not suspicious at all. “This big hunk of gold was swimming?”
Ford nodded, sporting a grin so wide that it looked ready to knock the glasses off his nose. “It’s a working biomechanical Atlantean nautilus! They’re mentioned in the accounts, but I never dreamed I’d encounter one, certainly not one in working order. I’ve seen occasional shell fragments, but this is the real thing!”

“So,” said Stan, “It’s a magic robot fish?”

Ford shook his head. “Absolutely not. For one, it’s a cephalopod, not a fish, and ‘robot’ is a crude and misleading word when considering the finesse of Atlantean technology. Likewise, it isn’t technically magic, just a different branch of science than most humans have ever experienced.”

Stan considered. “So it’s an Atlantean science octopus?” He grinned, hoping that Ford would pick up on the fact that he was joking.

Ford winced. “I suppose, if you insist . . .” Then he looked up and saw Stan’s smile. He matched it, and then his grew wider and he laughed and swatted at Stan’s shoulder.

Okay. They could still be okay. He might be a barely-functional mess with a brain full of fog and bad impulses, but as long as he could still make Ford laugh maybe they could pull through this. Maybe someday he’d be able to laugh too.

“It became dormant as soon as I pulled it from the water,” Ford continued, “But I believe I should be able to re-activate it. I’m not sure what its primary purpose was, but it’s astonishing that it’s been able to remain functional for this long after the fall of the city.”

There was a gentle tap on the hull, and Ford leapt up from his seat. “That must be Nuala! I men—”

He paused mid-sentence, swayed, and grabbed on to the table to steady himself. Stan was already rushing to his brother’s side as Ford’s legs apparently decided they wanted no part in this whole “moving” business, leaving the rest of Ford’s body to slide, gracelessly, back into his chair.

Stan caught his shoulders, preventing him from falling all the way onto the floor.

Even the panic he knew he should be feeling was dulled as he patted Ford’s face, watching his eyes for a response. Did the golden nautilus have some kind of defense mechanism? Some type of sedative or poison or—

“Ford!” he called. “Ford, are you all right?”

Ford’s eyes fluttered open and he tried, with limited success, to sit up. “I’m fine. Just a little light-headed . . .”

“A little?”

“I can stand up, Stanley, don’t worry about me,” said Ford in a clipped voice, pushing Stan away. He set both hands on the table and tried to push himself upright, managing to get partway before his legs gave out again. He would have collapsed to the floor if Stan hadn’t caught him. He was shaking, clearly not with excitement this time.

“What do you know what this is?” Stan asked him. “Is it the nautilus? Do I need to . . . find an antidote or something?”

He’d been expecting another wall of science babbling, or possibly confusion or denial. What he hadn’t been expecting was the dark, bitter laughter that welled up from Ford’s lips.
“What?” He shook his brother’s shoulders. “Ford, what is it?”

Ford shook his head. “The pair of us. Always looking for mysteries when the answer’s right in front of us.”

Confused, Stan looked at his brother. And then he looked closer. His eyes were bloodshot, with heavy bags beneath them. His clothes were crumpled with the lines of several days’ wear, and his hands shook with manic energy and barely-contained exhaustion. The last time Stan remembered seeing Ford look this unhinged was over thirty years ago, when he’d turned up at the strange new house in Oregon and been greeted with a crossbow brandished in his face.

“Wait,” said Stan. “Have you eaten anything?”

“Coffee,” muttered Ford.

“Okay, no. Stay there; I’m getting you something to eat.”


“I’ll go tell your seal friend she can talk to you later!”

Stan dumped a bag of apples on the table in front of Ford and reached for the hatch.

“No!” Ford cried, reaching out and grabbing Stan’s arm.

“What, you don’t want anyone else talking to . . .” Then he noticed, really noticed, the naked terror in Ford’s eyes, the way his hand gripped Stan’s forearm with every ounce of strength in his body. Oh.

“You’re scared of me going up on deck.”

Ford didn’t respond.

“For Ford, I’m not gonna—”

“I don’t know that!” snapped Ford.

Stan tried to pull his arm away, but Ford gripped tighter, his fingernails digging into Stan’s skin.

“What’s wrong with you?!”

There was the laughter again, bitter and sharp and hopeless, as Ford sputtered, “What’s wrong with me?”

Stan stared at his face again, the dark circles under his eyes.

“You haven’t been sleeping.”

“Yes, genius observation, do go on!”

“Why?” Stan asked, even though he already knew the answer.

“Oh, I don’t know!” yelled Ford, “Maybe it has something to do with being afraid that you’ll kill yourself if I’m not awake to stop you!”

The words echoed around the small space, but the silence that followed was even louder somehow.
Stan wrenched his arm out of Ford’s grip and began wordlessly pulling things from their cupboards, and Ford sat motionless, staring through the table with a glazed look in his eyes.

“I’m sorry—”

“Shut up,” Stan replied, emptying a can of tuna onto a plate.

He’d been an idiot to think things could be okay. Typical Stan Pines, destroying everything he touched, especially those people stupid enough to care him. He was only ever going to be a burden, only going to hurt people, only ever going to be kept around out of pity. Ford had been doing so well, and now he was acting like he had after a body-snatching demon had tricked him into building a doom portal. And it was all Stan’s fault. If only he hadn’t come on this trip in the first place. If only Ford had kicked him out after all; at least then he could have died quietly without worrying about people mourning him.

He plunked the plate—tuna, cheese, crackers, a can of corn—and a fork down on the table without a word. Ford picked up the fork and twisted it between his fingers, fidgeting so much that it looked like he was going to use up more energy eating the food than he’d get from it.

Stan ran his hand across the table, coating it in a layer of glitter, and waved it in front of Ford’s face.

“There. I’m going to talk to your seal friend and I’m not gonna jump off the side. You believe me now?”

Ford nodded imperceptibly, and Stan pressed his glitter-coated hand to his brother’s forehead, saying, “It applies to you too, knucklehead. Shouldn’t a scientist of all people know you need to eat?”

He stomped up on deck, remembering to bring an extra coat for the seal-woman, and slammed the hatch shut behind him.
An adolescent harp seal is called a “beater” because of the way they beat the water with their front flippers while learning to swim. I know. It’s adorable.

It had been three days since he found the nautilus. That was how he was counting, Ford decided. Dwelling on the other things that had happened three days ago was proving decidedly unproductive.

He’d slept—poorly, but Stan had threatened to tie him to his bed if he didn’t—and he’d eaten under his brother’s watchful glare, and he did have to admit it was having some effect. But something about Stan had shifted, and Ford didn’t like it. It wasn’t that Stan was avoiding him or refusing to talk or anything concrete. It just felt like, in some subtle way, his brother was always being Mr. Mystery instead of Stanley Pines. He smiled too much, laughed off Ford’s questions, told jokes that were tinged with the desperation of a man whose living relied on convincing everyone he met not to look at what was really in front of them.

Ford was relieved when Nuala was able to visit again. Apparently she’d been called away for a while for some nebulous political reason, but now she was back, sitting at the table and watching Ford as he waxed enthusiastic about the nautilus.

Eventually, she dropped the bag of alarmingly pink candies she’d been munching her way through (the dregs of one of Mabel’s care packages), leaned forward and said, “I do have to let you know that if any of the Atlantean ruins surface, you’re on your own.”

“Oh?” Ford paused mid-gesture, his pen quivering in front of the word he thought he could translate as ‘renew’. “We’re always on our own.”

Nuala scoffed, and given how often he’d called on her assistance Ford supposed he couldn’t blame her. “I mean that if you get in over your heads, I’m not dragging you out. I’m not allowed. Anything Atlantis-related is officially neutral ground. I probably shouldn’t even be on your boat while you’ve got this thing, and if part of the city shows up all the sea-folk have to stay at least a half-mile away as the gull flies.”

Ford scribbled the fact in the margin. His former contacts had all been very tight-lipped about undersea politics, and although he was sure Mabel knew more than she was telling, whenever he asked her about it she suddenly became very engrossed in describing Waddles’ latest exploits. “And if you don’t?”

“Baaaaaad politics. We’re safe up here in the harp seal colonies ‘cause the other sea-folk are wimps and can’t handle the ice, bless the tide, but all the groups that migrate with the harbor seals go through territory controlled by the Mermanatee Alliance. They’ll be the ones to take the fall if one of us breaks the neutrality treaty. Long story short, if the two of you get yourselves killed on Atlantean ground it’s not my problem.”

“Noted. Ah, but before you go,” said Ford, as Nuala upended her teacup to lick the last drops from it, “Would you mind if I took a picture of you? In the seal form—it’s for my niece. She gets so excited about marine mammals, and she’s . . . awfully stressed at the moment. I thought . . .”
“You really care about those beaters of yours,” said Nuala with a smile.

Her voice was perfectly pleasant, if a bit teasing, but in Ford’s head the words were overlaid with another voice, harsh and echoing and triumphant. **YOU REALLY CARE ABOUT THOSE KIDS, DON’T YOU!** Even as he fought to hang on to the scene in front of him, he felt a rush of adrenaline engulf his heart, sudden and overwhelming. Like a bolt of lightning. Like electricity . . .

The world closed down around him, blurred and desaturated as his dreamscape, and he **couldn’t move as the current coursed through his body, arching against the shackles that restrained him, and all the while the demon laughed and waited just until he’d recovered enough to look up and proclaim his defiance before loosing another bolt, again and again, and he couldn’t keep doing this, he was going to destroy the world, lose his family, it was all his fault, he wasn’t strong enough, wasn’t . . .**

“Sixer.”

*The childhood nickname sounded perverted in Bill’s mouth as the demon toyed with him, laughing, thanked him for being gullible enough, stupid enough, to bring about the end of the world, stroked his cheek in a twisted parody of affection before snapping his fingers and engulfing him in pain and fire and pain. His throat was already raw from screaming, he hadn’t meant to scream, hadn’t meant to give Bill the satisfaction of a reaction, but he couldn’t help it. Weak, he was weak and stupid and everything hurt and all he could hope was that Bill would miscalculate and stop his heart—*

“Ford!”

*No Bill wasn’t there he wasn’t there they’d beaten him. Stanley had beaten him. Stanley . . .*

“Ford, listen to me!”

Ford tried, and, slowly, the vision faded. He could see a pair of hands curled in front of his face, and the six fingers told him that they must be his own, but he felt disconnected from them, from the tiled floor he knew logically he must be lying on, from everything.

“Hey,” said a voice, Stan’s voice. “You’re safe, okay? He’s gone.”

Ford couldn’t speak, could barely breathe, but he uncurled slightly, tried to reach out and was surprised when the hands in front of him moved with him.

And then there was something solid pressed against his forehead and across his back, holding him steady, and it felt real even if he didn’t, and he leaned into it. He blinked, and when he opened his eyes his vision was filled with rows upon rows of chevrons that slowly resolved themselves into an expanse of threadbare fabric. There was a stain near his nose—fresh, it still smelled like coffee. And there was a voice emanating from above his head, telling him that he was safe.

Stan.

Ford hid there in the shelter of his brother’s body. His forehead was pressed to Stan’s chest and his brother’s chin rested on the top of his head, and slowly, as the rest of the room fell back into reality around them, he felt the steady rise and fall of Stan’s ribcage and the warm exhalations ruffling his hair and remembered how to breathe again. The air smelled of coffee and salt water and Stan’s cigars. His fingernails were digging into his palms and his temples were beginning to ache and he was on a boat with his brother and he was real.

“Um . . .”
He’d forgotten all about Nuala, but hearing her voice made Ford’s face burn with a hot wave of shame. He squeezed his eyes shut. No one should have to see him like this, weak and pitiful, and no one should have to waste their time looking after him when he was so, so—

“Did I . . . do something?” Nuala sounded confused. “Look, I don’t understand . . . people. If this is some kind of human thing . . .”

Ford inhaled deeply and steeled himself, pulling himself back up into his chair. “It’s fine.”

He didn’t need to look at her to feel Nuala’s skepticism. “Okay,” she said, “I’m usually only a human for a day or two a month but even I can tell you’re lying.”

Ford floundered, trying to find a way not to explain, when Stan said, “Something reminded him of a person that hurt him. Not your fault. Not his either.”

Ford looked at his brother in surprise, but Stan had already turned around and was pulling rope out of one of their cupboards, organizing it by weight and color and level of enchantment.

“So, uh,” said Nuala. “What happened? With the person?”

Ford pulled a half-full bottle of whiskey from the cupboard behind him and poured a generous measure into his coffee. Nuala watched his shaking hands with concern, so he hid them reflexively behind his back.

“I was tricked,” he said, and the betrayal still hurt even after all this time, “And then I ended up . . . trapped, far away from home. For a long time.”

Nuala raised one eyebrow. “And?”

“What do you mean, ‘and’?”

“You’re talking to a selkie. That kind of thing’s pretty much par for the course.”

Ford blinked. “Wait, are you saying you—”

“Not me,” said Nuala, shifting in her seat. “A friend of mine.” She crossed her arms, pulling his jacket tight around her while one hand clutched nervously at the sealskin around her waist.

“What happened?”

Nuala noticed him watching her hands and straightened with an affected nonchalance. She quirked one corner of her mouth into a sad half-smile.

“What always happens, more or less. She had big dreams and met a biologist who said he could help her.” She scoffed. “Said they could change the world. But then she followed him on land, and he turned out to be just as bad as the other humans. Stole her skin. Trapped her. She sends messages with the gulls sometimes, but I haven’t seen her for three years.”

“That . . .” Ford swallowed. “That sounds depressingly familiar. Although in my case it was a demonic cycloptic triangle and not a biologist. And I couldn’t send messages. And it was thirty years.”

Nuala whistled through her teeth. “How did you get back?”

Ford smiled wryly. “Various family members made a series of incredibly stupid decisions, which, I must say, I’m very grateful for.”
The noises of Stan rummaging through the cupboard ceased for a moment.

“Heh,” he said, “Stupid decisions are what I’m best at.”

***

As Ford walked Nuala to the deck, camera in hand, he lowered his voice and asked, “When you were away, was anyone watching the boat?”

“This still about your brother?”

Ford deflated. “It is. I was trying to stay awake to make sure he didn’t try anything, but that’s proved . . . impractical. For a number of reasons.”

The selkie shrugged languidly. “Someone’s always around. Though it would be great if you’d stop tossing those bottles-that-aren’t messages over the side. We keep tracking them down and then they don’t even have anything in them.

“Oh,” said Ford, nervously scratching his neck. “I’m sorry. Um.”

“Look . . .” said Nuala, “If you want to talk to someone about this . . .”

“I don’t.”

She didn’t try to argue, and Ford was grateful.

***

Stan pulled the laptop across the table. Ford had been sent, despite his protests, to bed, and Stan had finished organizing their rope storage but still couldn’t sleep. He’d thought about whittling a new net-mending needle, but he wasn’t entirely sure he trusted himself with a knife.

He trusted himself with boredom even less, which was why he’d decided to finally investigate the fifteen seasons of Olympian Robot Fighters that Fiddleford had pre-loaded on the laptop “just in case” they felt like watching a bunch of cartoon teenagers with colorful and physically impossible hairstyles take on . . . he didn’t even know. Some kind of robot monsters? Or did the teenagers use the robot monsters? Neither the cover images nor the summaries had proved very forthcoming.

He poked at the computer, and it beeped awake. The screen blinked on and Stan shielded his eyes from the sudden brightness. When he could look, he saw that Ford had left up his nerd email, the one he used to try to convince various members of the scientific community that the Ph. D’s he’d acquired in his time beyond the portal should count in this dimension and that incidentally he deserved access to all their journal articles. Apparently the subscription fees were brutal. He’d been happily arguing away with what seemed like every scientist on the planet since they left on this mission, and, as Stan was beginning to believe was typical of scientific arguments, appeared to have made exactly zero progress.

He skimmed the subject lines in search of any particularly amusing threads. Occasionally Ford got a response that made him push the computer away and pace around the cabin, ranting about how no one was willing to listen to his obviously superior research just because he’d been missing for a few decades. Most of these looked pretty boring, though. Re: Re: Re: Your request. An Unfriendly Follow-up to A Friendly Query. Re: Re: A Counter-Response to ‘Yarn Theory’.

Just as he was about to close the window, his eye caught a thread that looked different than the others. While most of the subject lines were long and formal and somewhere on the spectrum
between passive and aggressive, this one just said we’re scared.

He only hesitated a moment before clicking on it. Impulse control had never been his strong suit.

The words washed over his eyes as he scrolled down—and down and down—the email thread. Mabel had another bad dream . . . I’m worried . . . I know it’s only been a few hours but please write back when you can . . . What do we do if . . . Can you please check again . . . Tell us he’s okay. Please. . . . I don’t want to wake Mabel but I can’t sleep so please . . . Grunkle Ford I’m scared and chocolate isn’t helping . . . Is he okay? . . . Please . . .

Stan put his face into his hands and sank down onto the table. They should never have told the kids. It had been bad enough worrying about giving Mabel nightmares when he barely remembered her and the things she was scared of weren’t his fault. Now—

He twisted his fingers into his hair. As if it wasn’t enough that he had to bully Ford into sleeping and eating, he was giving Mabel bad dreams. Hurting the kids. Hurting everyone. All he ever did, all he’d ever done—Stanley Pines, the loser twin, the failure. Give him everything he wanted on a silver platter and he was still going to find a way to mess it up.

It wasn’t fair that he’d somehow tricked them into caring about him. It would be better if the kids had never met him, if they’d stayed home and safe and didn’t have to send emails in the middle of the night worrying about a stupid old man who didn’t know how to be happy with what he was given. It would be better if the memory gun had erased him for good. It would be better—

He kept his head on the table, but his mind went, longingly, to the deck, to the water, to the darkness that dwelt beneath the ocean.

He couldn’t remember what it had felt like when he’d fallen in the water, not properly, but he hated whatever part of him had started fighting and grabbed onto the warp line. He’d been so close to saving everyone the trouble of having to deal with him. He should just—

No. He couldn’t. If he did it he’d only hurt them more, and he knew it. There was no way out. If he kept existing like this than Ford would keep tearing himself apart with worry and the kids would keep having bad dreams, but if he stopped he’d only make their dreams worse, hurt Ford in a way he couldn’t make up for. He was trapped.

I'm sorry, he thought, curling in on himself. I'm sorry I'm broken I don't know how to be happy I only know how to hurt people I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I wish I was—

“Ow!”

A sharp stab of pain shot through his left wrist, and when he flinched away something—flexible as a rope but strong as handcuffs—stopped him. He looked up and saw the air in front of his face filled with waving, metallic tendrils and one thin tentacle wrapped around his wrist.

The golden nautilus stared at him, holding his arm steady with a disconcerting strength.

“Get off me, you dumb robot!”

It made a strange mechanical chittering noise but didn’t loosen its grip. Most of the tendrils were some dull grey, but the tip of the one around his wrist was bright and silver. And sharp. And about half an inch of it was currently inserted under the skin of his arm. Well, that explained the pain.

Stan stopped struggling and glared at the nautilus. “Ah, go ahead. I don’t care.”
Should he tell Ford? He should probably tell Ford. His brother would want to poke at the thing now that it had decided to come out of its shell, and probably it was stabbing his arm for some... science reason...

He opened his mouth to call out, but what came out was much quieter and more gibberishy than he’d intended. He frowned, or tried to, but all his muscles were sluggish, and when he glared at the golden nautilus all he saw was a vaguely metallic blur. His head spun and everything was very... swirly...

He slumped forwards.

***

Stan sat up with a start.

The laptop was still sitting accusingly in front of him, but other than that the table was empty. The nautilus had definitely been there, he was sure he hadn’t dreamed it. Stan pulled up his sleeve to check his wrist. It was purpled with a thin bruised line where he’d struggled, and on his inner wrist a tiny puncture wound was just beginning to scab over.

The damn thing had stabbed him and knocked him out and now it was gone.

He looked around the room in case the nautilus was just hiding somewhere. Given some of the other creatures they’d encountered, he wouldn’t put it past them to end up with a blood-sucking golden robot thing living in one of their cupboards. As far as he could tell, no such luck.

Could it have gone outside? He walked over and examined the hatch, noticing that he felt surprisingly awake for someone who’d just been drugged by a mystical aquatic robot.

Ha. There. One of the wards that Ford had carved into the door had been scratched out almost completely, with silvery metallic flecks stuck in the scratches. Not exactly comforting, but at least it meant he had something to show Ford when his brother inevitably complained about the thing escaping.

Stan opened the hatch and stepped out onto the deck.

The nautilus was clinging to the rail, the glyphs on its shell casting a faint green glow. It froze when the light from the cabin hit it, and then began to creep away toward the bow.

"Get back here!" Stan yelled, launching himself at it.

The thing avoided his grasping hands easily, chirping as it skittered out of the way and over the side of the boat. Stan grabbed at it again. One hand caught the shell, but he couldn't find purchase on the smooth surface, and as he leaned over and tried to reach further the thing slipped away from him and dropped into the sea.

His growl of frustration was abruptly cut off as a heavy weight slammed into his side and he tumbled, breathless, to the deck.

***

Ford didn’t know what had awoken him. There was a part of him that wasn’t even sure he was awake, but before he had a chance to think the hatch slammed and the gulls started screaming—your fault—and he was up—you’ll be too late—pounding through the cabin without pausing for a coat or gloves or even shoes—you shouldn’t have fallen asleep you shouldn’t have left him alone—and past
the empty table—*stupid stupid you didn’t realize what was wrong and you’ll be too late*—and wrestling with the hatch with bleary eyes and unwieldy fingers.

The cold stab of adrenaline (*just adrenaline Bill’s gone he can’t hurt you you’re safe you’re safe*) drove him onwards as he flung open the hatch and stumbled out onto the deck, the cold burning his bare feet and bare hands and face and the inside of his throat. Stan was standing at the rail, leaning over, with one foot off the ground.

Still unsure if he was awake or dreaming, Ford charged, tackling his brother and knocking the two of them to the deck. *Safe he’s safe you’re safe*

***

Stan landed heavily, gasping with pain as his elbow slammed into the icy decking, Ford collapsed on top of him, knocking the breath from his lungs.

"What . . . the . . . hell!" he gasped.

"What do you think you were doing!" Ford shouted. His glasses were crooked and his fingers were grasping the front of Stan's coat with a terrible intensity.

"What?"

"You were leaning over the rail! Were you—"

"What—no!" realization washed over him like a wave, cold and unpleasant. "Ford, I wasn't—Your Atlantis octopus bit me and then ran off, I was just trying to get it back. Listen to me, bro, come on, I'm not—"

"Stop lying to me!" Ford shook him by the collar of his jacket and Stan winced as his head cracked against the deck.

"I'm not!"

"Why should I believe you?"

Stan went limp, feeling the guilt twist in his stomach.

"You probably shouldn’t," he admitted.

Ford didn't reply, just kept clutching at Stan's coat and breathing heavily. They stared at each other, the silence broken only by the swell of the waves and their ragged breathing. The gulls had stopped screaming. The back of Stan’s head was wet and he could only hope it was with icemelt and not blood.

"Uh . . . hey."

They both jumped at the sound of Nuala’s voice, Ford rolling off Stan and patting his pockets for a weapon he wasn’t carrying, and Stan managing to crack his head on the deck a second time as he flinched. The selkie had pulled herself up one of the trailing lines and was dangling over the rail.

"He’s not lying, you know. I saw it."

Ford stared between Nuala and Stan, who shrugged. "Don’t blame you. I wouldn’t have believed me."
“I,” said Ford looking down at where Stan was still sprawled across the deck, his shirtfront creased where he’d grabbed at it. “Um. Nuala, you . . . may have been right.”

“Of course I was right! About what specifically in this instance? Not precluding me being right about everything else I’ve ever or will ever talk to you about.”

“About . . . talking to someone.”

“Cool,” said the selkie. Her arms were beginning to shake from holding herself up. “I bet old Luka would see you. She’s not a selkie though, so make sure you prep some bribes that would be good for a seal.”

With that, she splashed back down into the water, and when Ford glanced over the side he saw a dark seal head for a moment before she vanished under the waves.

Ford walked back to Stan, offering him a hand. "You said it bit you?"

Stan took the proffered hand and stumbled up, rubbing his elbow. "How about we get out of this cold first. I don't want any bits of us dropping off because you got distracted by some science."

Ford smiled—it was brittle, but it was better than nothing—and the two of them headed back inside.

***

“So,” said Ford, after he had conducted a cursory examination and concluded that probably whatever the nautilus had done was temporary, “What were you doing when it attacked you?”

Stan poked at the bandage on his wrist—completely overkill, but it seemed to make Ford feel better. “Not much,” he said. “Sitting here. Thinking.”

“Thinking about what?” Ford’s brow was knotted with concern as he watched Stan’s face.

Stan held his expression steady, the neutral face he’d developed for talking to their father. How much could he tell Ford when he was like this? No, it wasn’t a hard question.

He let his face break into a smile—not the performer’s grin he used at the Mystery Shack, something more hesitant, more guarded.

“About glitter,” he lied.

Ford breathed out in a rush and smiled back, clapping Stan on the shoulder.

“Good,” he said. “Good.”

Stan stood, disguising his sigh of relief as a laugh, and swung one arm around Ford.

“Now that you know I’m all right, you’re going back to sleep.”

Ford froze. “I don’t know—”

“Nope, no arguing. You had what, forty-five minutes?”

Ignoring his protests, Stan marched Ford to his bunk, and as Ford stood there uncomfortably he sat down on the floor and pulled out his whittling knife. When he saw Ford staring at him he shrugged.

“Gotta get some work done anyway, and that table feels a little less welcoming than it used to. Get
Ford drifted off slowly to the rhythmic scrape of the knife on wood. The first time his dreams sent scrambling upright, gasping with cold terror, Stan was still carving. He very carefully didn’t look up as Ford bit down his panic and forced his breathing to steady, but he shifted closer to the bunk and Ford reached out a hand to clasp his brother’s shoulder, solid and real and warm and alive, he’s alive, the dreams aren’t real, your brain is lying to you.

“You need anything?” said Stan evenly.

“No,” said Ford, shaking his head. “No, I’m—I’m good.”

Stan did look up at that, cracking a lopsided smile. “You’re a terrible liar, y’know.”

When Ford awoke for the second time, Stan’s head had fallen forward and he was snoring softly, and Ford watched until he could breathe in time to the steady rise and fall of his brother’s chest. He must have made some noise he didn’t remember as he woke, because Stan groaned and half-opened his eyes, squinting around him in confusion.

“You’re too old to sleep on the floor,” Ford told him. “I’m awake now. Take my bed.”

Mumbling sleepily, Stan let Ford pull him up into the bunk, but before Ford could get up Stan’s arm flopped heavily around his waist. “Gotcha,” he muttered, his jaw set stubbornly even through his half-awake haze. “You’re too old t’ not sleep.”

Ford tried, unsuccessfully, to push his brother’s arm off him. “Stanley, this is ridiculous. I—”

His protests were cut off as Stan began snoring again. Ford glared at the ceiling. He must have slept for at least four hours total. That was more than enough. He lay there, plotting increasingly elaborate ways of escaping using scientific principles, until he realized that he didn’t actually feel like getting up any more.

“You win, you old trickster,” he grumbled. Ford smiled despite himself, and soon, pressed between the wall and the reassuring solidity of his brother’s body, he drifted back into unconsciousness and didn’t wake until morning.
Something Stolen, Something Grand, Something Lost

Chapter Summary

In which Ford meets his seal therapist for the first time.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ford looked across at the old seal lying in front of him. The snowflakes tumbling across the pack ice coated her gray whiskers as she raised her head and regarded him with eyes as dark and unfathomable as the sea.

He lowered his gaze, reaching out to adjust the lantern he'd brought from the boat. It was already firmly anchored on the ice, but it gave him something to do with his hands. They were warm but clumsy in their double-layered mittens, the equations knitted into the hems flickering in and out of visibility in the lantern light.

He felt . . . well, he felt ridiculous. Aliens and cryptids were all very well, but sitting down on a ice floe to spill his heart to a seal made him feel as if he'd fallen into some rather twee children's book. Of course, a children's book would probably manage to make the small pool of light the lantern cast seem cozy somehow. It was anything but. The light was white and harsh, and the ice beyond was endless. The bitter wind nipped at him, searching for bare skin to bite at. But for once he'd dressed properly for the weather and the wind roared past, defeated.

There was no sun—there was never any sun this time of year—but the last vestiges of gray-blue twilight hung in the sky under the heavy clouds. Icebergs stabbed at the darkening horizon, and white-capped waves beat and snarled against the ice. Ford was warm inside his coat, but he shivered nonetheless. The landscape was beautiful, and harsh, and as unwelcoming as any alien planet he'd tramped across. In some ways, it felt more familiar than any of the towns on the mainland had. In some ways, the more unearthly the landscape became the more he felt at home.

Behind him, the Stan O' War II bobbed at anchor, the yellow light of her cabin looking as small and ephemeral as a candle flame. Part of Ford wanted to run back across the pack ice and hide in that fragile light, lock the dark and the wind and the cold outside, but he knew that wouldn't solve anything. Bleak as the landscape was, the real danger was inside his brother's head. And, he had to admit, his own. That was why he was out here in the first place. He couldn't talk to Stan without driving him further into guilt and regret, and he couldn't keep his worries locked up or they festered until they exploded. Hence, well, this.

The seal—Nuala had called her Luka—twitched her whiskers and barked at him, and Ford swallowed. His nose was wet from the condensation inside his scarf, and he wasn't sure either of them would be able to hear him properly when he spoke. Maybe they wouldn't. Maybe he'd be able to excuse himself—conditions too harsh, couldn't possibly have this conversation, perhaps some other time . . .

“So.” Nuala was lying next to Luka, snuggled up against the older seal's side. She hadn't asked for a coat this time, letting her sealskin and her wild hair and Luka's silver-brown pelt shield her from prying human eyes. In front of them, bathed in the light of the lantern, were the offerings Ford had
brought: a basket of fish for Luka and a package of shortbread fingers for Nuala. Ford had found the shortbread in the very back of one of their cupboards after a long search; soon they would have to start offering IOU’s until they could make port or the ley lines calmed enough to let a care package through.

“I filled her in as much as I could,” Nuala said, “But I don’t know that much. Remember, she can understand you so I'm only translating one way. Got it?”

He nodded awkwardly behind his scarf and hood and took in a musty breath.

“I'm,” he tried, “I'm not sure . . .”

Luka blinked at him slowly. “Take your time,” said Nuala, leaning her head against Luka's flank and stroking the old seal's flipper.

“I don't know how much this will help. Or what I can say. It's—it's my fault and I just have to—”

Luka cut him off with a sharp bark.

“Pretty certain that not everything is your fault,” Nuala translated. “But if that's what you need to think right now, we won't argue.”

Ford blinked, but he wasn't sure if they could see under the buildup of snow and ice that coated his glasses. “You won’t?”

“Right now we're here to listen,” said Nuala. “Arguing with people about their own minds doesn't usually help that much, at least not at the beginning. So talk to us.”

“I'm, ah . . .” Ford breathed out sharply. The inside of his scarf was hot and claustrophobic. “I'm not good at . . . trusting people . . .”

Nuala nodded contemplatively. “Well, Luka can't pass on your secrets to anyone, and you know where I stand. As long as you and your brother are alive and stable, I'm in the Mermanatee alliance's good graces. Believe me, I wish they'd given me a different job, but if I want to protect my colony, I help keep you both alive. Frankly your odds haven't been looking too good lately.”

“I . . . appreciate your candor.”

Ford took a deep breath. He'd volunteered for this. It wasn't like the terrible counseling sessions he'd had to endure when he was younger. Unless Nuala was considerably more conniving than he gave her credit for, none of this was going to end up on his record. It was just . . . talking. With a seal. Which was supposed to make him more sane, somehow.

Well, he'd done odder things. Probably.

He wondered how Stan was doing. He worried about leaving him alone, and felt guilty about worrying, and felt foolish for feeling guilty. Of course he should be worried. It was the only logical thing to feel under the circumstances. It was the way the worry spiraled that was the problem, turned into wild terror and paranoia and the unshakable certainly that if Stan did do anything it would be Ford's fault. His fault at least twice over. Once for not being there to help him and once for not being there to stop him.

Ford closed his eyes and balled up his hands inside his mittens and talked. The words seemed to catch behind his teeth, but he forced them out, made them as clinical as he could. He told them about Fiddleford and Bill and the Portal, about Weirdmaggeddon and the children, about Stanley. Stanley
at seventeen, standing on the sidewalk with nothing but his car and one hastily-packed bag to his name. Stanley at thirty screaming as Ford kicked him backwards into the console and the burning symbol bit through his jacket and his shirt and his flesh. Stanley at sixty kneeling in the forest clearing, empty and pliable. Stanley just last week, admitting that he'd jumped into the ocean of his own volition, that he wanted to die, and Ford hadn't known, hadn't noticed.

Finally, he trailed off, blinking behind his frost-coated glasses until he could focus on the two creatures in front of him.

“I suppose that's most of it,” he said. “So now you know, and maybe I should—”

Nuala sighed. “Sit down.”

Ford, who had been pushing himself up off the ice, sank back.

“You told us a lot about what happened,” Nuala continued, “But nothing about how you feel about it. Sure, we can guess, but that's unlikely to be efficient or comfortable.”

Ford wrapped his arms around his knees and stared back at them, glad that he was swathed in his winter gear and they wouldn't be able to see the fear in his eyes or notice the thrum as his heart kicked into overdrive. Nuala was right. The only way he knew how to talk about things without spiraling into guilt and fear and regret was to remove himself from the equation. Rely on the passive voice he'd mastered for his science writing. The samples were prepared. The results were tabulated. The portal was constructed. When you put it like that, you could almost pretend it wasn't anyone's fault.

But it was a lie, as least as much of one as Stan's Mr. Mystery persona. When Stan hid, it was just behind a different first person singular, squirreling away his thoughts and feelings behind a constructed “I” that was jovial and sarcastic and always ready with a flashy grim. When Ford hid it was behind impersonal constructions, building in so much distance between the speaker and the verb that a listener might almost forget they were linked.

Once upon a time, he'd expressed his goals in the simple future, but now “I will” just felt like a promise waiting to be broken. He used old Latin constructions instead; the Romans were almost as good at the passive voice as scientists were. He took refuge in the passive periphrastic: future passive participle with sense of obligation. Cipher delendus est. Cipher must be destroyed.

That had been his mantra as soon as he realized the demon's betrayal, and it lasted through three decades travel beyond the Portal and the first few weeks of his return. Cipher must be destroyed. And the unstated but ever-present dative of agent. By me.

But it hadn't been him. All he'd done was watch. Cipher had ignored him the moment the demon switched from second person plural to the singular, and Ford had stood there uselessly as Stan took the fall that should have been his.

Cipher must be destroyed. He knew it was still true as he picked up the memory gun, even as his whole mind was screaming that it wasn't supposed to happen like this. He input the name with trembling fingers. Cipher must be destroyed. Must be. I must—

And then he'd looked up and the construction broke and he felt the weight of the first person singular slamming down onto his shoulders.

When he remembered things now, all the buffering relative clauses and impersonal verbs faded away to simple declaratives. I failed. I wasn’t smart enough. I trusted a demon. I endangered the world. I
drove my friend to madness. I shot my brother. That was the truth, and everything else was just excuses.

“Stanford?”

Ford blinked and realized he'd been staring at the ice in silence for several minutes. He looked up, but still didn't speak.

“You blame yourself for your dealings with the demon,” said Nuala. It wasn't a question. He hadn't heard any response from Luka, but the old seal was gazing at him and twitching her whiskers, so he supposed they could be engaging in some type on non-verbal communication. Under other circumstances he would have made a note of it, tried to watch and categorize Luka's movements, but now it took all his strength to make himself speak against the weight of shame on his tongue.

“I shouldn't have trusted him,” he managed. “I was stupid. Self-centered. He told me he was a Muse, that he was helping me because I was brilliant.” Ford laughed bitterly. “I was so desperate for the world to see me as something other than a freak that I swallowed every lie he fed me.”

"You're not a freak. Well, no more than all the other human—hey!" Luka had rolled to one side and slapped a flipper at Nuala until the selkie scowled and said, "Fine. Not at all."

Then Luka barked, and Nuala listened for a moment before she went on. “I suspect he was very good at lying. At making you feel special. Important.”

Ford nodded miserably.

“It hurts. Finding out that someone you trusted was deceiving you.”

Ford laughed again. “Try finding out that someone you trusted was using you to destroy the world. And would have succeeded if it weren't for your family. How am I supposed to forget about that?”

“You're not. Living with something and forgetting about it aren't the same.”

Ford flinched. Then he paused, biting his tongue to anchor himself. He shouldn't have used the word so flippantly. He knew exactly what happened when people forgot.

Stan's memory had been bad that morning. Ford had already gotten up and was on his second cup of coffee when his brother shuffled into the kitchen, and Ford knew, even before he saw the vacant smile, even before Stan asked him who he was, that something was wrong. It had happened often enough that he'd learned the signs.

It was still terrifying, but not like it had been at the beginning, when every time he was convinced that the memories were lost permanently, that he'd only been granted a temporary respite from the doom he'd sealed when he pulled the memory gun's trigger. He'd learned not to let his terror show; it only made things worse for Stan to be surrounded by panic and fear.

Slowly, Ford had accepted that his brother's memory ebbed and flowed like the tide, and that like the tide it would always return to him. The fear that lingered was irrational, the same sort of paranoia that sometimes refused to let him sleep until he crept to Stan's bedside and reassured himself with every twitch and snore that his brother was alive and breathing.

They had a routine now. Ford would sit Stan down at the table and talk to him gently as he brewed coffee, and then he'd get out Mabel's scrapbook and flip past the glitter glue “1” on the cover to the last pages, where there were pictures of the whole family at the children's thirteenth birthday.
Ford didn’t offer information, which was the most difficult part, but he’d learned that Stan didn’t like hearing things that he couldn’t believe yet. After he’d stared for a while, the furrows in his brow would soften and he’d say, “The girl made this book.” That was Ford’s cue to begin filling him in. “Yes. Her name is Mabel. She’s your great-niece, and she and her brother spent the summer with you.” He would keep talking as Stan asked questions and then eventually began to fill in details on his own, and it was only when Ford caught the tell-tale glint of recognition in his eyes that he could throw his arms around his brother.

“Come on, Sixer,” Stan had said that morning, leaning into the embrace. “You’re not getting rid of me that easy.” Ford hoped it was true. He hoped that he was imagining the slight stiffness that passed through Stan’s body immediately afterwards, as if he’d just realized what he’d said and was regretting it.

A bark from Luka brought him back to the present. “I’m not saying I want to forget,” said Ford. “But how am I supposed to live with it? Every day, I look out at this world and think: this could all be gone. This could all be broken and burning and everyone and everything on the planet could be dead and it would all be my fault.”

He hung his head. “Everyone except me, probably. I suspect he would have kept me around to gloat. Thank me for helping him.” And I would have deserved it, he thought. I would have deserved it if I couldn’t stop him.

Nuala looked at him, and there was pity in her eyes, and he wished he could sink into the ice and disappear. “The way you blame yourself. Is it really because of the world? Or is it because of you?”

Ford didn’t respond.

“Listen,” said Nuala. “From what you’ve told me, your brother endangered the world. Your niece and nephew endangered the world. Probably most of that crazy town endangered the world at one point or another. Why are you the only one who doesn’t deserve forgiveness?”

Ford glared. “Because I’m a hypocrite, all right?”

Nuala shrugged sadly. “All right. But he used you.”

"I shouldn't have let him!" Ford snapped. "I'm supposed to be smart, but . . . I never suspected. I saw the warnings and I ignored them because I was so desperate. For success. For acclaim. For . . .” He squeezed his eyes shut. This was the hardest to admit to. Pride was one thing. Pride was easy, but to admit that he'd nearly destroyed the world because he was lonely . . . “For a friend.”

“Did you love him?”

Ford balked. “What? What kind of question is that?”

“An . . . obvious one?” said Nuala. “Lots of the selkies who were taken loved their humans before they were betrayed.” Her face fell. “And sometimes after. It’s complicated like that.”

Ford shook his head. “No, I . . .” He blushed, and knew they couldn’t see it under his scarf, and hated himself for it anyway. “I’ve never felt that way.”

He remembered his mother pointedly inviting neighborhood girls over for dinner whenever he came home, until he stopped coming home at all, remembered his freshman year when she’d squealed, “Is that a girl with you?” when she called his dorm room, and he’d scowled, “No, Ma. It’s just Fiddleford. I told you about him,” with an apologetic grimace, because he knew his friend was self-conscious that he still sang alto. He remembered how later, when Ford didn’t come home anymore
and Fiddleford was a tenor, his mother would say archly, “So you talk about that friend of yours an awful lot . . .” and Ford sighed, every time, and said, “Yes, Ma, it’s because we’re friends.” He didn’t understand why she couldn’t be happy that he’d found friendship instead of always complaining that it wasn’t . . . something else. Something Ford wasn’t sure he wanted and was sure he wouldn’t get. Face it, his and Fiddleford’s joint fanzine subscriptions were the closest thing to domesticity he’d ever have.

And, though he tried not to think about it as he threw himself into his thesis work, it was something with a very clear expiration date. Graduation was looming, Fiddleford’s relationship seemed to be getting more and more serious, and even when his grant came through the excitement he felt at preparing to conduct his own research was tempered by the bleak knowledge that he’d be doing it alone.

His . . . partnership with Bill (he’d called it that at the time, a partnership, and oh the demon must have laughed) was different. Until the end of time, he’d said, and he thought that at last he’d found someone who wouldn’t leave him.

“All right,” said Nuala. “So you wanted him to be like your family?”

Ford laughed at that, and his throat felt tight. “Yes.” Family was a difficult word. It was a better word, now, than it had been for a long time. It meant Mabel’s care packages and Dipper’s notes, meant movies and board games and hugs, meant Stan’s arm around him as they laughed and Soos shyly sending them pictures of the attractions he’d made based on their adventures.

For a long time, family had meant betrayal, and bitterness, and broken trust, had meant blows and misunderstandings and the feeling that everything he’d depended on had crumbled away. By that definition, Bill fit right in.

He’d fit right into Ford’s life, filling the gap that Stan had left. Bill reflected the parts of him that Stan hadn’t, the parts that Ford told himself were better, more important. Intelligence. Resourcefulness. Tenacity.

But he’d been wrong about that, too. Stan had rebuilt the portal, despite the alien tech, despite the spacetime physics, despite Ford’s own warnings. Pig-headedness was another trait that they shared.

When they were children, Stan wanted them to be the same and their father wanted them to be completely different, but they weren’t either. They were isomers, the same formula but constructed differently. After Stan left, Ford had imagined that they had completely different properties, that his brother would do fine, find it easy to form bonds, that the fact that Ford would have struggled in his situation just meant that Stan was going to flourish. They were so different, after all.

In the cell in the Fearamid, Ford had pressed his bare hands to his brother’s gloved ones, and for the first time in his life felt both his hands fully mirrored by another person. Hands were always what the chemistry textbooks used to explain chirality: structural mirror images, non-superimposable. When it came up in class, students would clasp their own hands together and then turn to their neighbors, giggling, and align their hands with each other in a chain of reflections around the room. Ford kept his folded under his desk.

Stan in the six-fingered gloves was a trick, but their chirality was real. It wasn't just about the one time, when they'd bet the universe on it. Their lives were mirrored. Stan’s left hand, held out in supplication to Ford as he closed the blinds of his window. Ford’s right hand, outstretched as he tumbled backwards into the portal. The portal engulfing Ford in blue fire. The memory gun engulfing Stan in blue fire. Both times, the one left behind thinking that he'd lost his brother forever. (Mabel, both times, calling them out of the flames).
“I thought I lost Stan once,” Ford whispered. “I can't lose him again.”

Luka barked and nuzzled Nuala's head. “You aren't just afraid of losing him because he's your brother,” said Nuala softly. “He's your anchor.”

Ford shifted on the ice. He'd been sitting there long enough that one of his feet was falling asleep.

“What do you mean?”

“This world doesn't feel like yours anymore, does it? It's hard enough when one of us returns to the sea after being stolen, and change in the sea is slow. Humans do everything so fast. Every year there are different boats, different houses, different machines. Thirty years of that—do you even recognize it?”

“Yes,” said Ford, but she was right. In a way recognizing it made it worse, because it reminded him of everything he'd lost. All the years, all the discoveries, all the things that should be familiar but weren't. The future was a different dimension and he was a different man than the one who had fallen through the Portal. This world was home and it wasn't. He belonged and he didn't and the gap between was excruciating.

His anchor. He thought he could understand what Nuala meant. He'd given up on places feeling like home, but people still could. That was what made this dimension worth it. Nothing could ever really be worth the risk Stan had taken to bring him back but he was still, selfishly, grateful. He had a companion in his wanderings now, had a base to return to. He'd been feeling excitement about the future instead of vague dread for the first time he could remember.

If Stan died, making it back to his own dimension would be little more than a cruel joke. He'd manage. He'd have the kids and his research, at least until some monster caught up with him and he needed backup that he didn't have. But the dramatic irony that he'd sidestepped when Stan's memories returned would choke him. If Stan died, it would be better if Ford had never made it back at all.

*

Stan sat at the table and spread the damaged net out before him. He hadn't been able to work on it for a while, but now the new needle rested in his hand, smooth and warm from the sanding he'd just given it. He wound it with rope and knotted one end into the net.

He hoped Ford would take his time. It would be good for him to get off the boat for a while. Good for him to talk to someone apart from Stan and the kids, someone who was on the outside of this whole mess.

And it would be good for Stan to have a chance not to pretend. He was so tired, and acting like he was doing well—no, he couldn't pull that off—acting like he was functional was exhausting. He was eating into energy reserves that he didn't have, to the point that he was afraid that next time it would be him collapsing on the cabin floor. But he couldn't do that, couldn't let Ford know how bad things still were. At least the memory lapse that morning had provided a brief respite, although it was bittersweet in retrospect.

He could remember forgetting. Every time his memories slotted back into his mind he still knew what it had been like when they were missing. He could feel them shifting as they awoke and the blankness inside his head was suddenly filled with people and places and scenes from a past that never felt, at first, like it belonged to him. Maybe there'd been some kind of mix-up. Maybe it was someone else who'd made those mistakes. And then something connected, and he felt his whole life
crash down around him.

He shouldn't miss it, the emptiness in his head, being, if only for a few moments, blissfully unaware of all his failures. He shouldn't feel nostalgic when he remembered himself dissolving away in blue fire, shouldn't long for the peace he'd felt then, the certainty that he'd done all he could and that his last act, at least, had been a good one.

When you didn't have a self to be, there was no reason to feel guilty. As soon as the memories came back, the guilt came with them. There were these people who cared about him—who loved him, against all reason—and he was letting them down and he didn't know how not to.

Ford was always so gentle with him, and when he came back to himself he hated it, hated being coddled and pitied and fussed over, but at the time, when he could just sit and let the strange man care for him, he felt safe and contented. Almost as contented as he'd felt as the blue flames closed around him.

Stan sighed. He'd lied for thirty years. What were a few more? He'd hoped that having Ford back, that having his family back, would mean that he could stop pretending, but clearly that was just wishful thinking. There was no reason to pull the rest of them into it. Let them think he was getting better. Let him stop haunting them.

And then? He didn't know. He wasn't sure how long he could keep it up. But he hadn't been sure how long he could keep working on the Portal either, and he'd stuck that out somehow. They were up against something deadly most days. Even if he did try, could it really be that long before one of them got the best of him? It felt like all the hope he had. At least that way it wouldn't be his fault. At least that way his family wouldn't have another reason to hate him. They could grieve. Move on. Forget about him. Stop letting him hold them back.

Stan looked down and sighed. He'd gotten the tension all wrong. His mend was just going to warp the rest of the net around it if he left it, split it again or pull it out of alignment.

He dropped the needle and began to cut away the new knots. Scraps of rope fell around him as he worked, picking up flakes of the glitter still scattered across the table.

* 

“Nuala?”

The selkie woman paused at the rail of the boat. She'd insisted on escorting Ford back “so you don't fall in the water and ruin all Luka's hard work.”

Ford fidgeted, twisting his fingers together behind his back. “Your friend . . . do you know where she is?”

Nuala didn't look back at him, but he could tell by the tension in her shoulders that she'd heard. “You won't be able to help her,” she said quietly.

“But do you know?”

There was a pause as Nuala balanced on the rail, perfectly still except for her long hair billowing around her. In the blue glow of the Arctic twilight she seemed to fade into the landscape, her bare brown skin like a polished iceberg and the harp-shaped mark down her back as dark as the sea. She stared out across the bow, tense and still as a figurehead, and Ford was reminded, however well she played at being human, that these expeditions onto their boat were as alien to her as the worlds beyond the portal had been to him.
“Boston,” she said, and dove away before he could respond.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to everyone for your patience with this update! My semester is ending soon, so I should have more time to write about these poor broken teacups. Thanks for reading!
Every Morning I Watch The Main

Chapter Summary

In which there is a long-awaited discovery, and then more waiting.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Stan was still trying to repair the net when Ford returned, and he still couldn’t get the mends to lay right. He dropped the needle in defeat as his brother ducked through the door.

“How was therapy?”

Ford paused in the midst of removing his mittens. “It was . . . good? It was certainly strange, but . . . I think it was good. Luka is, ah, quite perceptive.”

Stan hid his sigh of relief with a chuckle. “Should have thought of this years ago. Course, back home I only had squirrels and that one vocally challenged gnome to talk to. I bet animal therapists would be all the rage. I shoulda taught that bear to give mental health advice instead of driving.”

Ford squinted at Stan and shook his head. “I don’t think I want to know.”

“Nah,” said Stan, “It would have been a gold mine! People go nuts for animals. And therapy animals are one thing, but therapist animals? Believe me, I wouldn’t be able to sell tickets fast enough!”

Ford sat, folding the net and stowing it under the table. He began to pull off his winter layers, and when his face emerged it was smiling.

“Not that you would have trained the animals to do anything useful, I assume.”

“Ah, training shmaining! Get ‘em to sit tight and wear nerd glasses and no one would ever tell the difference.”

Ford elbowed his brother, tentatively, across the table. Since the Incident all physical contact was tentative unless one of them was panicking or on the verge of sleep. Before, they had gotten back into a rhythm of easy hugs and casual touches—a hand on a shoulder, a playful nudge as they walked. Now, Ford seemed afraid that every touch would push Stan away from him. For his own part, Stan was afraid to reach out in case the contact somehow transferred the despair that hunched over his shoulders.

“Well,” said Ford, “It’s a good thing I stole you away from your life of crime when I did. Who knows what you’d get up to if I wasn’t around to keep you honest.”

His tone was jovial but brittle, like water that had just barely iced over. Stan could feel all the unsaid words and unasked questions lurking beneath the surface. Is it my fault? Am I making it worse? Would you still be alive if I wasn’t here? Would you want to be?

After Stan's memories returned and they'd started talking again, really talking, they’d promised to be up front with each other. They’d known that the ocean of things unsaid was what had driven them
apart in the first place. But, well. Old habits died hard.

“Yeah, sure,” Stan replied with a smirk. “Honest. At least I haven’t been banned from entire dimensions!” No. No. I don’t know. I don’t think so.

*

“So,” said Nuala the next day, slurping on the dregs of her tea. “How do you think it went?”

Ford considered, focusing on his own half-empty mug so he wouldn’t have to make eye contact. "It was . . . not unhelpful, which raises the bar considerably from my previous experiences. I . . . may wish to speak to her again."

Nuala nodded. "Can do. She says you're a mess, but not the worst she's seen."

Ford laughed. "High praise. I, ah, was thinking, however, that we're unlikely to remain in close proximity to your colony for much longer, so I took the liberty of putting together an alternate method of communication."

He laid the item on the table. It had been cannibalized from one of their spare underwater cameras and would certainly never be described as 'elegant,' but it did what it was supposed to. He picked it up and held it out to Nuala. She lowered her head and poked it suspiciously with her nose. Ford had noticed that she had a tendency to investigate new things with her face instead of her hands—undoubtedly another holdover from spending most of her time as a seal.

"This is a camera. If you wear it or hold it while you swim, the motion will charge the battery. It's completely waterproof and won't be damaged by the cold. To use it, you press this button here. It will automatically lock on to the boat's satellite signal and open two-way video. You'll be able to see me on this screen, and this lens will pick you up. I've made the interface as minimalist as possible. That way, we can communicate even after we've left your colony, which should happen any day now."

"About that," said Nuala, leaning back in her chair, "You would be leaving soon if you hadn't been going in circles for the past week. I'd assumed it was intentional but evidently I was mistaken."

"What?" Ford checked the navigational equipment, which said that they'd been sailing a steady northeast. "No we haven't!"

Nuala rolled her eyes. "Fine, trust your temperamental human technology over someone who's been swimming through these waters her whole life. Typical. You don't have to believe me, but I'm telling you, you've been spiraling around the same patch of ocean for days."

"I—I'm sorry," said Ford. He twisted a dial on the instrument panel and frowned. "Thank you."

She did take the camera with her when she left. "You want to talk to Luka again? Sometime tomorrow?"

He nodded. "Yes, that would be suitable."

*

No matter what tests Ford ran on their navigational equipment, it continued to say that they were on course. The precision wasn’t up to par but he was used to that. He’d known that the high magical activity from the ley lines made it difficult for anyone else to find them, but not that their own location was a lie. He stayed up most of the night watching the stars, trying to turn the wheel every
time they drifted out of alignment with Polaris, and when morning came he still wasn't sure if he'd accomplished anything. After returning to the cabin, exhausted and discouraged, he slept most of the day away. When he awoke, he was terrified that he'd missed Nuala’s visit, but Stan assured him that the selkie hadn't tried to contact him while he slept. It was getting late, and he still hadn't heard anything from her.

He was trying not to worry, with limited success. Selkies weren't good at specific timekeeping. To be fair, he wasn't either, but this was the sort of thing that he liked to have scheduled so he could, if not worry less, at least worry more specifically.

There was a noise outside, the familiar tapping at the hull. Finally. He left his notes and the tea he’d been half-heartedly worrying at on the table and went to investigate.

"Nuala? Is that—Oh. Oh . . ."

Ford's voice trailed off and a wide smile spread across his face. His heart began to pound in his chest as he was gripped with a heady cocktail of nerves and excitement. This was what he lived for—the exploration, the unknown, the exhilaration of discovery. This was what made up (almost made up. Sometimes made up) for the fear and the misery and the days where he felt like his brain was trying to eat him alive. No matter how many anomalies he discovered, there was still that thrill that shot through him, especially when he could watch Stan gape in wonder and remember how rare this was. How magical.

Before him, jutting up out of the water, was a tower that glowed in the colors of the aurora borealis. The sides were steep and smooth and looked like they were made of crystal or green ice, and the spire was whorled in a pattern that wasn't quite representational but reminded him of shells and cephalopods.

"Stan!" he called, not looking away. "Come quick!"

There was an oval door at the top of the tower. It seemed like it was made of the same stuff as the rest of the building. All around the opening, picked out in gold, was an inscription in an alphabet that, while not quite readable, was beautifully familiar.

He heard the noise of the hatch behind him, heard Stan's sharp intake of breath.

"What the hell . . ." his brother whispered, gaping at the tower.

When Ford had first stepped outside, the outside of the tower had been as smooth as glass, but as he watched the surface began to bubble and warp as a set of spiral stairs formed. The first step rested on the rail of the boat and the last was a double-width platform outside the tower door.

"It's Atlantis," said Ford, turning to Stan with a wild grin. "We've found it."

*

"It's probably not anything to worry about."

"Right."

"They've lost internet before; even Mr. McGucket's sci-fi magic doesn't work all the time."

"Exactly."

"It's only been two and a half days. That's hardly any time at all. It would be silly to worry."
"Absolutely."

Mabel groaned in despair and flopped backwards onto the floor. "I hate this. What if they're in trouble? What if they need our help? What if they've been captured?"

"Come on," said Dipper. "I'm sure they can take care of themselves?" He hadn't meant to turn it into a question, but the unwelcome inflection crept into his voice.

Mabel scoffed. "Sure, just like Mermando has those rebellious walruses under control. Face it, Dip, they need us."

Dipper put down the math textbook he'd been pretending to study and sighed. "Even if that is true, what can we do? They're on the other side of the world. A bottle message would take days to get to them. We don't even really know where they are."

"I knowwww," Mabel moaned. "But we can't just do nothing!"

"Okay then," said Dipper. "So what can we do?"

* *

Fiddleford McGucket frowned at the two very earnest, very worried children projected on his computer screen.

"So you're tellin' me they vanishified? Two days ago?"

"Three now!" said Mabel, leaning forward in concern until all the camera picked up was her forehead and her wide, frightened eyes. "I know it hasn't been that long but we were getting emails from Grunkle Ford every day, and we sent him a bad dream email two days ago and he hasn't answered, and we were supposed to talk to them yesterday but they never came online!"

"Well now. That does sound mighty suspicious. What do you reckon we should do about it?"

"Can you . . ." Dipper shrugged. "I don't know. Boost their signal somehow? Get a satellite photo from that alien space pod you put back into orbit? Something?"

"Hmm. If'n I can get a signal through, I might be able to do some snooping." He grinned. "I did leave a few failsafes in that ol' laptop of theirs. Knew she'd come in handy one o' these days."

Mabel wrung her hands at the screen. "Thank you thank you thank you! I just want to know they're okay. Things have been . . . scary lately."

Fiddleford cocked his head. "Scary? How so?"

"Oh!" said Dipper, leaning into his sister until she toppled off-screen with a squawk. "Monsters and things! Definitely not anything else that we promised we weren't going to talk about, right Mabel?"

Mabel righted herself and laughed uneasily. "Haha . . . yeah. Exactly. Just . . . if you do get in touch with them, ask them if I need to send more glitter. They'll know what I mean."

Fiddleford chuckled. "Now, young lady, if I get a line through to those Grunkles of yours I'll make sure you get to ask them yourself."

Shortly thereafter, the call blipped out. Fiddleford pursed his lips and stared at the array of screens and keyboards before him. He clicked a few keys and entered a directory labeled LESLIE_FS, tapping idly at the edge of his desk as he scrolled through the protocols. This was going to be a tricky
The cabin of the Stan O’ War II was silent. The overhead light swung gently, illuminating the still scene. On the table, a couple of mugs that had once held tea were now coated in brown stains as the liquid evaporated. A pile of notes and papers sat abandoned, the pen beside them dropped mid-sentence. The base of the table sparkled with the sheen of glitter, which was a thin layer across most of the surface but mounded in technicolor piles near the wall. A sweater was draped over one of the chairs, its sleeves drooping onto the floor. Mold was beginning to grow on the plates piled in the tiny sink. One cupboard door hung open, the cans spilled on the counter clear signs of over-hasty packing.

On the table, the laptop beeped and turned itself on. For a moment, the screen was filled with the image of a man with a long white beard, frowning in concentration, and then he vanished and lines of code began to scroll across the screen. The machine beeped and whirred several more times, and then a panel opened on the side and a set of spindly, spider-like legs emerged. It folded its keyboard up and, wobbling as it adjusted its balance, stood and slowly panned its camera around in a circle, taking in the interior of the abandoned cabin.

Getting off the table was a challenge, and several creative Southern curses emanated from the thing as it toppled down onto one of the chairs and then the floor. It skittered around the boat, checking messy beds that clearly hadn't been slept in for days and pausing to observe the warning lights flashing on the main instrument console. The sensors couldn't make up their minds. Either there was something absolutely massive outside, the size of a blue whale or bigger, or there was nothing at all.

Finally, having explored the entire interior of the boat, the little laptop robot attempted to make its way out on deck. The hatch presented it with some difficulties, and it beeped angrily when the handle turned out to be beyond its reach. Several minutes later, having liberated a loop of rope from the floor beneath the table and successfully used it to turn the handle, the robot skittered outside.

It paused as its camera picked up the glow in the sky. It was dark Arctic nighttime, but the sky danced with colors, pinks and greens and blues stretching up to the stars. The northern lights. Or at least something that was very good at mimicking them.

With a strange whirring noise, the laptop mounted its camera on to one of its "legs" and raised it above the rail in the direction of the lights.

"Mother of moonshine," breathed the voice from the speakers.

In the former Northwest (now McGucket Labs) Mansion, Fiddleford let out a low whistle and shook his head. He had no idea what he was looking at, but he was sure of two things. One: it was where the twins had gone. And two: it was going to cause nothing but trouble. Glowing green towers never meant anything good.
email that included chatspeak, five exclamation marks, and a correctly used semi-colon in the space of two sentences.

Then he looked at the other message and his heart sunk. "Got signal through to Leslie. Stans not there. Found something though." There was a grainy picture attached: a tower sticking up out of the sea with a spiral staircase winding around it. He didn't have time to talk to Mabel before class began, but he caught her eye and she nodded. She'd seen it too.

Neither of them were sure if this made things better or worse.

*

They called Fiddleford as soon as they got back from school, Mabel skipping out on her play rehearsal so she could head straight home.

“So they just left, right?” she asked as soon as the call connected. “We were just being silly?”

Fiddleford frowned. “I’d like to say so, but according to Leslie’s logs that email’s been trying to send since Tuesday. Somethin’ had their signal jammed up good and proper; I had to hijack two shadow government satellites and toss up some alien tech to get through.”

"Oh.” Mabel’s face fell. “At least you know where they are now!”

Fiddleford shrugged noncommittally. "Well . . . I know where the ship's maps say they are. Don't rightly know if they're tellin' the truth, though. There's almost as much weirdness out there as in this here town, and who knows what that tower connects to."

"You're sure they went in there?" Dipper asked. There was a pause, and then he said, "Who am I kidding. It's a mysterious magical door in the middle of nowhere. Of course that's where they are."

"The maps can’t be too far off, can they?" said Mabel. “So we sort of know where the boat is. That’s a good start! We just need to keep working, and together we can find them and bring them back!”

The old inventor sighed. "I reckon I can send my own satellite in low orbit over their part of the world. See if I can't determine their location. Mabel, last I heard Stanford was complainin’ that you've got ties to the sea kingdoms that you won’t tell him about. I say you call in all your favors. I'll leave the feed from old Leslie running, give you a link to that in case she spots anything. Otherwise, I think we've got to wait."

Dipper nodded. Mabel sighed. "I was afraid you'd say that."

When the call ended, the twins sat staring at the screen in silence for a while. Eventually Mabel spoke. “Do you think they’re . . . okay?”

Dipper draped an arm around her. “I think that after we find them you need to do the Communication Dance until they promise never to pull something like this again.”

Mabel smiled shyly. “I thought you hated the Communication Dance.”

“I do!” Dipper shuddered. “Believe me, I do. But desperate times, as they say, call for desperate measures.”

Mabel giggled. Then she leaned into her brother’s shoulder and sighed. “Speaking of communication... now that we know we aren’t just overreacting to their internet being out, I think there’s someone else we need to call.”
“Hey doods! I can’t talk for too long; I’ve got a gaming date with Melody. What’s up?”

Mabel and Dipper looked at each other, grateful that Soos couldn’t see their faces and they couldn’t see his. This call was going be difficult enough without watching the handyman’s reaction to their news. Dipper grimaced. Mabel steepled her fingers and put on a determined expression.

“Soos, let me cut to the chase. When was the last time you heard from our Grunkles?”

“The last time? I think it was, like, two weeks ago. I send an email every couple of days, let ‘em know how the Shack’s doing, you know, normal business stuff. Stan’s, uh, not the best at answering, but that’s okay. I know they’re pretty busy out there adventuring on the high seas.”

He sounded so content that Mabel almost hung up. Instead, she took a deep breath and prepared herself.

“Stan and Ford are . . . well, we don’t know where they are.” (“Just don’t say that they’re ‘no longer with us,’” Dipper had cautioned her before they hit the Call button, and she’d hissed, “I know that!” over the sound of the first ring.) Mabel pressed on despite the choked noise of surprise on the other end of the phone. “We couldn’t contact them for three days, and now thanks to Mr. McGucket we can see their boat, but they’re not on it. They probably just went on an adventure to find some kind of magical polar bear that turns icebergs into strawberry ice cream! They’ll probably be back any minute and laugh at us for being worried! But, right now . . . I am worried. And we didn’t want you to be worried too but we also didn’t want you to not know in case . . .” She trailed off.

There was silence, and then Soos said, “So, we’re gonna rescue them, right?”

Mabel nodded, then remembered that Soos couldn’t hear her over the phone and said, “Yes! We absolutely are!”

*  

Gravity Falls was a small town, and news spread quickly. Sometimes it had help.

“Local heroes Stanley and Stanford Pines have gone missing, which frankly is what we should have expected after they announced that they were planning to investigate the paranormal in the North Atlantic Ocean by themselves. Their boat has been located but it appears to be uninhabited. More on this story as events warrant. I’m Shandra Jimenez, and our local news is now international.”

Shandra took a delicate sip from her water glass as the camera cut out. Toby, who she was absolutely not going to call “Bodacious T” when they weren’t on air, waited a beat to make sure they’d cut to commercials, and then asked her, “Do you think they’ll find them?”

Shandra shook her head. “I certainly hope so. They may not live here anymore, but Stan Pines has provided me with more news stories over the years than anyone else in town. I’d hate to lose him.”

*  

There was a tentative knock on the mansion door, and then, after a pause, a more confident one. Fiddleford scrabbled down from the scaffolding he’d erected around the salvaged alien escape pod.

“Good mornin’!” he said, opening the door to reveal Lazy Susan—or at least the lower half of her. The rest of her was hidden behind an enormous box. She hefted it onto the floor and smiled nervously at him.
“Hello! Mr. Mystery the younger told me those silly old men got themselves lost in the ocean and you were gonna find them.”

Fiddleford nodded. She had more confidence than he did, but the basic facts of the matter were the same.

“Well, here!” Susan opened the top of the box and took out a smaller box containing a whole blueberry pie. “For you! I thought to myself, ‘Susan, you’d be no help with all that science, but you know how to keep a man’s belly full so his mind works quicker!’ And when you do find them, I made up a package of pancake mix and syrup. I’m sure no one’s been feeding them properly out there!”

Fiddleford tipped his hat. “Certainly not as well as you would! I’ll send it along if—ah, once, I find them.”

“Good! And let us know when you find anything! The whole diner’s been asking after them!”

Fiddleford nodded. “The stream’s all we’ve got for now, I’m afraid.”

Susan paused in the doorway, cocking her head. “The whaaat?”

* * *

Sheriff Blubbs took another sip from his coffee cup and rubbed his eyes. It was supposed to be Durland’s turn to take the night shift, but the man had a delicate temperament and Blubbs had volunteered in his place. He sighed. The things he did for love.

He glanced at the laptop beside him, the way he’d been doing all night between patrols and paperwork. It looked almost exactly the same as it had at the beginning of his shift: a grainy image of a green tower, glowing like he imagined the buildings in their FCLORP campaign did. Occasional flurries of staticy snow drifted across it, the only clue that it really was video and not a still image. Nothing else had changed all night, but the minute it did he’d be ready.

* * *

“Hey,” said Dipper, shutting the door to their room. “Mayor Tyler made an announcement about the stream, so it sounds like half the town's keeping an eye on it. We’ll definitely know as soon as something happens! Also Wendy offers her fists and her family’s wilderness survival skills! If we can get a clearer image of the sky they might be able to help us with location.”

“Great!” Mabel looked up from the banner she was putting a final layer of glitter on. It read “SAVE OUR STANS” in foot-high, multicolored letters. “Everyone’s being so helpful! Look!”

Dipper’s conspiracy corkboard had been repurposed as an investigation corkboard. Pinned to one side was a world map with the sea-folk’s kingdoms marked on it in invisible ink, and across the rest of the board was a mixture of clues and blown-up photos from the stream and encouraging messages from the townsfolk. Dipper noted several new ones since he’d last looked. From Candy: “I am going up to the manor tonight to help Mr. McGucket search for energy signals! Hang in there girlfriend!” She'd added a picture of a bat covered in hearts and sparkles. From Grenda: “REMEMBER, IF YOU FIND MONSTERS MARIUS WILL FLY ME OUT THERE SO I CAN PUNCH THEM!!! XXX<3<3<3” From Pacifica: “The town, like, won’t shut up about your stupid uncles. I will literally pay to help you find them so everyone will just stop talking about it.”

Mabel mounted the banner above the board and stood back to survey her handiwork.
“Do you think they know there are this many people who want to help them?” she mused.

Dipper shrugged. “I don’t know. But I’m glad that there are.”

Mabel jumped as her phone buzzed. She almost dropped it in her haste to get it out, and once she read the message she squealed and head-butted Dipper’s shoulder. “It’s Candy! She says they found something!”

Dipper scrambled to open his laptop as Mabel, hopping from foot to foot in her excitement, called Candy back. He winced and covered his ears during their shrieks of greeting, and then prodded at his sister to fill him in as she said, “Uh-huh . . . uh-huh . . . Yeah, we’ll be right on!”

She lowered the phone and tackled Dipper in a hug that knocked the breath out of him. “They found another device in the boat’s network! Our Grunkles might have taken something with them!”

Dipper was, by nature, a less optimistic person than his sister, but he couldn’t help but crack a smile. This did sound promising . . .

“All right,” said McGucket’s voice when the call connected. “I’m putting you on speaker. With any luck, this’ll be a good surprise for ‘em!”

The screen went to black, then to static, and then finally resolved into a barren snowscape.


The picture shifted, as if someone was moving the camera. Dipper reached out and grabbed Mabel’s hand, squeezing it tightly. Please please please . . .

A form blocked the lens. Dipper held his breath until the focus adjusted, and then he let it out in a sigh. He shouldn’t have gotten his hopes up. It was just a stupid seal.

Mabel, on the other hand, was making inarticulate noises and pointing at the screen.

“What are you doing?” Dipper hissed.

“It’s Nuala!” said Mabel. “Their selkie friend! I know it is! Grunkle Ford sent me a picture and I recognize the spot over her nose!” She waved at the screen. “Hi! I’m Mabel! You’re even more beautiful in person! Well, in video. Can you please tell us if you’ve seen our Grunkles?”

The seal rolled offscreen, and then after a moment a woman’s face reappeared, her pale brown skin marked with a darker spot across the bridge of her nose, and her face framed with wild black hair.

“Hey,” the woman said. “Mabel, huh? I’ve heard of you.”

“I know!” said Mabel. “They brag about me all the time. I’m great. So . . . have you seen them?”

Nuala stared past the camera into the distance. “Not since the Atlantean tower surfaced.”

Mabel grinned, the way she did when she was trying especially hard to look ingratiating. “Can you check?”

Nuala shook her head. “Atlantis is neutral ground, little pup. I can’t stop the humans from going in, but it’s forbidden for the sea-folk to enter or approach.”

Mabel spread her hands. “Okay, I know normally that’s how it is, but I happen to be close personal friends with the Queen of the Manatees. Any way you could . . . I don’t know, bend the rules just a
“Little? Just this once? For me?”

Nuala smiled wryly and shook her head. “There’s more folk in the sea than the manatees, Mabel pup. Get me a dispensation from the Trans-Oceanic Council and I’ll spring into action, but until then I’m keeping a safe distance.”

They tried to argue further, but the selkie was adamant. When they finally hung up, Mabel blew a raspberry at the screen. “Politics!” she grumbled. “I’ll show you politics!”

*

The next day came. Mabel wrote letter after sticker-bedecked letter to undersea royalty pleading for a dispensation. Dipper checked out every book on Atlantis he could find. Most of the townsfolk turned in to the stream when they had a spare moment; Soos played it constantly on every device he owned. Shandra Jimenez continued to broadcast updates on the situation, even if the situation was that there were no updates.

The days passed. The green tower sat impassively. The town waited.

Chapter End Notes

The laptop/robot is named after the filk singer Leslie Fish, because I can and because Ford and Fidds definitely sang all the filk in college.

Thanks for reading!
The Sooner To Sleep

Chapter Notes

The usual warnings of depression and suicidal ideation continue to apply, but they're especially intense in this chapter. The whole thing is Stan pov and he is not in a good place, to put it mildly. Additional warnings for injury/medical trauma, and I'm putting a warning for self-harm here as well to be safe.
I've said that they're going to be okay, and it's true, just . . . not in this chapter.

The Sooner To Sleep

The translucent steps were slick under Stan’s boots. He took them slowly, one hand trailing along the smooth side of the tower and the other clutching at the strap of his pack. You don’t want to fall, he told himself over and over. You don’t want to fall.

He didn’t. Not with Ford there. His brother had bounded up the stairs two at a time, grinning like Mabel in a yarn store, and was already jabbering about the writing on the door. Stan had no idea what most of the words meant, but it was reassuring to hear Ford acting like the nerd he was. He’d been so reserved lately, and Stan knew it was his fault. Maybe he couldn't stop himself from falling apart but he'd be damned if he took Ford with him.

Between the tower’s glow and the darkness beyond and the fact that Stan was resolutely not looking down, it was hard to tell how high up he was. He tried not to think about it, concentrating instead on Ford’s voice floating down from above him.

“. . . and of course a number of the vanishing islands have been traced back to connections with Atlantean technomancy. The prevailing theory was that it allowed them to transverse the oceans, either by mechanical or supernatural means, but given our own navigational shortcomings, the theory that the islands are in fact static and the wildly conflicting reports of their locations . . .”

Stan paused to catch his breath. He was so damn tired. Even the air seemed heavy. He wondered if this was how the dinosaurs down in the Gravity Falls mines had felt as the sap hardened around them. Lucky bastards, getting to sleep for sixty-five million years. What he wouldn’t give . . .

“. . . given the modular nature of the city’s architecture as described in the earliest accounts, we have no way of knowing how much of the city is still attached to this entrance. Sadly, the accounts that survive are fragmentary, and after Plato elected to use to city as an antagonist in his dialogues the evidence becomes hopelessly contradictory. The regenerative properties . . .”

Stan shut his eyes, leaned in close to the tower, and kept climbing. None of this sat right with him. “We’ve found it,” Ford had said, but Stan had a sneaking suspicion that it was the other way around. Not that his brother cared. As they threw together their supplies, Stan had asked, “Don’t you think this is a little suspicious?” Ford, typically, had nodded, “Yes!” and grinned from ear to ear.

It wasn’t like this was going to be the first time Stan walked into an obvious trap. But he wasn’t sure if this time he’d be able to protect Ford if anything happened. He didn’t want to slow his brother down more than he already was.
Or maybe that would be for the best. Maybe Ford would realize that Stan couldn’t keep up, that it had been a mistake to bring him along on this mission. That it had been a mistake to bring him along at all. Maybe Ford would tell him to leave, and he could go back to the mainland and pretend he didn’t know how to work the internet so he wouldn’t see all those incessant, cheerful, excruciating messages the kids and Soos kept sending him. Stan winced. He felt guilty every time another one of Soos’ emails went unanswered, but not as guilty as he’d feel if he did respond. Soos deserved someone better. They all did.

Finally, he reached the top step of the tower, where Ford was busy scribbling down the inscription around the smooth oval door. The man could never stop writing, even when they were in sub-zero temperatures. It was a miracle he hadn’t frozen his fingers off by now.

Stan rapped the door with his knuckles. “So what’s the deal? Do you have to open sesame it or something?”

“The city has a reputation for welcoming travelers who were in need of shelter,” Ford began, “So it’s unlikely we’ll need—”

Slowly and soundlessly, the door swung open beneath Stan’s hand.

Ford beamed. “You see! It likes us!”

Stan grunted, unconvinced. “Or it’s luring us to our doom.”

Ford shrugged, as if in his mind there was little difference. “Well, that would also be an exciting research opportunity!”

“Yeesh,” grumbled Stan under his breath. “Anyone would think you were the one with the death wish.”

He was sure Ford had heard him, but his brother didn’t acknowledge it. He pushed the door the rest of the way open. Inside was a platform, the floor tiled in spirals of gold and green and mother-of-pearl. On the far side sat a bench with swirling, gilded arms like the crests of waves.


Ford peered inside. "Given how far this tower extends over the rest of the city, I suspect that it may actually be an elevator of some description.” He spun one of his weird interdimensional guns in his hand and grinned. “If not, we can always blast through the floor!”

Now that he was in the doorway, Stan felt steady enough to spare a quick glance at the boat far, far below them. The light from the cabin twinkled bright and yellow against the otherworldly glow of the tower. It looked like a toy, like he could reach out and pluck it out of the water.

He tightened his grip on the doorframe, trying not to imagine what it would feel like if he just let go, just took that one little step and let the bright air and the dark water swallow him up forever. He wouldn’t. Ford was there. Ford needed backup on this damn fool mission. But it would be so easy. That was always what was most frightening, and most exhilarating, about thoughts like this. So easy—one step, one swallow, one slash of a knife, one swerve of the wheel, and then it would be over. It would be so easy, and staying alive was so damn hard.

He noticed that Ford was staring at him, and he tore his gaze away to grin at his brother and gesture at the open doorway. “Ladies first.”

Ford’s expression of concern vanished as he rolled his eyes. “Really, Stanley?”
Score one for the con man, thought Stan, as they both stepped forward on to the platform. There was no joy in it, just a sort of bitter satisfaction that he could still pretend well enough to put Ford at his ease. Some day he might not be able to, might hit the point that he’d sunk to during the winters when the Shack was closed. He’d spent days unable to work up the energy to move, either from his bed or from the console of the Portal room. He always lost weight over the winter. And there was the one time—no. It wouldn’t come to that.

The door swung shut behind them. When it was closed there was no sign that it had ever been there. Stan leaned closer and examined the wall where he was sure the joint should be, but there was nothing, not even the thinnest hairline crack.

“So how long do we wait before you start taking potshots?”

For the moment, Ford had slipped the blaster back into his waistband and was examining the bench. He muttered to himself, “No apparent controls. Does that mean I’m not seeing them or that they’re not there? Alternate hypotheses: controlled from the building below. Automatic, perhaps weight-sensing. Vocal commands. Mental commands . . .”

“Woah, hold up,” Stan interrupted. “Are you saying this thing can hear what we’re thinking?”

Ford shook his head, still smiling brightly. “Not at all! I’m saying I have absolutely no idea how it operates!”

“Oh.” Stan slumped on the floor. “Good.” For a smart guy, Ford sure got excited about not knowing things. Certain types of things, at least. If he missed a crossword clue he’d be furious for days, but hand him some lost civilization or creature man was not meant to know and the more incomprehensible it was the happier he’d be.

It was a good thing. If Ford was busy paying attention to ancient buildings and unrecorded technology, he wasn’t paying attention to Stan. On the boat, Stan was beginning to feel like he was one of Ford’s scientific curiosities, the way his brother stared at him and wrote down little coded notes when he thought Stan wasn’t looking. It had been like that for a while at the beginning, too, with Ford checking on his memories and running test after test trying to confirm that all traces of Bill had been wiped from his brain. He’d passed every one of them. Now, he found himself wishing that he hadn’t. If his mind had turned out to be a time bomb for another Armageddon, he’d have an excuse for wanting to get rid of it. One even Ford couldn’t argue with.

Stan suddenly realized what he’d been staring at for the past few moments. “Um. Ford?”

“Hmm?”

Stan pointed, and Ford’s gaze followed his finger upwards. The ceiling was rising away from them. Or rather, the platform was sinking, but the motion was so smooth and gradual that neither of them had noticed.

The two brothers watched as the arched ceiling receded further and further until it was no longer visible against the glow of the tower walls.

Ford sat down on the bench and pulled a flask from one of his inner pockets. He uncorked it and raised it in a toast, nodding across at Stan.

“To exploration!” he said, and drank. Then he held the flask out until Stan got up off the floor and came to join him.

Stan plastered on a smile. “To treasure hunting!” He took a swig. The vodka burned his throat on the
way down. He hadn’t had a drink in a few weeks; he knew how he drank when his head was like this, and he wasn’t putting Ford through it.

“There probably won’t be any babes in the Atlantean ruins, I have to warn you,” Ford teased.

Stan sighed dramatically. “There are never any babes.”

It made Ford laugh. Stan smiled hollowly and considered it a victory.

*

“So,” said Stan as they continued to descend, “What else do you know about this place?”

Ford pulled out his journal again and flipped through it. "As I've said, my knowledge is limited. Everyone's is—the city was lost so long ago, and legends and misinformation have been circulating for so long that it's nearly impossible to tell where the true information ends and the myth begins."

"So, typical for you," Stan added.

Ford smiled. "Regardless, it was supposed to be a Utopia. A city where both science and magic flourished. Somewhat insular, of course, in a quite literal sense, but welcoming to strangers. It was said that none who passed the gates could feel sorrow, though I'm sure that's just a metaphor. It's abandoned now, of course."

"’Cept for those octopus gizmos."

"Well, yes," Ford conceded. “But the nautili were never really alive in the first place. They were . . . helpers, of various sorts. I'm sure we have them to thank for the fact that things still seem to be in working order."

"And we're not worried about the fact that one of them stabbed me?"

"Of course we're worried about it," said Ford gently. "But we aren't jumping to conclusions. It's possible the creature was faulty, but it's also possible that it was merely trying to ensure that it could escape uninterrupted. There are too many possibilities. We'll be wary."

Stan was about to respond that he hoped they found some gold that wasn't going to escape on its own so they could liberate it, but he paused when the wall in front of him spiraled open and another oval doorway appeared.

Ford bounded upright. He paused at the doorway to wait for Stan, and together they stepped out into the city.

They stood in a cavernous hallway, the high vaulted ceiling supported with slender pillars that either had been carved to look like coral or were actually growing, branching and swirling above their heads. The floor was tiled in a spiral pattern, glimmering gold and green and soft coral pink. The tile was clearly manmade, but everything else looked like it could just as easily have grown. Whether it was the ancient architect’s design or the slow encroachment of nature over the centuries Stan couldn’t tell. Even the statues, set along the room on tall barnacled plinths, seemed to be succumbing to the sea. They looked like they had been marble originally, but some were crusted with stalactites and some were clad in billowing seaweed garments that ate away at their forms and some had water dripping from their broken limbs.

“How long has this place been here?” breathed Stan. He hated being in places that made him want to whisper, hated the way that people acted like something must be so special and important just
because it was old, but he couldn’t bring himself to break the silence properly. The room didn’t just feel old; it felt like a mausoleum.

“Here, in this place? No idea. The ruins migrate, so it could have arrived yesterday. How long has the city existed? Pre-Classical, that’s for certain; there are Egyptian writings that mention it. It was active through the Classical period and perhaps after, though some of the later accounts are certainly fictionalized. These statues—representations of the Metamorphoses myths—make me give more credence to the testimony of an anonymous writer during the rule of the emperor Vespasian; normally his work considered to be allegorical since the writer claims that Seneca was among the “wise men” he encountered during his visit, but the man had been driven to suicide five years and four Emperors previously.”

Stan stiffened momentarily, but Ford was too caught up in his explanation to notice. It was the first time either of them had actually said the word since the Incident, and of course it was Ford talking about some stuffy Roman. He kept speaking, expounding on the various other sources he was drawing from, but Stan wasn’t listening.

He was afraid of the word. It was stupid, but somehow hearing it made everything seem more serious. More real. Almost more real than it had felt actually trying to . . . to . . . there, he couldn't even think it! How absurd was that? To want something that desperately and to be so afraid that he couldn't even name it, both at the same time.

Stan realized that Ford had finally finished his explanation, and he'd missed most of it. Hoping it hadn't already been answered, he asked, “So what happened? I don’t want you coming down with some nerd plague or something.”

“No one knows,” said Ford. “It’s the greatest mystery of the place. But I’ve read more than one report of people stumbling upon the ruins and returning with no ill effects, so if it was a biological agent it’s long gone.”

The door behind them hissed shut and vanished. Stan prodded at the wall where it had been. Nothing. Looked like they were stuck down here until the city changed its mind or they found another exit.

Ford had already pulled out his journal and was copying down the symbols at the base of the nearest statue. It depicted an old man, bearded and bald-headed, with one arm outstretched. Whatever he'd once been holding had been lost long ago; the arm was broken at the wrist and seaweed and limpets had taken over, flowering out from the break.

Stan shuddered and turned away.

*  

Wherever they walked, the same multicolored glow emanated from the walls and ceiling. It made the rooms blur into each other, all one huge glowing corridor at once perfectly preserved and oozing with signs of decay. Ford noted every turn they took in his journal, but since some of the doors vanished once they passed through them Stan didn't know what he was trying to accomplish. It wasn't like they'd be able to retrace their steps.

It was humid, and much warmer than the Arctic air they'd dressed for. They shed their winter layers as they walked. Stan knew he should be enjoying the warmth and the light, but the heat didn't seem to sink in properly and the brightness was starting to give him a headache.

He sat down on the floor (all the furniture in this room looked too organic) to take the weight off his
aching feet. As he did so, his stomach growled, and he wondered how long it had been since either of them had eaten.

“How long have we been down here?”

Ford pulled up a sleeve to check his watch, then frowned. He prodded at the screen. “Interesting . . .”

“Well?”

“At the moment, the answer is ‘no idea!’ It would appear that something about the city interferes with modern technology. It could be deliberate sabotage or an unintended consequence of the strong techno-magical field. I wonder . . .”

He pulled his sci-fi gun from its holster, pointed it at the floor, and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened.

“So you’re telling me all your nerd gizmos are out of commission?”

Ford tapped the side of his head. “All except this one! And the piton line in the blaster; that’s purely mechanical and should still function.”

Stan grunted. Just what they needed. No communication. No weapons. Usually he brought a good old-fashioned Earth gun along, but that had been locked up since the Incident and Stan wasn’t about to ask Ford for the key.

He rolled his stiff shoulders and pretended to listen to Ford explaining how magical fields and magnetic fields canceled each other out. He just had to keep going.

* 

Stan had no idea how long they’d been exploring. Ford’s watch was still broken, and the light never changed. They slept when they needed to, and when they woke the glowing city would still be there, exactly as they’d left it. Ford filled page after page of his journal with notes and sketches. He kept finding new things to talk about, but it all looked the same to Stan: bright and glittering and abandoned. At first he’d made an effort to pick up chunks of gold when they found ruined sections and stow them away in his pack, but now he didn’t even have the energy for that. He just kept going, hoping that Ford would be too engrossed in his research to notice the way Stan lagged behind.

They’d caught several glimpses of a golden nautilus like the one Ford had found, but for a long time the creatures stayed in the distance, skittering away when Ford tried to approach them. They were getting low on food (the only sign they had that time was passing at all and this wasn’t some limbo where they were cursed to wander through endless glowing halls for eternity) when they stumbled across a broken one. There were dents in its shell, and its wiry tentacles spilled out onto the floor in a tangled mass. Ford cackled with delight when he saw it and immediately pulled out his journal and pen.

While Ford was busy trying to sketch the nautilus, Stan stepped through the next door. It was one of the big ostentatious ones with a raised frame and gold shell handles.

“Ford, I’ll be—” he said, as the door began to slide closed. He reached out to stop it and it slammed shut on his hand.

“Ow,” he said flatly, yanking the hand back. It was out of habit more than anything. It did hurt, but distantly. The pain, like everything else, felt like it was reaching him through thick fog. He flexed his fingers. There would be bruises, but nothing felt broken.
He raised his voice and called out, “Careful, Ford, this door’s as bitey as those gnomes back home!”

“Yes, yes,” came Ford’s voice from the other side. “Don’t worry, I’m not planning on allowing the architecture to attack me. I’ll be there in just a moment!”

Yeah, thought Stan. Sure. “Just a moment” when Ford was in Science Mode meant at least half an hour. Probably longer now that they had no way of tracking time. Normally he didn’t mind hanging around in the background while his brother worked, but the nautiliuses—nautili? Ugh, why should he care what the plural was! Those damn golden robots gave him the creeps.

He paced around the room he’d found himself in. It was much the same as the other rooms they’d seen, with the gold spiral tiling on the floor and the high vaulted ceilings in ice green and coral pink. Around the walls of this one were a series of tall, cylindrical tanks. In the center of each, a life-sized statue stared blankly out at him, half-hidden by fronds of decorative seaweed and the occasional glint of a nautilus swimming around to attend the plants. He wondered how long it had been since another living creature had laid eyes on the underwater garden. Here, again, some of the statues were disintegrating as nature reasserted its hold. It reminded him of the myths Ford had taken to telling as they went to sleep, apparently appalled by Stan’s lack of Classical knowledge. In the stories when life got to be too much, everyone just turned into stones or trees or fountains. Stan rested one hand on the side of the pillar and looked at the statue inside. That seemed like an easier way of doing things. Just stop moving, stop doing, stop being. You didn’t even need to ask; feel bad enough and some deity would intervene on their own.

His thoughts were interrupted by a yelp from beyond the door.

“Stab yourself with a quill again?” he called, expecting to hear a sarcastic retort. There was nothing.

“Ford?”

A thump, and then dead silence.

“Ford!”

Nothing. Stan’s heart began to pound. The nautilus was broken, it was dead, Ford was fine, he just . . . needed to be sure. He definitely wasn’t panicking.

Stan turned and ran for the door.

“Ford, you idiot, what are you do—”

The door wouldn’t budge. Stan stared for a moment in shock, then pulled at the handle until its decorative pattern was imprinted on his palms. “Ford!” he yelled, pounding on the door with both hands. He could still feel some things through the fog of his brain, shame and pain and hatred, but even those had their edges dulled. The only emotion that was able to cut straight through the haze was fear. Not fear for his own safety; that was hard to come by at the best of times. But fear for his family. If Ford was hurt he’d never forgive himself.

He is unharmed.

The voice seemed to come from all around him, from the walls and the floor and the door beneath his fists. Yeah, that was real reassuring. Disembodied voice in a place that was supposed to be abandoned, a place that was keeping him from his brother. If Ford was unharmed, why couldn’t they just let him see . . .

“Prove it!” Stan growled, spinning to face the room and sinking into a boxer’s stance.
In time. We wish to talk.

“Well that’s tough. I’m not talking until you let me see my brother!”

There was a noise like the crackle of static electricity. The door didn’t open, but it became transparent. Ford lay on the other side, sprawled face-down on the floor. He wasn’t moving. The nautilus he’d been examining had a tendril wrapped around his wrist with the needle tip under the skin.

Stan’s throat went dry. The cold stab of adrenaline shot through his heart as he fought to breathe. He stared through the door, wondering what curse or poison the thing was injecting into his brother’s veins. The nautilus on the boat had knocked him out and he’d been fine, Stan told himself frantically. Ford would be fine.

He didn’t believe it for a second.

He didn’t have weapons or brains or anyone to help him, so he used the only thing he did have. Stan threw himself against the door with all his might. It shook, but didn’t open. Ignoring the voice calmly informing him that he was being unreasonable, he drew back, centered his weight behind his right shoulder, and charged again. Ford was in trouble. He had to save him. Ford was the important one.

Crash. The smart one.

Crash. The good one.

Crack.

Stan staggered backwards, his breath hissing through clenched teeth as pain exploded across his shoulder. Something had broken, but it wasn’t the door. He fought to stay upright as dark spots danced in front of his eyes. He wanted to lie down and sleep for a year. Maybe for a dozen years. Maybe forever.

But his brother was still there on the other side of the door, lying deathly still, so his pain didn’t matter. He didn’t matter. All that mattered was getting through, getting Ford, getting out. Stan gritted his teeth. He’d been hurt worse than this. It was no excuse for giving up, no reason to be weak. He just had to stay on top of it. So one shoulder was out of commission. He had another one. And if that didn’t work he had his legs. He’d get the door open somehow. He had to.

He shifted his stance, angled his left shoulder towards the door and prepared to charge, but before he could move strong tendrils wrapped around his ankles, immobilizing him. Stan fought desperately, but it wasn’t enough. He tried to move his right arm and cried out at the pain. The nautili took advantage of his distraction and dragged him down to his knees. Weak, he was weak, he should be able to do this. His left arm was wrenched behind his back, and then a smaller nautilus took hold of his right shoulder and upper arm. In one smooth motion, it pulled and and twisted.

Stan screamed.

There. Now perhaps we can communicate.

“Fuck off,” Stan gasped. Something in his shoulder had clicked back into place, but the pain wasn’t any less excruciating, just seated differently. The rest of his arm felt numb.

Or perhaps not. Hmm.

Whatever was speaking was doing a very good impression of a human voice. If it wasn’t emanating
from the walls of a sinister underwater city, it could have belonged to a radio announcer, or perhaps a host at a high-end restaurant. It was warm and calm and measured. Stan wished it was coming from something specific so he could punch it.

*Your brother has merely been given a sedative. It is perfectly harmless. Observe.*

The nautilus holding Ford wriggled its way under his shoulder and rolled him over onto his back. Stan stared at the gentle motion of his brother’s chest and the way his hair fluttered when he exhaled. There was a slight smile on his face.

Stan took in his own deep breath in time with Ford’s. It was the only connection he could make. *I’ll get you out of this*, he thought, even though at the same time part of him was thinking *I lost I failed I couldn’t get to him I couldn’t help him I’m too weak too useless he’ll be better off without me.*

“So he’s breathing,” he said, trying not to let the wave of relief he was feeling creep into his voice. “That doesn’t prove anything. Wake him up.”

*We wish to talk. We wish to help you.*

Stan strained against his bindings. “You’ve sure got a funny way of showing it.”

The voice ignored him. *We have summoned you here to grant your wish.*

“Summoned?” scoffed Stan.

*The tower. For you. It would have been simpler had your brother not accompanied you.*

“You don’t know the first thing about my brother.”

*Admittedly. He is shielded from us. Even now his mind is closed.*

The plate must be earning its keep. Stan still couldn’t believe that Ford had installed a metal plate in his own skull.

*A plate. Intriguing.*

But if Ford’s mind was closed, that meant that Stan’s was open.

“You get out of my head!” Stan growled. “It’s mine! Kill me if you’re going to but get the hell out of my head!”

How long had the thing been listening? How much did it know? He tried to make his mind go blank, staring at Ford and matching his breathing to his brother’s. He’d been fighting the numbness, but now he let it well up, hid there in the fog. There was nothing but the air, drawn in slowly through his nostrils until it filled his lungs and then released in a steady stream past his teeth.

He’d cleared his mind before, made everything blank and white so Bill wouldn’t—no! He wasn’t thinking about his memories. He wasn’t thinking at all. He was nothing. He was stone.

*Hear us out, and then you may leave if you wish. Both of you.*

*Like I’m going to believe that,* thought Stan, directing the thought outwards with every ounce of bitterness he could muster.

*No matter what your choice, your brother will go free. We promise that.*
“Oh yeah?” Stan struggled against the tendrils holding him down, biting down on his tongue when one of them jostled his injured shoulder. When he spoke again he could taste blood in his mouth. “And what fucking choice are you giving me?”

A way out.

The door went opaque again and Stan couldn’t stop the immediate rush of panic before he clenched his jaw and forced his thoughts back under control. He was staring at his own refection in the glistening green crystal of the door. He looked awful, like—no. No. He didn’t look like anything except himself.

We have been listening, said the Voice. We heard your wish time and time again.

Stan shut his eyes. No. He knew what the Voice was going to say next, and he didn’t want to hear it out loud, didn’t want to acknowledge how easy it must have been to pluck the thoughts out of his head. People weren’t supposed to see those. They were supposed to see the show he put on, the grin he used to cover up the emptiness. They weren’t supposed to know—strangers weren’t supposed to know—

You wish to die.
Chapter Summary

The City explains, and Stan makes a choice.

Chapter Notes

If you've read this far you're familiar with the necessary content warnings, but just a note that basically this entire chapter is Stan contemplating suicide, so please be safe. If you find this subject matter particularly sensitive, you may want to wait until Chapter 11 is posted, which swings more towards comfort.

Nothing of Him That Doth Fade

There was always silence in Atlantis. It was a heavy silence, distilled over the centuries, compressed by the weight of the water overhead until it felt almost like a solid presence. It never allowed echoes. It deadened footsteps. Whenever someone spoke, the silence pushed back, eating the words up almost as soon as they were formed.

It permitted the slow drip of water, the soft scrape as the golden nautili made their ways through abandoned halls, even the occasional muted boom as a section collapsed. Those sounds belonged there. They textured it, built it up into something more than emptiness. The silence welcomed them.

It did not welcome humans. They made so many noises, strange and unpredictable noises that had no place this far below the ocean. It hovered over them, doing its best to snuff out their words until they gave up and left its halls, or, sometimes, gave up and stopped making noises altogether except for the slow, gradual sounds of decay.

Now, the silence was broken. There was a noise ringing through its halls that had no right to be there, a noise that it hadn’t heard in a very long time.

Stan laughed.

It wasn’t a happy sound. It wasn’t even disguised as something happy, the way most of his laughter had been for the past forty years. It was loud and rough and mirthless. His whole body shook against the tendrils that bound him and something inside his shoulder made a grating sound, but he didn’t stop. He wasn’t sure if he could. The laughter bubbled out of him, a bitter bark followed by unending peals until tears streamed down his face and he could barely breathe.

He tried to catch his breath and failed as the laughter welled up again. The whole thing was just so damn funny. His whole life was. One big joke. Why fight it?

Finally, the laughter died away in a last burst that was at least halfway to sobbing. Stan gasped in air, his rasping breath loud against the stillness of the city. His ribs hurt. Honestly, he wasn’t sure if there was any part of him that didn’t hurt.
He raised his head from where it had fallen to his chest. “Yeah?” said Stan. “Yeah, you’re right, I wished it. I wished it for my whole fucking life, but you know what? I can’t. I can’t and if you’ve been reading my mind you know it. So why bother with this whole octopus and pony show? If you were gonna take me out why not just do it on the boat? Why not just do it now? Why set up this whole pageant and act like it’s up to me?”

The tentacles that bound his limbs were as strong as steel cables. Even if there wasn’t some less harmless version of the sedative in them somewhere, and he was pretty sure there was, it would be easy enough for them to choke him or snap his neck. What the hell were they waiting for, then? Unless for some reason the ruins of the city got off on martyrdom. Or maybe this was a trick. It needed him for something.

Stan stared defiantly forwards. So the thing could read his thoughts? Let it have them! They were a mess, a hopeless tangle of self-loathing and pain and bitterness.

*You misunderstand,* said the Voice. *We know your problems. We offer . . . a solution.*

It was the way it stayed so calm that infuriated him the most, like he was preparing his coffee wrong instead of contemplating the end of his existence. “There isn’t one!” Stan shouted, straining against his bonds. “You think I haven’t looked! I’m sure as hell not one of them, but there are people who care about me! I stay like this and I hurt them longer! I die and I hurt them worse! It’s like one of Ford’s goddamned robot paradoxes!”

The Voice waited for him to finish, until the last word died away, and then it said, *To defeat a paradox, you must change the rules. You wish to die, but you do not wish to be mourned. There is a solution, satisfactory to all parties, if only you would let us explain.*

*Don’t wish to be mourned . . .* Surely it didn’t mean—

"Listen," Stan growled, "If you’re a thing that messes with people's memories you better can it right now. We’ve all dealt with more than enough of that and it doesn't fix a damn thing." His thoughts went, unbidden, to McGucket, but he didn’t try to shut down the images that flashed through his mind—the photo Ford had shown him of the two of them in college, bright-eyed and smiling; glimpses of the man over thirty years of living in the town dump; the way he was still trying to piece his life back together. He finished with the image of Mabel stomping on the memory gun’s bulb at the twins’ birthday party, an implicit promise to the town. Never again.

*I won’t let you hurt them,* he thought furiously.

*Let us explain,* said the Voice again. *Come. We only wish to help.*

The tendrils around Stan’s legs loosened. The nautili that had been holding him skittered forwards a few feet and then paused there, clearly expecting him to follow. Instead he sat back, crossed his legs and glared at them. It was petty, he knew, but petty was about the level of defiance he could muster at the moment. Plus, this way he didn’t have to move. He could reserve his strength. Well. What was left of it.

He could feel the adrenaline draining from his system, leaving him slow and sore and muddled. His right shoulder was still throbbing with pain—definitely something broken, nothing he could do about that—but as his anger faded he became aware of how battered the rest of him was. His head was pounding—a sharp ache behind his temples—and when he tried to straighten his glasses his hand came back bloody. To his shame, it was also shaking. No. He had to be stronger than this. He clenched the fist, nails digging into the skin.
“You know,” he said conversationally (he knew how to keep his voice steady, if nothing else), “I’ve been dealing with the supernatural for most of my life, and if it’s taught me one thing it’s never to trust something that shows up saying it can grant your wishes. It just makes things worse, every time. Okay, Soos’ infinite pizza is probably more value-neutral, but that was one thing and it’s on him for wishing something ridiculous; those time cops are still bad news.” He was rambling. Not good. The inside of his brain felt fuzzy. He rallied. “Point is, I know all that and I still might have fallen for whatever racket this is. Except you messed up. You know why?”

The Voice didn’t respond.

“You hurt my brother.”

For a moment he thought it wasn’t going to respond to that, either, but then it came, calm and measured as always.

_No more than you did._

Stan’s face was impassive. _No don’t think don’t think_—But he couldn’t stop the guilt that rose in him like a tide, every thought and memory of everything he’d ever done to hurt Ford.

_Your whole life long, you have been causing him pain. We have seen it. The betrayal, the decades lost. And now you hope to make amends, but instead you hurt him more. We have seen it in your mind. How he hardly sleeps, hardly eats. All out of fear for you._

He couldn’t listen. He couldn’t give the voice more thoughts to work with. Stan bit down on his tongue, hummed one of those earworm pop songs the kids were always singing, but none of it was enough to distract him. He needed something more. He needed to not be able to think . . .

Stan raised his fist and punched his broken shoulder. There was no room in his head for anything but pain.

*

Stan groaned and opened his eyes. He hadn’t meant to close them.

The first thing he noticed was that the light was different; instead of the multicolored glow he’d become accustomed to, he was bathed in soft pink light like a summer sunset. It pulsed gently—or maybe that was just his head. He knew from experience that passing out could do some strange things to his vision. The light seemed to be keeping time to the heartbeat that pounded in his temples, so yeah. Probably just him.

So he’d pass out if the pain was too much. That was useful information; if he was unconscious he wasn’t thinking, and if he wasn’t thinking he wasn’t giving that damn voice anything new to use against him.

He began to hum “Disco Girl” as a preventative measure against any new thoughts, and slowly raised his head. It was about the only thing he could move; his legs were bound again, and now he could also feel restraints across his chest. His right arm was supported in some kind of sling, rigid and green and seamless. They’d left his other arm free. He was sitting in a chair, which . . . Huh. Wow. He would have called it a throne if it weren’t for the fact he was tied up in it. It was large and ornate and made of gold and coral. The arms were decorated with elaborate golden knotwork designs and small green stones.

_I’ve seen better,_ he thought, in case the Voice thought he was impressed.
Then his eyes focused on what was in front of him, and for a moment all his thoughts stopped.

Like the other statues this one looked to be made of marble, but unlike their bleached white façades it was coral pink and seemed to be the source of the light. While all the other statues had been pitted and worn by time, this one looked like it had been carved yesterday. Stan looked into a pair of blank stone eyes staring sightlessly back at him from a strong-jawed face. Every detail was exact, from the bulbous nose to the heavy eyebrows to the stubble that traced the solemn mouth.

For a moment he thought it was Ford’s face, the way he’d been fooled at first by Wax Stan or even by his own reflection. It was no secret that his brother had aged better than he had, and the figure he was staring at seemed young. Much younger even than Ford, and as soon as he realized that he noticed the smooth chin, the slightly squarer jaw.

It was his own face, but completely untouched by the world.

The pounding in his head had lessened, but the light from the statue continued to pulse like a heartbeat. No, not just a heartbeat. His heartbeat.

As he watched, the face changed, as if fueled by his presence. Wrinkles grew out from the eyes and settled into the forehead. The skin began to sag, and scars grew across it like frost on a window.

Stan swallowed. His throat was raw and dry. When he spoke, it barely made a sound.

“What the hell is this?”

A solution, said the Voice.

Stan let out his breath heavily. “So you want to replace me with an evil doppelganger? Fat chance, pal.” This he could deal with. This was . . . well, not ‘normal’ obviously, but pretty much par for the course.

Doppelganger, yes. Evil, no. It would be improved. Repaired.

Stan scoffed. “Sure. Better at taking over the world or whatever it is you want.”

What we want is to help.

“Then let. Me. Go.”

But you would still be broken. You are defective, are you not? The Voice sounded almost confused.

“And you’re gonna fix me?”

Yes.

“Like I said, fat chance.”

We have helped many. We were made to help. First for the city—those who were broken, in body or in mind. We made them whole, created iterations of them that could reach their true potential. And then when the city emptied we moved on. We came here, to the land of ice and darkness, because people called us. As you called us.

“I didn’t—”
We heard your despair. We heard how you welcomed the oblivion of the sea until your brother saved you. We have heard you longing to return. But as you said, you felt that you cannot.

Cannot take yourself away from those who love you. That is why we brought you here. That is why we used your blood to prepare the coral. Give your life to it, and it will live for you. Your family will marvel at your recovery, at how happy you seem. They will no longer spend their nights sleepless with worry. They will no longer cry at the thought that you might leave them. The coral will be all you wish you could be. A better brother, a more loving uncle. And they would be safe from what lurks in the back of your mind. So many people who pass through are broken, but never one like you.

"Gee," Stan scoffed. "Thanks. Good to know I'm at least a unique disaster."

The traces of the demon in your mind. If you die, they die with you.

"There are no traces."

You do not believe that.

"Ford checked."

And your faith in your brother is only overpowered by your lack of faith in yourself.

Stan didn't bother to answer. Surely the Voice could already see what he was thinking.

Consider. What would really hurt your brother the most? What we might do to him, or what you already have? What you will continue to do, if you leave here now. And not just to him.

"Shut up," Stan growled again.

The children. The boy and girl who weep for you. Your son, who wonders if he really matters so little that you do not return his letters."

"He's not—" Stan began, but trailed off. Why bother? The Voice wasn't interested in what he had to say, except as ammo to use against him. It was messing with him. That's all. It probably didn't even believe what it was saying. He told himself that, and pushed down any doubts that said otherwise. He knew how cons worked. You couldn't betray that you were interested or you were that much easier to reel in. Of course, when the con artist could see every thought that passed through your head, it made things a lot harder. He set his jaw and shut the thought away.

"Why the coral?" he asked. "If you can fix people, why not fix . . . people? ‘Cause right now this sounds a lot less like helping and a lot more like finding people you can trick into letting you replace them with doubles that will eventually rise up and take over the world. Don’t think you’re the first, either; we’ve seen it before. Where do you think politicians come from?"

It is not permitted to interfere with the work of the Gods.

“But it’s permitted to let magic perfect coral people take over their lives?”

A creation, once formed, cannot be tampered with. A man, once broken, must face his own shame. We cannot redeem him. We cannot redeem you. You are broken, and you wish to die. This is as things should be. Yet a thing may be re-created. This is the power of the coral, the grace that the Gods have allowed us. To pluck out what is good from what is broken and form it anew. In the prime of the city, it was only the greatest good that was rewarded this way, wise men and
heroes who could be re-born once they cast off their first, imperfect bodies. But now the city is empty, and even you, Stanley Pines, are enough of a hero to earn this privilege and this mercy.

"They'd notice," said Stan. "You think you can fool Ford with something that isn't even alive? He'd know it wasn't me." He'd get suspicious as soon as it didn't ruin everything it touched.

That is the magic. It would be alive. A perfect facsimile. It lives until it is destroyed, or until a set event point is reached, pulled from the original's mind. In the past, the events were the fall of empires, something where the world had changed enough that those chosen for the process could not imagine their coral avatars existing beyond it. For you, the set point is the death of your brother.

Stan looked forwards again. The coral avatar had completed its transformation. Every wrinkle, every scar on his body was matched on the glowing pink skin. From the way the right arm was held, it had even emulated whatever was wrong with his shoulder. The light it emitted was softer now, still pulsing in time with his heartbeat. He half-expected its chest to be moving, but for the moment the thing remained as still as stone. He wondered when it would wake up.

One life cannot exist in two beings. The statue will not activate while you are living.

There was a scraping noise, and one of the nautili approached, carrying a golden chalice. It placed it on the arm of the chair in a recess that had obviously been designed to hold it. The knotwork carved into the chair and the decoration on the cup slotted into each other seamlessly. Stan prodded it. It was filled to the brim with a liquid that looked deceptively ordinary, like oversteeped tea.

The nautili that had been holding him released their grip and moved away.

Leave now, and the statue will revert to unshaped coral, said the Voice. Or drink the hemlock and grant your wish. The choice is yours.

"I've got no reason to trust you," said Stan. "No reason at all."

The Voice didn't reply.

He looked at the cup, at the poison swirling inside it. It would be so simple. It was so strange thinking about it like this. When he’d fallen—jumped—he still wasn’t entirely sure which—from the boat, it had been so impulsive. He hadn’t even been thinking about it two minutes before, and he wasn’t sure he actually meant to do it until he was already in the water. This would be different. Planned. If he chose . . .

He stood. “Let me see my brother.” Let me get him out of here. Let me say goodbye. Both thoughts appeared in his head at the same time.

The chair was in an alcove, the pillar with the statue—his statue—at the edge of the garden of other pillars. When he stepped forward and his eyes were no longer dazzled by the pink light, he could see the door. Silently, it swung open.

Stan walked towards it. Everything still hurt, but he felt disconnected from it all, like he was floating above himself. His body barely seemed to belong to him. Well, maybe in a little while it wouldn’t. He didn’t know.

He passed through the door and there was Ford, lying just as Stan had last seen him. He looked peaceful, so much more peaceful than he ever did when he was awake. His brow was relaxed, the lines of care and age smoothed away. A smile hovered around the corners of his lips, so different
from the concerned frown that had been his default expression for the past few weeks.

Stan knelt beside his brother, wincing at the ache in his knees. He reached out to straighten Ford’s glasses, which had slipped to the side when he’d fallen. Ford had been through so much. So much pain. So much loneliness. Thirty years. And now he was supposed to be back, supposed to be happy again, and he couldn't be because Stan was dragging him down. Just like he'd done when they were children. Just like he'd done when Ford called on him for help and he'd been so selfish, only able to think about himself. Well, maybe he could do better this time.

Stan's voice cracked. "He'll think I'm happy . . ."

Yes.

He brushed Ford’s hair away from his glasses, his finger hovering for a moment above the cracked lens. Ford was never going to fix it. He learned to live with broken things until he thought their brokenness was what made them important. That’s what he’d done with his glasses. That’s what he was beginning to do with Stan. When they’d left, part of Stan had been sure that he was going to find a way to make Ford angry enough to leave him again—even then he’d known things were too good to be true—but it seemed that Ford was choosing to hang on. He’d keep Stan around even if he kept hurting him. And that wasn’t fair. He deserved to be happy. He deserved not to worry. He deserved someone who wasn’t broken. Someone who wasn’t Stan.

"Will it hurt?"

No.

And there. He'd said "will." That was the last thing you kept a watch for, when a mark switched from "would" and "if" to "will." By then, you knew you had them.

Stan looked down at his brother. He should say something. Ford wouldn’t know, but still he should try to say goodbye.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m sorry I couldn’t be what you wanted. What I wanted. I . . . you’ll get to be happy now. You’ll get the adventures you wanted, and the kids won’t have to worry, and . . . it’s better. You’ll all be better.”

Stan took one last look at Ford, and then he closed his eyes and took off his glasses, hooking them over the collar of his shirt. When he opened his eyes, the world was soft and blurred. Ford's face would be the last thing he'd ever see. It felt right, somehow. Symmetrical.

Stan stood. His legs trembled beneath him. He took a deep breath and waited for them to steady. Then, slowly, he walked back through the door.

He wasn't afraid. He ought to be afraid. Or maybe he ought to be relieved. But he wasn't anything, just calm and empty.

He sat in the gilded chair. His right arm was still numb; he had to move it as he sat and something grated in his shoulder. But it didn't matter. It would stop soon enough. Everything would stop.

He felt . . . light. That was the only word for it. He wished he'd had this thirty years ago. Forty. If only he’ d been able to replace his whole life with someone who wouldn’t make his mistakes. Whatever got up out of the room—the new him, the better him—would be the brother that Ford deserved. He’d be there for Soos in a way that Stan had always been too afraid to be. He'd teach Dipper taxidermy like he kept promising. He wouldn't make Mabel cry.
I'm sorry, he thought. Not for what he was doing, but for everything he'd already put them through. They'd pulled him back from one death already, and he couldn't repay them for it. Couldn't be grateful.

His good hand closed around the cup of hemlock.

The city was silent again. The nautili made no sound when they weren't moving, and the glass of the pillars was so thick enough to deaden the noise of the bubbles that floated around the statue. He looked up at the thing that would become him. Without his glasses, it was nothing but a hazy blur.

"Be good to them," he told it. "I know you'll be better than me."

As he raised the chalice, it came back into focus. He could see the pattern around the edge, the tiny stones inset into the base. He could see every wrinkle and callous and scar on his hand. And there was something else.

Stan froze with the cup of hemlock at his lips.

* 

Ford blinked. He was lying on the floor. That . . . wasn't what he'd planned. He tried to pull himself upright while making as little noise as possible. Had he fainted again? He was sure that he'd been eating enough that it wouldn't be a problem, but it had surprised him before. No, there was something else . . . as he sat up, he noticed a single drop of blood welling up from the underside of his wrist. The nautilus! Of course! He'd been examining the creature when it reactivated and stabbed him, just like the one of the boat had done Stan. Ford looked around, but the culprit was nowhere to be found. Neither was his brother.

He wiped his wrist. They would have matching puncture wounds now.

"Ford!"

"I'm fine," said Ford automatically, as Stan stumbled through the nearest doorway. "Which is more than I can say for you!" he added as he took in Stan's disheveled appearance. "What did you do?"

"It doesn't matter. We've got to get out of here!"

Stan's right arm was held stiffly at his side. The shoulder was swollen—severely, Ford could make it out through the fabric of Stan's coat. But it was his other hand that drew Ford's attention. Stan had it clutched to his chest as if he was holding something extremely precious, and he kept glancing down at it with an expression that Ford couldn't read.

"I . . ." said Stan, and for a moment Ford thought he wouldn't continue. "I kept a promise," he said, and clutched his other hand over his heart. In the glow of the Atlantean light, the single hexagonal flake of ice blue glitter on the back of his hand twinkled and glowed like a star.
Rise Again

Chapter Summary

In which there are a lot of hugs and some rescuing.

Chapter Notes

This is essentially a double-length chapter because I didn't want to keep you waiting any longer for the comfort. Enjoy the hugfest!

Rise Again

The glitter could only mean one thing, but a part of Ford didn’t want to believe it. He felt sick, sick that he’d thrown himself so whole-heartedly into the exploration, that he’d thought he could stop worrying for a while. He was supposed to be helping. He was supposed to make sure Stan was all right. But he’d failed, he hadn’t seen . . .

But he’d been saved the consequences of his willful ignorance. Through the grace of Mabel’s love and her glitter, Stan was all right. He was standing in front of Ford and he was hurt and shaken but he was alive.

Ford laid a hand on his brother’s uninjured shoulder. He wanted to be gentle but his fingers curled inwards, clinging to Stan, anchoring them together. “Stanley, what happened?”

Stan laughed shakily. “For starters, this place is kind of alive and maybe a little evil and it can hear everything I’m thinking. So, y’know, whatever genius plan you have to get us out of here you’d better keep it to yourself.”

“Evil?” Ford’s mind raced, filtering through everything he’d read about the city. “That can’t be right. There are centuries of records singing its praises! Is it possible you triggered a defense protocol? That could explain—”

Stan cut him off. “If I’d listened to this place, I’d be dead,” he said simply. “And not in a defense way. It told me I was defective, that if I killed myself it would . . . replace me with something better . . .”

Ford blinked, speechless.

Whatever strength had carried Stan out of the room and through the conversation seemed to drain. He started shaking, first his hands and then his whole body. It took him a moment to notice.

“Fuck,” he said quietly. “You’re right, I’m just a drama queen, it would be better—oof!”

Ford cut him off with the tightest hug he’d ever given anyone in his life. He did his best not to jostle the swollen right shoulder, but that didn’t matter as much as taking Stan in his arms, standing
between him and the city, letting him know that he was good and important and loved. He didn’t know how to express it, not without sounding trite and insincere, and they were never good at talking anyway. So he just squeezed tighter, trying to force all his emotions into the hug. Stan stood stiffly for a moment, and then he leaned in, resting his head on Ford’s shoulder and wrapping an arm around his back. Slowly his fingers closed until he was clutching the back of Ford’s jacket, pulling him close.

Ford could feel the beat of Stan’s heart through the front of his shirt, felt it slow down and even out into a steady iambic rhythm. When they were in high school English and learning about metrics, Stan would always write \textit{iamb} as “I am.” At the time Ford had rolled his eyes, but as the years passed he found it comforting. The chant of his heart, \textit{I am I am I am}, a small defiance against the terrors of the world. A small affirmation against a mind that sometimes wished it wasn’t.

He wished that he could find something to say. It reminded him of the day the world didn’t end, when the whole family gathered around Stan’s old armchair hoping for a miracle. He remembered the moment when Soos went from crying tears of loss to tears of joy, remembered how the spark of hope in his heart, faint as a single flake of glitter, grew and brightened the longer Mabel read. The first time that Stan seemed to really connect to the memories instead of looking shocked and confused after he’d called someone by their name, Mabel had stood up and thrown her arms tight around his neck and babbled, “Grunkle Stan! Grunkle Stan we’re so happy you’re okay! We were so scared and we love you so much and you’re so brave but don’t be brave like that again we need you—”

Ford felt that way again. But he was no Mabel. A guarded personality and years of paranoia made it difficult for him to say what he felt at the best of times, and he felt like his emotions were clogging his throat. So he just hugged with all his might and thought \textit{I love you I love you I can’t lose you I don’t want something better I just want my brother—}

And then \textit{How dare this place call you defective how dare it hurt you how dare—}

And then \textit{I won’t let it get away with this.}

He was so absorbed in his thoughts that it took him a moment to realize that Stan had spoken. He still didn’t trust himself to form words, but he managed to let out a soft, “Hmm?”

The reply, when it came, was muffled, half-lost in the fabric of Ford’s jacket. “I said, you okay, bro?”

Ford laughed into Stan’s neck, still not letting go. He wasn’t the one they should be worried about, but it was just like Stan to try to shift the focus away from himself. “Are you?”

A pause. “Yeah.” Stan’s voice sounded small and hoarse. He’d stopped shaking but something about his tone and his stance felt fragile, like he was just one breath away from falling apart again.

“So you’re okay?” Ford asked, as gently as he could. “Because . . . if you weren’t okay, that would be all right too.”

In the silence that followed, Ford felt Stan’s hand release its grip on his jacket and move up to his shoulder, close to his face. Ford knew he was looking at the glitter again.

“I am now,” he said, his voice slowly growing more steady. “I’m not—it’s not fixed. I don’t know what I would have done if this had happened yesterday, or tomorrow. I think I’m only here because I’m selfish, and stubborn, and— But right now . . . This city’s a jerk, and I’m not letting it win.”

“Good,” Ford whispered. He wasn't even sure if Stan heard him, but he could feel him reciprocate as
Ford tightened the hug again.

They clung to each other in silence for a moment, then Ford took a deep breath and tried to clear his head. Loathe as he was to let go, they couldn't stay that way forever. He needed a plan. They needed to get out. Once they were back on the boat he could hug his brother for as long as he wanted. He could wrap him in blankets and cover him in an entire bucket of glitter and hug him and never let go. Stan would probably be grumpy about it, but that was a risk Ford was willing to take.

“So,” said Ford, without loosening his hold. “We’re getting out of here. Tell me what you know. You said it can read our minds?”

“Nah. Just my mind.” Stan rapped gently on the side of Ford’s head so that the metal plate rang. “Turns out that Bill-proofing your head also Atlantis-proofed it. You’re safe.”

That did give them more options, but it also made Ford's heart ache. Having your mind exposed was terrifying at the best of times. He could only begin to imagine how Stan must have felt with all his self-destructive thoughts laid bare to the city. He wished he could help, step in and shield his brother's mind the way he was doing his best to shield his body. But none of the equipment he had with him would work as a telepathy blocker even if it was functioning, and the city's dampening effect on technology meant most of the things he'd brought were now useless lumps of metal.

“Hmm. Let me think.”

Stan moved as if to step away, but when Ford didn’t let go he sunk back into the hug with a small noise of contentment.

“Hugs are good for thinking,” muttered Ford. “It’s science.”

Stan chuckled, and it sounded like he meant it, and that helped too.

Ford ran through a mental checklist of everything they had with them. Slowly, a plan took shape in his mind. It was going to be difficult. But Atlantis had tried to take away his brother. He wasn’t going to let it hurt anyone else.

“All right,” he said at last. “If it’s listening, I can’t tell you what I’m going to do. But I do have a plan. Do you trust me?”

Stan scoffed. “That’s a stupid question.”

“Well?”

Stan squeezed Ford’s shoulder. “Course I do, knucklehead.”

Ford felt some of the tension ease from his body. “Okay,” he said. “Okay.”

Reluctantly, he released his hold and knelt to root through his pack for the supplies he needed. First the medical kit.

“All right,” he said, holding up a large orange pill. “You need to be cautious. This will help with the pain, but you could injure yourself further without feeling it. Don’t use the arm until we can get it looked at properly.”

While Stan downed the pill, Ford completed his own preparations. He adjusted the contents of his pockets, then pulled out his last roll of bandages from dimension 22.

While Stan downed the pill, Ford completed his own preparations. He adjusted the contents of his pockets, then pulled out his last roll of bandages from dimension 22. He’d miss them—incredibly strong, long-lasting, and best of all completely transparent once you’d applied them. They were the
best way to avoid those looking for vulnerable creatures to prey on. Or pitying eyes.

He did what he needed to, and then tore off a tiny square from the end of the roll.

“Come here,” he said, and when Stan obediently approached he pressed the bandage to the back of his left hand, sealing down the glitter.

All right. Now for the tricky part.

Ford stood.

“Oh, mighty Atlantis!” he intoned. “I understand that my brother has rejected the gift you offered! But what about me? May I not be given the choice?”

His words echoed through the halls. When the echoes died away and were replaced by heavy, oppressive silence. Ford looked from side to side, his raised arms beginning to ache.

*Interesting*, said the City.

* * *

In times past, when the voices of wise men and heroes filled its halls, Atlantis had grown used to praise. It was the Oracle of the Deep, the Hand of the Gods, the Voice of Judgment. The men who had shaped it knew that they were calling something greater than themselves out of the gold and coral walls they raised. They gave it the nautili to do its bidding. They gave it a voice to offer its gift to those who were worthy. They gave it the power to recreate its creators, to take the offerings of their first flawed vessels and make them strong, and sure, and perfect.

No one who entered would ever remain broken. No one would ever remain sorrowful. No one would be denied the opportunity to redeem their mistakes.

There was a choice, always a choice, but in times past it spoke only to wise men, and it knew how they would choose. Now it was forced to search out broken men from the sea, sending out the nautili to track their wishes, sending out its towers to call them down to its sanctum. It offered them their heart's desire, and there were those that took it. But so many of them chose to remain broken. Atlantis was bewildered.

Here, for the first time in a long while, was a human treating it with the proper obeisance. A human whose mind was closed to them. It was intrigued.

*Your mind is hidden.*

It could feel the presence of the second human—the warmth of his blood, the beat of his heart, the strange emptiness where his thoughts should have been—but it could not hear him. It needed the other for that. It listened, wending its way through the tangle of thoughts to hear, “My mind is protected. A necessity in my line of work.”

It had heard about this human—*brother Ford Sixer Poindexter Stanford Pines knucklehead*—already. It had not reached out to him because it could not hear his wishes, but now it seemed that it had chosen poorly. Clearly he was much worthier than his brother.

*And what is your work, Stanford Pines?*

“Genius.”
The city had to work to separate the response from the broken human’s emotions about it—always the smart one always better than me I just hold him back—but even those were promising.

“Idiot, more like.” The words were covered up by a whirlwind of what kind of a genius doesn’t eat—my fault my fault I’m the one dragging him down—trust me—the first worthwhile thing in your life—what kind of genius is dumb enough to ask me for help—my fault—broken—lost—my nerd brother—

The city plucked the hints of useful information from the mess of self-loathing. This mind really was rotten.

**And what do you wish, genius?**

No no no you don’t wish you’re getting out we’re getting out—The city did its best to ignore the chatter. The man was obviously delusional.

“To be better. To overcome the frailty of my body and the uncertainly of my mind. To redeem myself. You told my brother that he was broken, but compared to me his problems are nothing. I nearly brought about the end of the world with my hubris, and I watched helplessly as my family made the sacrifices to save it. Truly, what you offer would be a great gift. My brother was a fool not to accept it.”

The city searched through the memories laid out in front of it and saw that everything the genius was saying was true. His brother didn’t believe it, was convinced that the genius would share in his foolishness, but the memories spoke for themselves. So much he could have accomplished if not for the double betrayal of his brother and the demon Cipher. So much he could still accomplish if only he was whole and strong.

**The state of your mind complicates the process,** said the City. **But surely that can be overcome. One last act of genius, perhaps.**

The city could not see as humans could, but through the fool’s mind it saw the wide smile that took over the genius’ face, the excitement that took over his voice.

“Let me help! I’m sure if you explain the process I could assist you with a solution!”

**Very well,** said the City. **Come. And take your brother. His mind is . . . illuminating.**

It had to push to get past the surface layer of the fool’s mind, which was nothing but trust me trust me trust me, to the memories below. Trust. Such a strange, human concept. So irrational. The city was not concerned with the fool's desperate repetition. The genius would make the wise decision. The city was sure of that.

“What are you playing at, bro?” the fool whispered as they began to walk through the doors that the city had laid open for them. His mind was open, trying to allay the doubts.

“You rejected an impressive opportunity,” the genius replied. “I’m merely not repeating your mistake.”

He's lying he's lying please I know he's lying I trust him I trust— But the city sensed the doubt growing beneath the desperate surface thoughts. He was just unwilling to accept the truth in front of him.

* * *

Ford couldn’t meet Stan’s eyes, so he pretended to be extremely interested in the tile of the floor. As
they passed through the doorway, he reached into his pocket to grab a handful of the gritty grey substance he’d put there. He let it trail through his fingers as they walked, leaving a path behind them like ashen breadcrumbs.

Atlantis was fascinating. He did have to admit that.

He almost broke when it showed him the replica of Stan it had made, when he saw the empty cup and the poison dashed across the floor and felt something in his chest tighten, but he bit his tongue and didn’t look at Stan and got through it. He’d left something from his other pocket at the foot of the pillar and couldn’t wait to use it.

Nothing after that was as bad—the other coral nurseries, the control room where he made appreciative noises at technology they used for stripping out undesirable traits and left one of his gifts adhered to the underside of the table, even the recycling wing where the city broke its bodies down into their component elements.

Stan lagged farther and farther behind as they went. The City never spoke to him, so it was Ford who had to snap, “Come along, Stanley!” every time they got separated.

Finally, Stan had had enough. He stopped in the doorway of the technomancy hub and refused to move, and when Ford called to him, he yelled, “I’m not letting you do this, Ford!”

Ford paused. Just a few more minutes and then he could stop pretending. “Atlantis?” he said.

*Yes.*

“Would you allow me to escort my brother to an exit?”

“I’m not leaving you!” Stan shouted. His fists were clenched at his sides—both of them, despite his injury.

The City ignored him. *Of course. We have what we need from him.*

Ford seethed inwardly, but he let the City direct them to one of the crystalline elevators. It might have been the same one they’d come down; there was no way of knowing. Stan glowered at him as they stepped inside.

“I don’t know—” he began, but Ford cut him off.

“Stanley, may I ask you just one question?”

A grunt. Stan hunched his shoulders defensively, wincing as the right shoulder moved. Despite the pill Ford had given him, it was even more swollen now.

“Do you still carry a lighter?”

Stan looked nonplussed. “Yeah, why? Wanna have a smoke break with your murderous new best friend?”

Ford let the last of the alien gunpowder he’d been sprinkling through the city fall through his fingers.

“Something like that,” he said.

Stan handed him the lighter. It took two tries for Ford to flick it on, but then only a second for him to kneel and apply the small flame to the line of explosives.
The powder sparked and began to burn with a dark purple flame.

*What is this?* The City sounded confused.

Ford wrapped an arm around Stan and squeezed, and that, more than the fire, was when the City figured it out.

It screamed. *Interloper! Betrayer!*

Ford smiled. The city took what it knew of him from Stan, and right now Stan was at his side hugging him back (though Ford also caught a whispered, “Do that to me again and I’ll hit you so hard you’ll wind up in another dimension!”)

*You will never succeed! We will end you!*

Ford ignored it. “Have you ever heard of Greek Fire?” he said conversationally.

*We have defeated—!*

“Well, this is nothing like that at all. Except for one thing.” The City screamed as the fuses smoldered their way towards the charges Ford had dropped. “You can’t put it out.”

*Why!? The City cried. You are wise! You are—*

Ford laughed, mirthlessly, low in his throat. “Yes. Today I am wise. Wise enough to see your trick for what it is. Some days I might not be. Some days, when the world is lying to me, when my own mind is lying to me, I’ll wish that I’d chosen differently. But when those days come, I will be alive. My brother will be alive! And you will be rubble.”

The first charge blew, and the hall shook. Glass shattered, and chunks of coral fell from the ceiling and smashed on the immaculate tile floor. One of the statues in front of him toppled, disintegrating into bone-white dust.

Through the rubble, the nautili approached them in a wave. Some of them were malfunctioning, spasming as they came or turning to walk over and over into the same patch of wall. Others were doing their best to disrupt the fuses, but the powder burned into them instead, marring their shells with ash and smoke and scattering the floor with drops of molten gold. But most were still in working order, and coming fast.

Ford tightened his hold on Stan and raised his left arm. “On that note, we’ll be taking off.”

He glanced up at the blaster. He’d taken a leaf from Dipper’s book; the weapon was adhered to his hand and wrist using the bandages from 22x. He couldn’t fire his usual energy blasts, but there was something else it was still good for.

He heard Stan groan. “Oh no . . .”

“As my niece would say, although it’s not technically accurate in this case . . . GRAPPLING HOOK!”

Ford fired the piton line on his blaster, bracing his other arm around his brother. He felt it when the line caught, and then they were soaring upwards, the nautili chittering and grasping at their feet.

“I hate you,” Stan gasped.
“Liar.”

“Speak for yourself.”

He felt the distant shock of two more charges before the tower began leaking. If his calculations about their depth were correct that meant he’d have time . . .

A jet of sea water caught him straight in the chest. That was good, it was good, he needed to get over the initial shock of the cold. He needed to be able to hold his breath if this had any hope of working. Get past the gasp reflex and the hyperventilation while there was still air around them. He pushed off from the wall and swung himself directly into the path of another jet of water.

Stan sputtered and gasped and shivered, but he didn’t let go. Neither of them did.

“Hey,” Stan wheezed when he could speak again. “Did you maybe miss the part about not actually wanting to die right now?”

For a moment, Ford’s grin was too broad for him to respond.

“Hold that thought,” he said. “Also your breath.”

“Okay, because the ceiling—”

“Just hang on!”

Ford’s wrist beeped and glowed as the watch returned to life. Good. That was the last thing he needed.

As they approached the roof of the tower, Ford squeezed the trigger of his blaster. They were far enough away from the city’s hold that it did exactly what it had been designed to do.

The tower exploded.

Their momentum carried them up through the rubble of the roof, through the expanding cloud of glittering green shards. Ford could feel his brother’s face pressed tightly against his shoulder. He closed his eyes and fired his second piton line upwards as the water hit them. He had hoped that the tower would take them all the way to the surface, but it made sense that it was sinking. He could only hope that they weren’t too deep.

The water slammed into them like a wall. Ford fought the urge to gasp as he was buffeted back and forth. For a moment he hovered, unsure of anything except that Stan was slipping and he had to hang on, and then the piton caught and he was pulled upwards.

It took him a moment to re-adjust. His ears were ringing and the cold was leeching into his bones and Stan was slumped limply against him, but all he needed to do was hold on. If they got to the surface, everything would be fine. Nuala could help them, and he’d have access to his medical supplies again, and he’d be able to breathe . . .

Stan’s arm slipped off his shoulder and his head lolled back. Ford squeezed him tighter. Just a little longer. Hang on. Entering the water must have been too much for him, all that force hitting his injured shoulder. Even with the painkiller Ford had given him, it wasn’t surprising that he was unconscious. But they had time. Minutes. It might not seem like much, but Ford knew what you could accomplish in a minute. A minute was forever. You could destroy the world—or save it.

Something grabbed his foot. He kicked blindly downwards at it, knowing even before he felt the thin
sinuous cables wrap around his leg that it was one of the nautili. They were out, they were *out*, he wasn’t going to let one of the darn things stop them now. He was sure that one good shot on his blaster would take the nautilus out, but the gun was currently their only lifeline.

He was sure there must be something he could do. If only he could reach the surface, get fresh oxygen to his brain, then maybe he could think . . . But for the moment all he could do was kick, clumsily and without finesse, at the cables. Do his best to keep them from reaching his skin.

He looked up in case there was any sign of the surface approaching—a light, or a shape, or anything. Instead, in the last dying light of the ruined tower, he caught a flash of gold.

The line snapped.

Stupid, *stupid*, of course there were two of them, of course. It was the oldest trick in the book: split your forces, send one in as a decoy, let the other do the actual work. He should have known . . . better . . .

His head had half-fallen to his chest. He jerked it up. His vision was swimming. He didn’t have much time.

Ford let off a shot at the gold glimmer above him. It found its mark, and the nautilus screamed as it shattered.

The one on his leg let go and darted away. He followed it, straining his failing eyesight to find another flash of gold.

There! He shot again. This time, he couldn’t even tell if he’d hit or missed. He was so tired . . .

Ford tried to kick his way up . . . up? He wasn’t sure. His legs wouldn’t move. Or maybe they were moving but he couldn’t feel them. He couldn’t feel anything.

*Stan* . . .

He pulled his brother closer to him. The lingering warmth from Stan’s body was the only thing that felt real. He pressed their foreheads together, wrapped his numb arms tight around Stan’s chest.

*I’m sorry* . . .

At least if Nuala found their bodies, they’d be together.

As the darkness closed around him, he felt something brush his leg. Must be the nautilus, back to finish the job. He was so turned around that when the thing pressed into him, it almost felt like it was pushing him towards the surface. Buoying him up . . . but that was absurd.

*I’m sorry*, he thought again. And then, as he finally lost the battle with his lungs and tried to breathe in seawater, *Goodbye* . . .

* * *

To his considerable surprise, Ford woke up.

*Well*. . . he thought, as he rolled over onto his back, *Stranger things have happened*. That was one advantage of the kind of life he’d led. There was always something stranger. In the grand scheme of things, finding out that you weren’t dead was hardly strange at all. Not compared to monsters or demons or the internet. Or having a family that cared about him.
Still. It was a mystery.

He felt warm, which he instinctively distrusted. It was just like a body to do its best to convince you it wasn’t freezing to death. But he was enveloped in something soft, and there was light above him. Even through his closed eyelids he could tell that it was much brighter than the Arctic sun ever got that time of year. Artificial, then. And it was bright white, not the auroreal glow he’d become accustomed to in the halls of Atlantis.

Something prodded the top of his head.

“Hey, smart stuff.”

He flinched, pivoted himself upright, tried to grasp for a weapon he didn’t have with arms that were swathed in blankets, and finally fell inelegantly to the ground. Laughter rolled over him, and this time he recognized the voice.

“Nuala?”

“The one and only.”

Ford blinked furiously, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the light.

“What are— How did—?”

“Hi to you too,” said Nuala. They were in the cabin of the boat. Nuala was lounging in one of their chairs, wearing in something long and purple. He couldn’t tell much else without his glasses.

“How did we get here?” he asked, slightly more coherently.

Nuala shrugged. “I fished you out of the sea. That pup of yours got a dispensation through after all. Plus it gave me a chance to turn the tables and have the selkie steal the human’s clothes for once. How was I supposed to turn that down?”

Ford glanced down, realized he was distinctly lacking in clothes as well as information, and was suddenly extremely grateful that the blankets had prevented him from standing up. He blushed and pulled them closer around his body.

“Are you . . . going to give them back?”

Nuala seemed to consider for a moment. “Nah. I hid them. That’s how it works.” She grinned toothily at him. He hoped she was joking.

“We do have a problem, though,” she added.

Ford sat bolt upright. “Stan!” Why hadn’t it been the first thing he’d asked? His brother wasn’t there next to him, and between his injury and the water—

“Hey,” said Nuala. “Relax. He’s fine. Woke up before you did.”


“Why didn’t you tell me about socks?”

Ford blinked. “What?”

“Socks! They’re like cozy human flippers!” She stretched out her toes, and Ford could see that she
was wearing striped fuzzy socks that reached her knees. “I thought clothes were stupid, but these are amazing!”

“Um,” said Ford. And then, “Wait, where did you get those?”

“Your colony sent some presents,” Nuala replied.

“. . . Colony?”

“Yes!”

“You mean the kids?”

She rolled her eyes. “No, silly. Not your family. Your colony!”

Ford managed, by blindly groping around him, to locate his glasses. “I still don’t follow,” he said as he put them on.

“You know,” said Nuala. Now that he could see, he noted that she was wearing a fluffy lilac sweater dress with “Seal of Approval” embroidered across the front. No mystery where that came from.

“Your . . . colony. All the people that live around you, and you do things together, but you aren’t all related because that would be weird? You stay in the same area when you migrate? Or maybe you don’t; you’re humans, your migration patterns make zero sense.”

Ford blinked and looked back to the table. “The . . . the town?”

Their little table was completely covered in packages. The most common items were food—canned goods and cookies and jerky and pancake mix and real maple syrup and a whole blueberry pie with little cut-out boats in the crust—but he also saw warm socks and flannel shirts and movies and gadgets—some of which he recognized, some of which he didn’t—and at least two large weapons. He guessed that the axe was from Wendy’s family. He wasn’t sure who would have sent them a morningstar.

Ford gawped. “How did . . . ?”

“Oh,” said Nuala, “They had this . . . the excitable beardy man said it was a reprogrammed alien something? As soon as the city sank their maps started working again, so they dropped off a few things.”

“A few . . . ?”

He looked more closely at the mounds of supplies. In among them were cards and letters. He picked up a few and let them absently fall through his fingers. It looked like nearly everyone in town had sent something. Colony, indeed.

“You wanna talk to them?” asked Nuala. “Your brother made me turn the camera off when he woke up—you humans and your modesty!”

“Yes,” said Ford. “Rather, clothing first, then talking. And then we need to plot a new course. We’ve got to dock soon anyway. We should probably stop at the nearest port, get the boat and ourselves checked over. But after that, we’ll need to go ashore for a while. It should be somewhere we know, somewhere we can keep ourselves busy while Stan’s shoulder heals.”

“Have fun,” said Nuala.
Ford met her eyes and smiled slyly. “I was thinking . . . Boston's nice this time of year.”

Nuala went very still for a moment. Then her nose twitched. “I suppose you need me to come.”

“I wouldn't say that we need—”

“Yes you do. Who's gonna save your skins if I'm not around, huh?”

“We don't need that much rescuing,” Ford retorted.

Nuala laughed so hard that she fell off her chair.

*

It was too much. Everything was too much. Stan sat on his bunk and stared at the floor. He'd been staring for a long time. He should get up. Eat something. Let Nuala turn the camera back on. But there was no way he was letting the entire population of Gravity Falls see him cry, which was definitely going to happen if he tried to talk to them now.

He couldn't look at the table without a lump forming in his throat. He couldn't look at Ford, snoring gently in his cocoon of blankets, or at Nuala's smug grin. He'd felt so little for so long, and now it seemed like his emotions were making up for lost time.

People cared. It was absurd. He didn't deserve it, didn't deserve any of it, but still, at the moment, he was . . . glad. Glad that it was him sitting in the boat and not some coral avatar that would know how to deal with its feelings. It was selfish, yeah, but he always had been. Maybe that wasn't the worst thing in the world.

Whatever Ford had put on his hand was still there, holding down that one tiny flake of glitter. Sealing it there felt like cheating, somehow. Stan chuckled. Par for the course, then. Cheating was what he did, how he'd made it this far in the first place. If this was cheating, it was a good kind.

He could feel the dark thoughts lurking under the surface of his mind, huge and inescapable as the ocean. But for now he was afloat. For today. Maybe that was all he could ask for. Being alive, despite everything, one day at a time.

The bed creaked as Ford sat down beside him.

“So you're awake,” he said. “Took you long enough.”

Ford chuckled and leaned in to hug him. One arm brushed Stan's right shoulder, and he winced.

“Don't suppose you've got any more of those magic pain pills?” he asked.

“I do,” said Ford, frowning. “But I'm not giving you any until you let me look at that arm.”

“The kids—”

“Can wait five more minutes.” Ford reached out. His touch was gentle, but Stan still instinctively shied away.

“Hold still!” Ford huffed.

“I am holding still!”

Ford sighed. “Stanley . . .”
Stan grimaced. “Look, it's tough, okay! I don't like people prodding me!”

“I know,” said Ford, his expression softening. “But we need to see what's wrong so we can help you heal. It should only take a moment.”

He produced one of his sci-fi gizmos and moved it over Stan's shoulder. Whatever it was saying, Ford didn't seem happy about it.

“Well,” said Stan, “What's the damage?”

“Extensive,” Ford replied. “Compound fracture of the proximal humerus, and probably some ligament damage as well. It looks like your cartilage wasn’t in a good state to begin with, especially with . . .” He swallowed and continued, “Especially with the burn damage to that shoulder.”

Stan sighed. “Okay. Tell me again, but not in nerd language this time.”

“Your arm’s broken. Badly.”

Stan rolled his eyes. “Yeah, well I could have told you that.”

“We need to get you to a hospital.”

“Can’t you just magic it away or something?”

“I wish.” Ford frowned. “I have been in dimensions where broken bones were as easy to fix as a scraped knee. I’ve even taken advantage of their medical technology on occasion.” His expression went far away and one hand strayed to his ribcage. Stan didn't ask for details.

“Unfortunately, the technology wasn’t portable. I'll do what I can, and I’ll give you something for the pain, but I’m worried about the complexity of the break.”


“But it might not heal well. You want to be able to use this arm, don’t you? Then you need to get it looked at by a professional!”

Stan grumbled, but he let Ford immobilize the arm. They didn’t have much scrap cloth, but one of Mabel’s sweaters had been torn when they were attacked by a pride of sea leopards and the frazzled maroon fabric made a sturdy sling.

“I’m sure she’ll be appalled that we used an old thing and knit you a dozen new ones,” Ford joked.

Stan grunted. “Now I’ve let you attack me with your science, can we call them?”

“I'm surprised you didn't call them before I woke up,” Ford said.

“Well, yeah,” said Stan. “But . . . they’ll want to know what happened, and I don’t . . .”

He couldn't tell them. Couldn't tell them how close he'd come, not when they were already worrying so much. But Mabel needed to know how important she was. Needed to know that she'd saved him, again.

Ford took his hand. “I understand. I'll be there.”

* * *
As soon as the call connected, the boat was filled with Mabel's excited screams. The sound kicked in before the video, so for a moment there was only a pixelated blob on the screen while the speakers broadcast, “Hiiiiiiiiiiiiii!!! Hi Grunkle Stan! Hi Grunkle Ford! We missed you so much! Hiiiiii! Can you hear me? Can you see me? Hiiiiiiii! Ugh, this computer is the worst thing ever! Obey me, technology!”

The video started. Mabel screamed, and Dipper plugged his ears, laughing. “Ahhhhhhhhh!! I see them I see them I see them! Dipper look!”

“I see them too!” He punched her arm playfully and she retaliated by grabbing him in a hug and swaying back and forth with glee.

“Hello, Mabel and Dipper!” said Ford.

Mabel let go of her brother and waved at them so hard it looked like she was trying to propel herself into the air. Beside her, Dipper’s waving was more controlled, but his smile was just as wide.

“Doo-du-du-dooooo!” sang Mabel, miming a fanfare. “We hereby announce that Operation Save Our Stans was a success!”

“Thank you, kids,” said Ford. “We saw everything the townsfolk sent. It . . . means a great deal.”

“They did it because they looooove you!” said Mabel. “Not as much as we do. Obviously. But still a whole lot!”

“It’s true,” Dipper added. “You’re the town heroes. They didn’t forget just because you sailed away. I mean, they might have once, but now that the Society of the Blind Eye's been disbanded they’re much better at remembering things.”

Ford was about to reply when he noticed Mabel staring at the camera with concern. “Grunkle Stan?” she asked. “Are you okay?”

Ford squeezed his brother’s hand under the table. Stan’s lip was trembling and his eyes were wet.

“I . . . I am now, pumpkin,” he said. “I just—”

He pulled his hand out of Ford’s and covered his face, turning away from the camera. His shoulders shook but he made almost no sound. Part of Ford wondered when his brother had learned to cry so quietly. Part of him never wanted to know.

Stan drew in a deep, shaking breath, then turned back to the camera. “I got glitter in my eye.” He barely got the sentence out before his shoulders were shaking again.

Mabel peered at the screen. “You have glitter on your hand . . .”

Stan laughed through his tears. “I know.”

“Is it my glitter?”

Stan nodded, too choked up to speak.

There was a pause. Mabel’s eyes widened.

“You were right,” Ford told his niece. “The glitter was magic.” That was all he was going to say for now. Stan could tell her the rest later, if he wanted to. If he was able to.
Mabel reached out, pretending to hug the camera. She wrapped her arms tight around herself and squeezed. Stan, one-handed and still half-crying, tried to return the gesture. Mabel sniffed once, then seemed to get herself under control.

“Grunkle Ford!” she demanded. “Give Grunkle Stan a hug from me!”

Ford nodded, leaning over to wrap an arm around his brother. Stan folded into the hug, hiding his face in Ford’s shoulder. The family waited silently as he got himself under control and finally sat up, swiping at his eyes.

When Ford looked back at the screen, Mabel was glaring.

“Grunkle Ford. That was not a Mabel hug; that was just a regular Ford hug. I know you can do better.”

“Yeah,” added Stan, rallying. “Waiting for a bona-fide Mabel hug here!”

“His arm is broken!” Ford protested feebly.

Mabel shook her finger at the screen. Behind her, Dipper was trying not to laugh. “Well then get creative! Or Doctor Waddles with have to take away your PhD in hugging!”

“You know, I don’t believe I ever saw that pig’s medical license,” said Ford. He winked at Mabel, but the expression on her face was still deadly serious.

He was momentarily distracted as Stan leaned over and used his good arm to envelop Ford in a crushing embrace.

“There’s your Mabel hug!” said Stan. “Now don’t leave me hanging, bro!”

When Ford could breathe again (he feared the effect the Mabel’s hugs would have on his lungs once she got a little older), he laughed and carefully wrapped his arms low around Stan’s ribcage. Mabel cheered as he half-lifted Stan out of his chair with the strength of his hug. As his arms began to shake he released his brother, who was wheezing but also had a huge grin on his face.

“Happy now, princess?” Stan gasped. Mabel appeared to consider for a moment, stroking her chin dramatically. Then a smile spread across her face, her braces glinting in the light.

“I’m super happy! But Doctor Waddles says that you both have a prescription for one Mabel Hug a day until I get to see you, and then he’s upping the dosage. No skipping out! I’ll know!”

Ford looked at Stan. “I suppose we’d better prepare our ribs.”

“And tell Nuala thanks again for saving you!” said Mabel, “She’s so brave and amazing and we’re going to send her cookies every week for the rest of our lives, okay?”

Ford chuckled. “We will! And thank you for getting that dispensation through! You’re quite the diplomat!”

Mabel shrugged. “I mean, it didn’t really matter that much in the end.”

“Are you kidding? You saved our necks!”

Mabel frowned at the screen. “Not really. I got it through, but not until two hours after the city sunk again. Nuala saved you on her own.”
Ford looked across the cabin to where the selkie was investigating one of Lazy Susan’s pies and studiously ignoring their conversation.

“Didn’t she tell you?” asked Mabel, but Ford had already crossed the cabin and enveloped Nuala in a hug his niece would be proud of.

She squawked. “Weird! Weird human stuff! Too much touching!”

Ford drew back. “I’m sorry!”

Nuala glared at him. “What’s with this around-touching thing? Do you actually like it?”

“Yes! It’s, ah, an expression of affection. But of course if it makes you uncomfortable, I won’t hug you. I’m sorry; I should have checked.”

“How do seals hug?” called Mabel over the webcam.

“We don’t,” said Nuala. “I mean, there’s this . . .”

She stood up and moved closer to Ford. For a moment he was afraid that she was going to kiss him, as little sense as that made, but instead she half-closed her eyes and bumped their noses together.

Even as he heard Mabel squeal over the webcam, he backed away and said, “Um, I’m not sure I’m comfortable with that one.”

“Humans are so weird,” Nuala replied. “I don’t understand you at all.” She didn’t seem very put out about it, however.

“Aww!” said Mabel, “You’ve got to figure out some kind of hug!”

Ford and Nuala looked at each other. She shrugged. “The touching is okay, just not the around-touching. I’ve gotta be able to move, you know?”

Ford nodded. “It’s just the faces being so close together that’s discomforting. It’s . . . a human thing.”

“Okay . . .” Nuala cocked her head to one side. “How about . . .”

Tentatively, she rubbed her head against his shoulder, then looked up at him for assent. Ford smiled. “That’s great.”

“Ahhhhhh!” he heard Mabel yell. “Seal hugs!”

There was a thumping noise as she head-butted Dipper’s shoulder so hard that they both toppled off-screen. When they sat back up, they were giggling.

Ford moved back to the table. When he sat down, Stan leaned back against him, and Nuala came up behind him and rested her head on his shoulder to watch. On the screen, the children explained about their search and everything the townsfolk had done to help them out. As the call went on, Ford extricated himself long enough to make hot chocolate for everyone, and they drank it and ate Lazy Susan’s pie and laughed at the younger twins’ antics. By the time the call ended, Stan and Mabel were both asleep, and Nuala was nodding off.

Ford briefly entertained the thought of trying to move to his bed, but rejected it. He felt warm and safe and content. In fact, for the first time in a long while, he felt like things were going to be all right.
Ford tossed a tangerine from hand to hand, humming aimlessly as he stared at the food the townspeople had sent and pondered which they should cook first. For once, they didn’t really need to worry about rationing—they’d dock soon, and Fiddleford had made it clear that he would send them along anything else they needed. “Anything,” he’d said with a meaningful look that made Ford wonder how much the twins had told him. He’d already found a box of full-spectrum lightbulbs that was labeled, “In case you dudes run out!” with an added smiley face. The handwriting was heavy and uneven. He recognized it from when they used to get more printed letters; it was the writing of Stan’s handyman. Well, not anymore. Stan’s successor? Stan’s . . . something. There was clearly more to the relationship between his brother and the large rodent-like manchild than Ford understood, but Stan got grumpy and clammed up whenever Ford tried to ask him about it. That was all right. He’d figure it out in time. They had time, now.

He peeled the tangerine and bit down, savoring the sweet citrus tang. Judging from the amount of produce the town had sent, everyone was worried that they’d get scurvy. It was . . . probably a more rational fear than he’d like to admit, he thought, trying to remember how long it had been since he’d seen their bottle of Vitamin C supplements.

Stan had moved to his bunk at some point during the night. Last time Ford checked on him he’d been snoring like a thunderstorm. He smiled at the mental image. Stan deserved to have a good morning—he deserved to have every morning be good, but this one in particular—which was why Ford had washed the dishes and was going to cook a real breakfast.

He was aware that his culinary skills were somewhat lacking; Fiddleford still gave him flack about the time he’d managed to set pasta on fire back in college, and he missed the dimensions where he could buy a month’s worth of rations in the form of pills or small flat wafers. He enjoyed the wafers the best; he called them lembas, although he hadn’t run into anyone on his travels who had gotten the joke. Still, there had been a great many lembas-less dimensions, and it wasn’t always easy to get ahold of the local currency, so he’d learned to make do. He could cook things over laser guns and campfires and end up with something that was certainly edible and provided necessary nutrients and usually didn’t break his cutlery when he tried to cut into it, which he counted as a success.

Stan did most of the cooking on the boat, on days when they actually cooked and didn’t just eat out of cans; Ford was perfectly capable of cleaning fish, but for some reason whenever he tried to cook it it ended up scorched and stuck to the pan. It was frustrating; cooking was just science where you were allowed to eat the results, but for all his prowess with a Bunsen burner the culinary sciences remained beyond his grasp.

Still, he thought as he finished off the tangerine, he was sure he could handle bacon, and pancakes from a mix looked pretty safe, and while he might not be able to cook eggs in any recognizable style he could still probably do something with them.

He checked the location of the fire extinguisher just to be sure, then set their skillet on the tiny stovetop and got to work.

*\

“Stan! Breakfast!”
A muffled groan was the only reply Ford got from the mound of blankets.

“Come on! Get it while it’s hot! Of course, I could re-heat it with the device I invented to keep my hands warm when working outside, but trials so far have been unpredictable. Well . . . not unpredictable per se, just somewhat more explosive than I’d intended.”

Another groan.

“Stanley? There’s coffee if you need some.”

This time Stan didn’t respond at all. Tentatively, Ford prodded at the mound of blankets, then rolled down one corner to reveal his brother’s face. Stan squinted in the light, shielding his eyes with his good hand.

“Should I bring you some coffee?” Ford asked.

“Nah. Just . . . gimme a minute.”

Ford gave him five. When he returned, Stan was so still that for a moment Ford thought he’d fallen back asleep. But no, his eyes were open. He was staring fixedly at the low ceiling the way Ford did when he was trying to solve a particularly difficult math problem, and he didn’t turn his head as his brother approached.

“Stan? There’s food. Nuala says it’s even edible.”

This time Stan did move, but still not to get up. He drew in a great, deep breath like he was about to dive underwater, and as he let it out he closed his eyes.

“Stanley? Are you in pain? You should get something in your stomach before I give you another . . .” He trailed off as Stan shook his head, his eyes still shut. It was a small gesture, almost as if he didn’t really want Ford to see.

Ford tried laying a hand on Stan’s uninjured shoulder, but his brother flinched away from the touch.

“Stanley . . .” said Ford, quietly. “What’s wrong?”

He sat there in silence for a full minute while Stan did nothing, didn’t even open his eyes, just breathed and furrowed his brow. Maybe it was the sheer mass of the blankets around him, but Ford thought that he seemed very small. Stan never looked small; even when they were children he puffed out his chest and widened his stance and pretended to take up more space than he really did, like those optical illusions with the two circles, and after all the time he’d spent lying to tourists he was even better at it now.

Finally, Ford sighed. “Stan. Please talk to me.”

“Heh.” It wasn’t really a laugh, just an abrupt exhale and the flash of a wry smile. “That’s Mabel’s favorite word, y’know.”

“What is?”

“ ‘Please.’ Never been very good at it myself.”

“What, politeness?”

“ ‘Heh. That too. But I meant . . . asking for things.’ There was another long pause, during which Stan opened his eyes and lay there half-mouthing words with the expression of a man whose well-
being depended on finding a perfect rhyme for “discombobulate.”

“. . . Like help,” he said at last.

*

Stan could feel the change in the air, the not-quite-a-sigh as Ford relaxed, his fear slipping away into something softer. Pity, probably. Stan hated being pitied. He was supposed to be able to stand on his own, fight back against the world. Not lie there and beg for help.

“What do you need?” said Ford. His voice was closer, but he made no move to touch his brother. Stan was grateful. He floated there in his cocoon of blankets, in the foggy dullness of his mind. Ford’s touch would anchor him, draw him back to reality, and he couldn’t bear that. Not yet. Not if they were really having this conversation. The dreaminess, the feeling that he was watching everything through a video screen that was just out of alignment with the rest of the world, was the only thing that made it possible, the only reason he hadn’t shut down completely.

Stan huffed. “What don’t I need?” The sound of his own voice echoed through his ears, loud and distant at the same time, as if he was still wandering the empty grottoes of Atlantis. “Need a brain that works. Arm that works. Better back. Not to be a waste of space.”

“You’re not a waste of space,” said Ford. “You’ve never been a waste of space. You’re a hero.”

Stan shook his head slowly, letting his eyes fall shut again. “I’m a crook and a liar,” he said. “You know that. Wrote it down and everything.”

He could hear Ford’s breath catch in his throat as he swallowed whatever response he’d prepared to the first sentence. Sometimes when you tried to talk to Ford he decided early on what you were going to say and worked on his answer instead of listening.

“I was . . . foolish,” Ford said at last. “In many ways, but especially when I thought that being a liar and being a hero were mutually exclusive. I didn’t always—when we were children I respected your ability to embellish the truth—”

Stan scoffed. “Got us into plenty of tight spots.”

“It got us out of just as many. I’m not naïve enough to think that honesty is always the best policy, but duplicity has never been my strong suit. But you—you are a crook and a liar, and that’s exactly how you saved the world. How you saved me.”

There it was again. He kept talking like Stan hadn’t just been trying to fix his own mess. He was the one who’d doomed the world the second time he’d activated the Portal, trying to make up for doomed his brother the first time. Dooming himself was a small price to pay.

“Glad I managed to do one worthwhile thing in my life,” he said quietly. “Took me long enough. Thought that was gonna be the last thing I did, too. Wouldn’t have been so bad. Go out on a high note.”

Ford made a choking noise that sounded like he was trying to say about three different things at the same time. Stan pressed on. He didn’t know how much longer he’d be able to make himself talk about this.

“After yesterday . . . I thought it would get better. I felt better. I was . . . glad. That I was alive. And then I woke up this morning and it was gone and I wished . . .”
For the first time that day he turned and actually looked at Ford. His voice was heavy and monotone, too tired even to be hopeless. “I can’t fix it. I can’t fix... me. I don’t... I don’t know what to do.”

Ford’s face was soft and sad. Not angry. Not judgmental. Not disappointed or frustrated or any of the things Stan felt like it should be. He smiled gently.

“That’s not true. You know exactly what to do, and you’ve already asked for it. Let me help you.”

* Ford had dozens of conversational threads playing out in his head, like moves in a strategy game, like a tiny catalog of parallel universes. Every time Stan spoke some of the threads winked out but more were created, and Ford’s mind was burying itself under all the possible responses, all the things he wanted to say but didn’t know how to. He swallowed, pretending he was gulping down all the half-formed words that had made it as far as his lips before he decided that they were unnecessary or ineffective or just not right. He’d start with the simplest things.

“I want to help you, Stanley. Do you believe me?”

Stan’s scoff sounded fractionally more like a real laugh than the other ones had.

“Well, I know you’re not lying. But... just so I know... how long?”

“What?”

“How long until you don’t feel like you owe me anymore? It’s okay; I get it. One good thing in a lifetime of petty crime and disappointment probably isn’t worth that much. So, how long until you decide I’m not worth it?”

The question sailed calmly into the threads of conversation in Ford’s head like an iceberg into a major shipping line. He froze, struggling to rearrange his thoughts around it, but unfortunately he opened his mouth before he’d quite processed it and what came out was, “Don’t be an idiot, Stanley!”

Stan’s expression didn’t change at all. “I’m not. I read those notes you left in your books. I remember what you said. You stopped giving a damn about me when we were sixteen and you only started again after I punched that equilateral bastard out of existence. So it’s pretty clear what’s changed. You’ve got a debt to pay now.” Stan paused, his brow furrowing slightly, then continued. “And look, I know I don’t deserve any better than what I’ve got. I should be glad you want to help me at all, given everything. But I need to know—how long until you’re off the hook? Because I don’t think I can handle being left behind again... not without some warning, anyway.”

This time Ford managed to keep his mouth shut long enough that all the stupidest responses bounced around in his brain and dissipated without doing any further damage. Stan was looking at him, not with any anger or malice, but with an expression of quiet resignation.

“You... you really think that, don’t you?” he said.

Stan nodded. Now it was his own words that were clouding Ford’s head. He could imagine what the screen on his mind reader would look like if he were hooked up to it now—lines upon lines of lies that made his stomach churn when he thought of them now. I’m giving you the chance to do the first worthwhile thing in your life and you won’t even listen!... Perhaps he can yet prove his worth to me...

He’d thought it was all right. He’d thought that Stan understood that he’d been wrong, that he’d been
lying to both of them but to himself most of all. What Stan had done in the Fearamid hadn’t been about worth or redemption; it had just made Ford realize, perhaps too late, what he stood to lose. He’d thought it was all right, but they’d never really talked about it, and now Ford realized how it must look, especially to someone in Stan’s headspace.

“There’s . . . a fallacy,” said Ford, “With which the scientific community is rife, and which, to my shame, I have found myself susceptible to on a number of occasions. It occurs when one has sufficient investment in one’s conclusions that one fails to examine, or even acknowledge, contradictory evidence. This goes against the basic tenants of the scientific method—that a hypothesis is only as good as its supporting evidence, and should be discarded or reconsidered if the evidence no longer supports it.

“The hypothesis that you weren’t worth my time was based primarily on one piece of evidence, but it was . . . tempting . . . not to interrogate it. It allowed me to blame you for your own misfortunes . . . to shut myself off from the complexity of my true feelings and pretend all I felt was anger. I may be bad at lying, but I’m very skilled at pretending. Pretending that there was nothing suspicious about Bill. Pretending that I would be protecting Dipper and Mabel if I separated them. Pretending that you were worth less than I was.”

“That’s not pretending,” said Stan bitterly. “That’s common sense. You were a genius and I was a failed crook.”

Ford shook his head. “There’s no scientific metric of human worth. Nor should there be. I’m sure Dad would be disappointed in both of us; I never made those millions he was hoping for.”

“There’s still time,” said Stan. “You could always shack up with Fiddleford.”

Ford rolled his eyes. “I have no desire to ‘shack up,’ as you so eloquently put it, with anyone. My point is, monetary value is a flawed and frankly heartless method of assessing someone’s worth. However, I suspect you have me beat there. You paid off the mortgage and the exorbitant electricity bills I left behind and created a profitable business. I squandered my grant money on something that nearly destroyed all of reality. So . . . which one of us is the smart one again?”

“You’re a dumb genius but you’re still a genius,” said Stan.

“But,” Ford went on, “In terms of human connections you’re also worth far more than I am. Just look at everything the townspeople sent. That town loves you. The children love you.” He scratched nervously at the back of his neck. Talking about his emotions was difficult; he preferred to express affection with hugs or small inventions. Those were harder to misinterpret and easier to forget if he got rebuffed. “I love you, Stanley.”

His eyes had fallen to the floor as he spoke, examining the cracks in the paint in minute detail.

“Oy.”

Wishing that he could follow one of the conversation threads back into the past and redo the last several minutes, Ford looked up. Stan still looked exhausted, but he was smiling crookedly.

“Love you too, knucklehead.”

Ford smiled back.

It was strange to say the words out loud, never mind hear them said back to him. In all his life, his mother was the only one who ever really used them, and he’d mostly felt a sense of obligation when he parroted them back. Boys weren’t supposed to use sissy words like “love.” Boys weren’t
supposed to feel sissy things. Boys were supposed to show they cared about each other through punches, and men weren’t supposed to show it at all. It was one of the few lessons from their youth that both of them had taken to heart.

But now they had the kids. The townsfolk. Fiddleford. All of them so easy and open with their affection, all of them so happy to be expressing it. Ford could feel it chipping away at the cracks in his armor, and in Stan’s too. They’d needed to make themselves like this once, but life wasn’t a battlefield anymore. They had friends. They had a family. They had each other.

“And stop putting yourself down to make me feel better, will ya?” Stan added. “It doesn’t work.”

“I wasn’t—”

“Yeah you were. Now quit it!”

He looked like he was about to say something else but stopped himself short. At first Ford was grateful but as the silence stretched on he shifted uncomfortably.

“What are you thinking?” he asked at last.

“Nothing,” said Stan. It was an obvious lie.

“Come on,” said Ford. An idea struck him and he waved his six-fingered hands to either side of him, chanting “Comm-un-i-caaaaaa-tion!”

Stan laughed, a loud, genuine snort of laughter, and batted at Ford with his good hand. “Hot Belgian waffles!” he exclaimed. “Dipper was right; I’ll tell you anything if you promise never to do that again! It’s like Toby Determined trying to tap dance. That’s one memory I wouldn’t mind staying lost.”

“Tell me then,” said Ford, still waving his hands back and forth just out of Stan’s reach.

Stan stared at him guardedly. “So,” he said. “What’s your hypothesis about me now?”

Ford smiled. This he knew how to answer. “Scientifically? You’re suffering from severe depression, you’re physically and emotionally exhausted after yesterday’s events, and your body is spending most of its already limited energy trying to repair your broken bones. It would be a miracle if you didn’t feel tired and pessimistic.

“Emotionally? You’re one of the bravest men I’ve ever met, and certainly the most stubborn. That stubbornness can be a gift; it’s the only reason I’m standing here today. But it also makes you feel that you have to tough everything out alone, that asking for help is weakness. I used to think that, too, but you and the children taught me how foolish that was. Asking for help isn’t weakness; it’s strength.

“And . . . I’m proud of you, Stanley. Proud of what you did yesterday. Proud that you trust me enough to ask me to help you.”

He placed a hand on Stan’s shoulder—tentatively, in case his brother drew away. But instead Stan reached up and clasped his hand in a vice grip, his fingers curling around the side of Ford’s palm like the prongs on a grappling hook.

“Now,” Ford continued, “From both a scientific and emotional perspective, you need to eat something and you need to take something to help with that shoulder, and then we can talk about next steps. Can you get up or should I bring you a plate?”
Stan shook his head, still holding on to Ford’s hand with all his might.

“I’ll get up,” he said.

It was slow going, and Stan was unsteady enough on his feet that Ford had to support him for the short walk to the table, but the hazy look in his eyes was gone. Stubborn, thought Ford, smiling as he squeezed his brother’s hand.

* 

Ford had been afraid that Stan would have a hard time eating with his right arm immobilized, he shouldn’t have worried. After he took his first few bites of probably-scrambled-more-or-less eggs speared in a fork that he held in his fist, Stan sat back and sighed rapturously.

“Wow,” he said. “Food.”

“Helps, doesn’t it?”

Stan nodded. “Plus you only burned half the pancakes. That’s gotta be a new record!”

Ford hid behind his coffee cup and preened.

After that Stan put down the fork and dug in with his fingers, inhaling a stack of pancakes and a plate piled high with bacon and eggs.

Nuala looked at Ford accusingly. “You told me humans have to use the pointy things! Why does he get to eat normally?”

“He is down an arm and can do what he likes,” said Ford. “You have two working hands and, depending on what we discover in Boston, may have to spend some time on land among regular humans.”

Nuala paused, her mouth full of bacon. “That sounds awful,” she said indistinctly.

“I agree,” Ford conceded. “But occasionally it is necessary.”

“Hey.” Stan picked up his fork again long enough to jab Ford in the arm with the blunt end. “Where’s your plate?”

Ford blinked. “Oh.” He’d been so busy making sure Stan got food that he’d forgotten to get any for himself. He dished himself up a generous helping and set about eating, pausing occasionally to give Nuala helpful tips on the proper use of cutlery. She ignored him, having decided that she liked Stan’s style better.

When they were all slowing down, Nuala less noticeably than the other two, Ford asked, “Do you mind if we keep talking now, or would you rather have Nuala leave?”

“Eh,” said Stan. “Far be it from me to get between a lady and her pancakes.”

Nuala flapped her hands at him happily and made a wordless noise of contentment.

“So . . .” said Ford, not sure how to start and not wanting to ruin the fragile happiness they’d established. “We’ll be on land for a while. The course of action for your shoulder injury is straightforward enough, at least to begin with, but do you also want to talk to someone about the depression?”
“Want to? Not in a million years.”

“But . . . ?” Ford suggested.

“I think I need to,” Stan mumbled, averting his eyes. He picked up the fork again and twirled it between his fingers, worrying at the remnants of his food. “The . . . pills they had me on before. They helped.”

Ford had to ask. “How did you get on medication in the first place? You used to bite doctors.”

“Heh,” said Stan. “Still would if I could get away with it. Darn freeloading quacks. But I guess they’re not completely useless.”

Ford knew better than to repeat his question, and he was ready to move on and change the subject when Stan said, “Look . . . Stanford. There’s some things . . . some times . . . I don’t ever wanna talk about. Not even to you. Hell, not even to myself.” He looked small again, frightened and fragile and wrong, and it made Ford’s heart ache to watch him.

“It’s all right,” said Ford. “I . . . have those too. It’s all right.”

Stan sighed and shook his head. The rest of him was shaking too. For the moment, Ford pretended not to notice.

"Screw this,” Stan said, pushing himself up from the table. “I need a drink.”

“Alcohol would react disastrously with the painkillers,” Ford chided. When Stan ignored him and reached for the cabinet Ford added more sternly, “Stan, you can’t!”

He was too late. Stan threw open the cupboard they kept the liquor in and froze. He stared at the nearly-empty shelves in silence. Ford felt himself shrinking into his seat.

"You know," Stan said after a moment, "I think we missed something when we set out: no breaking champagne on the boat to bless the voyage! Good thing there's still enough here to give a libation to whatever spirits might be stupid enough to help a couple of dumb old geezers like us!"

Nuala, who had been watching the whole exchange from across the table with a mouth full of pancakes, put down her plate and swallowed.

"Welp," she said. "Time to return to the sea."

Stan rounded on her, a manic glint still in his eyes.

"Nuala! Do seals drink?"

"We . . . get all our liquids from our food, actually?" she replied uncertainly.

“Good,” said Stan. He handed her the two remaining bottles. “Here, take these and smash ‘em over the front of the boat.”

“Okay!” she said, backing away slowly. “I’ll just, um, leave you two . . .”

She nipped back, stuffed her mouth full of breakfast food, and fled.

Ford squirmed. "I can explain," he said. He couldn't, but he couldn't take the disappointed glare Stan fixed him with.
“Well?”

“Well what?”

“Explain, then.”

“It . . .” Ford swallowed. “It helps me sleep. Gives me fewer bad dreams. I only need it off and on . . . No, ‘need’ is the wrong word, it’s . . . I’m not like Mrs. Jenson.”

Stan paused in contemplation, and Ford knew they were both remembering the neighbor who used to play cards with their mother some days. No matter what time it was when she came over, she’d pour herself a glass of something that decidedly wasn’t water, and then another a little later on, and another.

“She’d have blown through everything we packed in a week, so yeah, I know,” Stan said, sitting back down. “Never thought I’d end up driving you to drink is all.”

“You didn’t. I’ll be fine.”

“Should have noticed . . .”

Ford could almost see the self-loathing coursing through Stan’s body. He knew he was calling himself stupid and pathetic and probably a bunch of nastier names, and Ford couldn’t bear to watch his brother crumble under the weight of his own thoughts so he reached out and clasped Stan’s hand.

“What you did yesterday? It was very brave.” Stan looked up in confusion and blinked. “There wasn’t really an opportunity to mention it at the time,” Ford continued, “But I mean it.”

Stan shrugged, looking embarrassed. “It was Mabel—”

“It was you. I know what she did, how much she helped, but she wasn’t there. It was you, Stanley. Personally, I’m . . . not sure I would have handled the situation as well.”

Stan frowned at him and let go of his hand. “What are you talking about?”

Ford felt his heart begin to pound in his ears. No, he shouldn’t have said that. Stick to praising Stan; there was no need to bring in his own issues. But it was too late to back out now. “I’m merely saying that given the chance to replace myself with a more effective model, having been assured of course that it had no hostile intent, I would find it . . . difficult to resist. Under the circumstances your safety was paramount, but had I encountered Atlantis alone . . .” His voice trailed off.

Stan shook his head. “No. You don’t understand. You can’t.”

Ford began to tap his fork nervously on the table. "I admit that I tend to experience greater anxiety than depressive symptoms, but the two conditions are almost by definition comorbid—"

Stan raised a hand, cutting him off. "Look," he said. "I know that using all these five-dollar nerd words makes you feel better, but it just makes me feel more stupid, so just . . . pretend you're as dumb as me for a minute? If we're doing this?"

Ford pinched the bridge of his nose. He didn’t want to talk about this—didn’t want to acknowledge that time. The children had told him about the time they’d followed Bill into his brother’s mind, the endless halls of chained and hidden doors. Stan locked his memories away from prying eyes; Ford locked them away from himself. There were parts of his past that he just . . . didn’t think about, afraid that if he did the memories would eat him alive. Instead they festered behind closed doors.
But this was for his brother. Stan deserved to know, if anyone did.

“There have been . . . times,” he began, “When I felt . . . not dissimilar to how you do now. It was . . .
different, beyond the Portal. More anger and paranoia and less . . .”

“Feeling like nothing mattered and wishing you were dead?”

Ford swallowed. "Exactly. But when I was younger . . . after you left—"

Stan laughed bitterly. "Left? Is that what you called it?"

Ford flinched. He should have caught that. Stupid. "It's . . . how Dad talked about it. I heard it
enough that I sometimes . . . I almost believed it. I'm sorry. But . . . he threw you out, and I went to
bed, and . . . I didn't get up. Not the next morning. Not the day after that. Not even for school. I
thought I just wasn't going to move ever again. Dad screamed about how I was just as bad as you.
Hit me. I could hardly feel it. Could hardly talk. I felt . . . like I wasn't even there. Like I didn't want
to be there."

"How long?"

Ford shook his head. "I don't . . . that whole summer's a blur. Ma made me eat. She even tried to talk
to some of my teachers, see if I could have extensions on my finals, but Dad said that . . . that it was
my own fault and if I was too lazy to get up that was my own problem and that . . . they'd been
coddling me too long and it was time for me to learn about consequences."

Ford swallowed. "I failed calculus. I failed . . . most things. And I was so numb I almost didn't
notice. And then I was just awake enough that I did notice, and I felt like I was never going to be
good enough for anything."

He glanced up, almost too quickly to see Stan's expression. "So . . . yes. I do understand."

He'd considered several possible ways Stan might respond to his confession, but he certainly hadn't
expected the look of fury he saw on his brother's face.

"How dare you?" Stan growled. He threw a weak punch that Ford easily caught, holding Stan's fist
in his hands as his brother slid forward onto the table. "How dare you!"

"Stanley," said Ford gently, "I don't understand."

Stan laughed. There was a hysterical edge to it, and he sounded like he might start crying at any
moment. "I'm the screw-up," he said. "It hurt having to learn that. But Dad was right. I was just
holding you back, and I knew it, and I was only being selfish wanting to stay! Every time I fucked
up something else, I could think, 'At least this is one more thing that Ford doesn't have to deal with!
At least this is one more problem that Ford doesn't have!' You were supposed to be better without
me! You were supposed to be okay!"

"I nearly destroyed the universe," said Ford. "I'm not sure how much better that is."

Stan shook his head. "But that was your one big mistake, you know? I didn't have that. I just had a
million stupid choices and nothing good to make up for it. Just a two-bit con artist dragging you
down—"

“Don’t flatter yourself,” said Ford. “Just because you weren’t there to see them doesn’t mean that I
didn’t make mistakes. Did it ever occur to you that perhaps we’re more alike than you realize?”
“No!” Stan snarled. Ford was shocked at the vehemence in his tone. “No, it never did!”

“Why!?"

Stan stared at him for a moment, and then all the anger in his face drained away. He looked old and tired as he practically crumpled back down into his chair.

“I never hated you that much,” he said.

“What?”

One corner of Stan’s mouth quirked up in a brief mirthless smile. He shook his head and turned away from Ford’s questioning eyes, his gaze fixed on the pockmarked table.

“Why would I ever want you to be like me?”

“Stan . . .”

“You’re better than me.” Stan’s voice cracked. “You have to be better. You shouldn’t have to feel like this, not ever. You don’t deserve . . .”

Ford rose and placed a hand on Stan’s back. For a moment the muscles were tense beneath his fingers, and then Stan softened and buried his face in Ford’s sweater.

“No one should have to feel like this,” said Ford, rubbing small circles across his brother’s back. “You don’t deserve any of it. It’s not a punishment. You’re just sick, and you can get better.”

For a while neither of them spoke. Ford muttered comforting noises and Stan just breathed into the wool. His exhales were warm against Ford’s stomach. Eventually, he straightened up.

“So how’d you do it?”

“Do what?”

“Get better?”

Ford sat down and let a long, slow breath hiss out between his teeth. “I . . . survived,” he said. “I survived until eventually, one day, I had enough energy for something more than just surviving. It was . . . slow, and sometimes I didn’t notice, because every day was enough like the day before, but . . . they got better. I started reading again. And one day I saw a leucistic cardinal out the window and I went running outside to watch it, and when I came back in Ma cried. It was the first time I’d left the house in months.

“By the time school started it was like I’d woken up, like the whole summer and the last weeks before it had been a dream that I could hardly remember. I thought about those months I’d lost and I figured out how to channel my self-loathing into working hard. Cut myself off from everyone. Didn’t do anything except focus on school. It still wasn’t enough to make the places I really wanted to go look twice at my application, but it was enough to get a scholarship at Backupsmore. After that . . . it never got that bad again. Not in that way. I just . . ."

“Stopped eating and sleeping and went mad with paranoia. I know that part.” Stan sighed. “Face it, Poindexter. We’re both shit at looking after ourselves.”

Ford didn’t try to deny it; there would have been no point.

“That’s true,” he tried. “But . . . maybe we’ve been going about it wrong. Not that I think it’s
fundamentally impossible for us to improve our base level of self-care, but . . . in the meantime . . .”

He looked up and met Stan’s eyes. “Maybe we should try looking after each other.”

Stan pushed the food around on his plate. “You think we can manage that?”

“It’s worth a try.”

Suddenly, Stan’s expression changed. His face split into a grin and he laughed, deeply and joyfully. Ford blinked at him in confusion, but that only made Stan laugh harder. When he finally stopped he was still smiling, though Ford knew it must have jolted his shoulder painfully.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “We’re gonna be fine.”

Ford frowned. “Why do you say that?”

“You’ve got glitter on your face.”

“I . . .” Ford blinked, then turned to check his reflection in the nearest shiny object, which turned out to be the bowl of his spoon. Sure enough, even in the small, blurred image he could make out a glint of gold on his right cheek. His reflection smiled.

Ford swiped his hand along the table where it joined the wall, the place where most of the remaining glitter was, and then pressed his sparkling fingers to the side of Stan’s face. Stan didn’t flinch. Instead, he started to laugh again, and Ford laughed too. Outside the sky was dark and the sea was deep and unforgiving, but inside the tiny boat were light and warmth and sparkles and laughter so loud that the whole cabin rang with it.
Stan stared at the piece of paper in front of him, the pen in his hand hovering uncertainly over the first box. It was a simple enough form: a list of questions and then four rows of check boxes. *Not at all, A few days, More than half the days, Nearly every day.*

He twisted the pen between his fingers. He lied on forms. It was just how he worked. Income tax? Business was bad, just barely broke even, no profits at all. Driver’s license? Vision’s 20/20, not to worry, and yes, the full name was Stanford Filbrick Pines. Psych evals? I’m fine, I’m telling you, perfectly fine.

He touched the tip of the pen to the *Not at all* box, half-tempted to just make a line down the page and run for it. This wasn’t the kind of doctor’s office where they chased after you. He could get off scot-free and never see them again. They’d never have to know that he was so weak . . .

A solid presence came into contact with his good shoulder. From the next chair over, Ford leaned into him. It made him feel . . . still not safe. But tethered. It made him remember to breathe.

“You all right?” said Ford.

Stan nodded and moved the pen over to place a crudely drawn X in the box labeled *Nearly every day*. He could do this. He could do this. He could do—

The next question asked how often he’d experienced “Feeling bad about yourself—or that you are a failure or have let yourself or your family down.”

He couldn’t do this.

He was halfway up from his chair before he realized, the clipboard with the form tumbling off his knees to the floor. Everyone in the office turned towards the noise, and Stan flushed and took off for the door. It was bad enough that everyone stared at his arm wherever they went. He’d seen a dour doctor when they docked in St. John’s, so at least the arm was in a real sling now. He didn’t remember much of the visit; as soon as they’d made Ford leave so they could take the x-rays some part of his brain had stopped. There’d been a lot of frowning and a lot of words he didn’t understand, and from the way Ford squeezed his hand while arguing with the doctor he got the impression that something about it was worse than his brother had expected.

He had another appointment to get the arm looked at after this one, and that would probably lead to more, to days of getting poked and prodded and possibly cut open. But he’d take that, gladly, if he could just get away from this. The arm was obvious. All they had to do was look at it and they could figure out what to do, and when they asked him questions about what had happened he could lie about them! That was the way this was supposed to work! Not . . . not baring all his flaws so someone else could judge him for them. They’d probably tell him that it was his own fault anyway, that there was nothing they could do or that he was making it up or that he just deserved to feel this way—

“Stan?”

Stan whipped his head up in a panic. He’d made it outside the waiting room to the brightly lit hospital corridor with its sterile white walls. In a way it was almost worse. There was nowhere to hide and it looked too much like other hospitals in memories he wished had stayed buried. No matter how much they tried to disguise it with soothing landscape paintings, he knew what places like this
“Stan.” Ford had followed him, the abandoned clipboard tucked under one arm. He laid a gentle hand on Stan’s elbow. “It’s all right.”

Stan shook his head, drawing back against the wall the way he used to press himself to the sides of alleys when he was avoiding pursuit.

“Nothing’s all right. Not when I’m here. Not when I’m one step away from you tossing me in the loony bin and walking away . . .”

Ford tightened his grip on Stan’s elbow. “I’m here with you, Stanley,” he said. “I’m not leaving. And I won’t let anyone here hurt you. I promise.”

Between the sling and the extra swath of fabric that bound his injured arm tight to his chest they’d been having a hard time keeping up with Mabel’s hug prescription, but Ford tried his damndest. He took Stan’s left hand in his and pressed himself close to the wall so there was a corner for Stan to hide in. Stan took it, resting his forehead on Ford’s shoulder and breathing in the familiar smell of wool. It covered up the sharp medical scent of the hospital, and for a moment Stan could close his eyes and pretend that they were back on the Stan O’ War II, in the warm, musty, salty cabin full of coffee stains and unpaired socks and strange artifacts Ford wouldn’t let him sell. And glitter. He could pretend that he was safe.

When he opened his eyes his heart had stopped racing and the walls seemed just a fraction less ominous. They weren’t going to take him away. If anyone tried Ford would probably blow something up with his space gun and then maybe there’d be a state that they were both banned from.

“Are you ready to go back inside?” Ford asked.

Stan shook his head and stared down at the floor.

Ford’s boots were filthy as always. Coming up from Atlantis should have washed them clean, but they were still caked with mud and grime. Maybe it was some kind of magic alien mud that didn’t ever come off, like all that magic alien ink on Ford’s chest.

He sure hadn’t picked up any mud here; everything was ice and slush, and they’d barely gotten off the wharf before Ford had insisted on calling a taxi to bring them to the hospital. Stan had forced himself to look out the window instead of at the meter, mortified that Ford would want to blow so much money instead of just taking the subway. Half the time you could get on the Boston busses without paying, especially if you waited until things were busy, and if there was one advantage to being an old invalid it was that sometimes people’s pity translated into cash.

The clipboard moved into his field of vision and he winced.

“I can go through this with you,” said Ford. “If you like.”

Stan stared fixedly at a loose thread on Ford’s sweater. “Yeah, okay.”

“It shouldn’t be too bad,” said Ford, raising the clipboard. “It’s just writing things down; you don’t have to talk to anyone yet.”

Stan snorted. “That is the opposite of helpful.”

“What?”
“You talk to people,” said Stan, “And it’s just your word against theirs. People forget things. You can say they’re lying. It’s . . . you’ve got options. You can back out. Write something down and it’s there and everyone can look at it and it doesn’t go away—not unless you steal it back or burn the place down.”

Ford sounded genuinely confused. “Huh,” he said. “I never thought of it like that.”

“Yeah, well.” Stan bumped his good shoulder against his brother’s. “You’re a nerd. You like . . . words an’ stuff.”

He looked balefully at the clipboard between them. He wanted to get better. He wanted so damn badly to get better. And on the boat it had seemed doable. Talk to a doctor. Get the pills. Bully his brain into behaving like it was supposed to. But now even picking the paper up again felt impossible.

“Here,” said Ford. “What if I did the writing? You don’t need to talk to anyone else, just me.”

Stan nodded mutely. Ford lifted the paper and there was a pause while he read.

“Oh . . .” he said quietly. “I see why . . . this is . . . difficult.”

“Yeah.” Stan straightened up. He probably looked ridiculous huddling into his brother like some frightened kid. He let go of Ford’s hand and swiped at his hair until it lay more or less straight. Part of him wished he could have worn the Mr. Mystery suit. He had it packed—you never knew when a set of fancy duds would come in handy—but it was too tightly fitted to wear with his arm like this. Still, it might have made things easier. It had been his armor for so long that slipping into Mr. Mystery—a man who grinned and strutted and never let anyone know what he was really thinking—was second nature. Put on the suit and the fez and he was a character. Mr Mystery could fling out his arms and go through his spiel and Stanley Pines could go back to being dead.

He wasn’t anymore, though. They’d finally sorted out the paperwork—enough of it, at least, before they left on their voyage. Gravity Falls was one of the few places where a man could return from the dead after thirty years and the authorities barely batted an eye. They had the feds breathing down their necks a little, but something called a “Trembley Clause” in the town’s bylaws kept them from handing their full records over. He had an ID with his own name on it in his pocket for the first time since he was eighteen years old and had tossed his real driver’s license out the window as he crossed the New Jersey border.

Maybe that was part of the problem. He wasn’t used to thinking that Stanley Pines was alive. He’d killed himself off once he realized that getting Ford back would have to be a long con. He hadn’t needed to. He could have just vanished. Of all his identities, that was probably the one people were least likely to look for. He’d told himself that it meant no going back.

And now . . . Stanley was alive, and Stanley was him, and it still felt almost as strange as the first few months of taking on Ford’s life. He had a few old identities he could still use if he needed to, but they were backups. He hadn’t thought about them in months. It was like he wasn’t used to being real. Like his brain didn’t want to be.

“All right,” said Ford. “How about this. I’ll read the questions, and all you have to do is tell me if I should mark down something other than the ‘every day’ option.”

“I’m gonna break their broken-people chart,” grumbled Stan, but when Ford looked at him he nodded.

Ford read. Stan didn’t need to stop him once.
Ford looked at the last question and gritted his teeth. Of course. They always did save the worst for last in things like this. He was tempted to just check the correct box—he knew what Stan’s answer would be—but he didn’t. He wouldn’t make the call for him.

“Thoughts—” His voice cracked and he swallowed before pressing on. “Thoughts that you would be better off dead, or of hurting yourself.”

Stan’s eyes had shut two questions ago. He squeezed them tighter and nodded almost imperceptibly. Ford ticked off the box.

“But I won’t,” Stan blurted out. “I think about it and I want to but I won’t!” He stared at Ford defiantly, as if daring his brother to argue. “If one good thing came outta that Atlantis mess . . . I’m sure now. Even if there isn’t glitter. I’m not gonna . . . I couldn’t do that to Mabel.”

Part of Ford wanted to throw down the clipboard and try to give Stan a full week’s prescription of Mabel Hugs all at once. Another part of him wanted to research the rarest and most beautiful yarn in the world and gather up every skein that had ever been spun just so he could send them all to his great-niece. Yet another part was wondering if he could hook up a small-scale duplicator to their kitchen table and make sure the glitter that covered it would never disappear as long as they lived. He would fill the whole boat with glitter. The whole world, if he had to.

But he didn’t have to. That was the thing. Stan hadn’t needed a boatful of the stuff. Just one flake.

Of course, no part of Ford actually remembered to react in any visible way.

“Or—or to you,” Stan added, clearly misinterpreting his silence.

“No, no, it’s all right!” said Ford, snapping back to reality. “I understand. The children are . . . less complicated. Than we are.”

Stan snorted. “You can say that again. Okay, next question. Might as well get this over with.”

“It is over,” said Ford, smiling. “We’re done, Stan.”

Stan slumped as the tension drained from his body, gulping in air like he’d just come up from a long dive. Ford embraced him as best he could, pulling his brother close and muttering, “It’s okay. You’re okay.”

Stan laughed, tremblingly, into his collar. “Pretty sure we just established that I’m as not-okay as that thing knows how to measure.”

“. . . Yes,” Ford conceded. “True. But . . . that’s just now. You’re not okay now but you’re going to be. I believe that.”

Stan crushed his face into the crook of Ford’s shoulder. “That makes one of us,” he said, almost too quietly for Ford to hear.

“And that’s all right.” He could feel the tiny nod against his shoulderblade.

They heard footsteps approaching and Stan stood up nervously.

“We should, uh, probably go back inside,” he said. “Don’t want them thinking I fled the state or something.”
“Is that your usual strategy for appointments you don’t want to attend?”

“Yep,” said Stan, with feeling.

The footsteps passed them. It was an orderly wheeling a child, probably a few years younger than the twins, who had one leg in a lime green cast. As they passed by Stan pulled a face, and the child giggled and made one back.

“Well,” said Ford, as they stepped back into the waiting room, “Once I realized that a healer was trying to flirt with me and I was so uncomfortable I left the dimension and never came back. So I understand the flight response.”

Stan cackled. “Not much of a looker, then?”

The healer had been a seven-foot lizard, but Ford thought it might not be pertinent to mention that fact in a crowded room. As for looks . . . well, he did have a rare scale pattern that was considered quite desirable by other members of his species and that Ford had found scientifically fascinating. Perhaps that was how he’d gotten the wrong idea? But he’d been approached on occasion by individuals of no scientific interest at all, so that couldn’t be it. “Other people seemed to think so,” Ford said carefully. “I’ve never been sure how you’re supposed to tell these things, personally.”

They sat down. Stan took the clipboard back and fiddled with it, opening and closing the clip as they waited for his name to be called.

“You . . . sure nobody in here’s an alien?” he muttered after a while. “Don’t wanna waste all this effort by getting abducted or something.”

“Hmm.” Ford looked around them. He was quite sure there weren’t any threats around; his watch would scan for lifeforms known to be hostile and alert him as soon as he was in a 50-yard radius.

Ford thought it might not be pertinent to mention that fact in a crowded room. As for looks . . . well, he did have a rare scale pattern that was considered quite desirable by other members of his species and that Ford had found scientifically fascinating. Perhaps that was how he’d gotten the wrong idea? But he’d been approached on occasion by individuals of no scientific interest at all, so that couldn’t be it. “Other people seemed to think so,” Ford said carefully. “I’ve never been sure how you’re supposed to tell these things, personally.”

By all accounts, the Mystery Shack had appreciated the business.

That had been early in their travels. It was almost odd to think of it now. He hadn’t realized how much Stan had changed as his depression set in. Or perhaps he hadn’t wanted to realize it. The change had come slowly, and he’d been distracted with his research and he hadn’t noticed when Stan had stopped laughing or when he’d stopped trying to scam every cryptid they ran across. The way things were now felt . . . normal. And they shouldn’t. He didn’t want to be used to this. He wanted Stan to be loud and brash and immoral again.

“Well,” he said, “There are no obvious anomalies. However, the individual behind the desk could well be a reptoid. Note the large glasses, suitable for concealing non-human eyes, and the elaborate nails. They look like acrylic, true, but they could also be reptilian claws!”

Stan snorted. “Oh, really? Do that guy.” He inclined his head towards a gangly, balding man in the corner. Ford was preparing an analysis about how he was clearly too thin to have a full set of internal organs, and how that combined with his hairless skin suggested he was one of a race of subterranean goblinoids, but he was interrupted when a nurse stepped into the room and called, “Stanley?”
For a moment Stan didn’t move. Eventually Ford nudged him and whispered, “That’s you.”

“Huh?” Stan looked around. “Oh, right.”

As he got up to follow his brother to the examining room, Ford wondered whether Stan would have looked up sooner if the nurse had called “Stanford” instead.

“You don’t have to come,” Stan whispered.

“You asked me to,” said Ford.

“Right . . . I did . . .”

He’d had the sense to bring it up before they left the boat. He’d expected his brother to hem and haw about it, and hadn’t been sure whether Stan would want him to stay or not, but he’d barely hesitated before saying, “Stay with me. Please.”

As they passed the threshold of the waiting room Stan reached out and clutched Ford’s hand. That was another thing he hadn’t expected; Stan wasn’t usually very affectionate when they were out in public, except when they were back in Gravity Falls. When he glanced over Stan’s eyes were glassy and unfocused.

“Stan.”

His whole body flinched and he almost stumbled, but Ford held tight to his hand to steady him.

“I’m here.”

“You’re here,” Stan repeated, sounding small and lost. Almost like a child. Almost like he had when—oh no, he couldn’t be having memory problems again. Not now . . .

“We’re real.”

“We’re real . . .”

The nurse, her smile frozen in place, led them to a room. “The doctor will be right with you, Mr. Pines!” she said. Ford nodded tersely and waited for her to close the door. Then he led Stan to the chair and knelt in front of him, still squeezing his hand.

“We’ll make it through this.”

“We’ll . . .”

“It’s okay, Stan. Just listen to me. Just breathe.”

Conducting with his other hand, he led Stan through the breathing exercises he used to calm himself down. In through the nose, fill the diaphragm, hold, then out through the mouth. In . . . and out. In . . . and out.

“We’ll make it through this,” said Stan. He looked at Ford, and it was like he was seeing him again, like whatever specter had been clouding his thoughts had finally been banished.

“You should get up,” Stan grumbled. “I’m sure that floor is filthy. Hate hospitals. All full of germs and . . . lizard people.”

There was something else going on, but Ford knew better than to ask. It was one of those blank
spaces that Stan had mentioned the other day, things he wouldn’t talk about to anyone. Ford could respect that. Not that he wasn’t curious . . . but Stan was right. He had his own carefully constructed vaults within his mind, impermeable even to himself, that he was afraid would destroy him if they ever broke open.

He tightened the mental bolts around those vaults and squeezed his brother’s hand.

*

Stan woke up in the hospital lobby. No . . . he’d been awake. He just hadn’t been . . . there. He’d been watching everything like he was underwater or in another dimension; he’d said things but they hadn’t felt like they mattered. They hadn’t felt real.

He came back to himself in the hospital lobby. Back to reality, with all the noise and people and the heaviness of existing. And Ford, standing in front of him and rambling excitedly about . . . alloys?

“. . . and of course I discussed the possibility with Fiddleford after we stopped in St John’s, so he’s drawn up a few prototypes. I did my best to steer him away from any . . . extreme enhancements, but you know how he is. Of course, in addition to the improved durability and temperature sensitivity over earthly metals, the fact that certain components aren’t naturally occurring on this planet means that if we get separated I should be able to use the molecular signature to track you down . . .”

Stan cut him off. “Wait up—you’re not installing some kind of tracking device in my shoulder.”

“Oh, it’s not actually a tracking device,” said Ford. “That’s just a bonus!”

“I . . . don’t even know how to respond to that. Okay, then. How are you expecting to waltz your alien metal thing into a normal hospital? That’s not the kind of thing they—”

“Not to worry! That’s already taken care of!”

Stan blinked. “It is.”

“Yes; it took some calling around but Fiddleford is now a major donor here, plus this place has ties to the shadow government and we’re giving them some information on the materials from Crash Site Omega.” He waggled a finger. “Just a taste, mind you. Don’t want them getting their hands on everything down there!”

Stan shook his head. “Remind me why they haven’t just kidnapped you yet? I mean, after that one time.”

Ford grinned wickedly and Stan was reminded, not for the first time, how glad he was that his brother hadn’t been the one to pursue a life of crime.

“Oh,” he said, “They realized that ending up on the wrong end of Fiddleford’s deathbots would probably be the last mistake they ever made.”

“I thought he was trying to cut back on the deathbots?”

Ford shrugged. “It’s a process. But anyway, he’s already raided the portal scrap for the necessary materials and done the preliminary forging. Once I send him your x-rays he should be able to get everything ready for your surgery in three days.”

“I still can’t believe you’re gonna replace my busted shoulder with part of that . . . thing,” said Stan.
“The irony has not escaped me.”

Stan wasn’t sure how he felt about having Portal parts implanted into his bones. He wasn’t sure how he felt about having anything implanted into his bones—well, no, he did. He felt terrified. But Ford seemed to think it was their best option, and Ford understood medicine more than he ever would.

Stupid old bones, trying to heal wrong. Stupid old bones, getting broken in the first place. Stupid old Stan . . .

“We don’t have to do this,” said Ford, and Stan got the impression that it wasn’t the first time that day he’d said it. “The risks are considerable, and if you’re uncomfortable we can always discuss other options.”

“No. It’s okay. Gotta be able to throw a punch, don’t I?”

“You . . .” Ford began, and then he trailed off and frowned. Thinking again. Ford was much better at thinking than at talking, and sometimes it seemed like he forgot he wasn’t actually saying any words.

After a minute or so Stan nudged him. “Earth to Ford?”

Ford blinked and shook his head. “Oh!” He stayed silent for probably another minute, but he was looking at Stan this time, and kept opening his mouth and then closing it as he looked for words.

“You . . . value,” he said at last. “To me. To Dipper and Mabel. Is . . . in no way based on utility. I know you’ll be happier if you can throw a punch, but . . . it doesn’t matter to me. Except inasmuch as you will be happier, in which case it matters immensely, but . . . if you couldn’t. You would still mean just as much.”

Stan wasn’t sure how to respond to that either. Before he could say anything, Ford blushed and stammered, “You—you know, I’ll bet your prescription’s ready by now! I’ll just go and get it! You stay here—unless you’re not comfortable staying here—”

“It’s fine. And Ford?”

Ford, still red-faced and disgruntled, paused in his flight and turned around.

“Thanks.”

*

It took Ford a moment to find his brother when he returned from the pharmacy counter. He held a paper bag with a slim bottle of pills and a sheaf of informational papers that he was going to read exhaustively the second they got back to the boat.

Stan probably wouldn’t be able to start the medication for a week or two; beginning a course of antidepressants right before going in for shoulder replacement surgery wasn’t a wise course of action. But they had them now, and they had a follow-up appointment scheduled, and . . . he felt hopeful. Not confident, not knowing what he did about the state of earth medical science and his brother’s brain chemistry. But hopeful.

He found Stan lurking in the back of the hospital’s gift shop, staring at a rack of notebooks and pens.

“Look at this junk!” he said when Ford approached. “I gotta tell Soos about this one; the tourists would go nuts for it!”
He clicked the top of an oversized pen and a display on the side spun around, settling on a panel that read “Go For It!” He clicked again and it landed on “Not On Your Life!”

“8-Ball Pen,” Stan explained. “Stupid, but the stupid that people love.”

Ford chuckled. “How are you feeling? You seem . . .”

“Like a real person for once?” said Stan. “Yeah. I feel . . . I mean, probably I’m just excited about getting the hell outta this place, but I do feel . . . less terrible.”

“Do you mind waiting to get the hell out of here until I get some coffee?” Ford asked, gesturing at the shop behind them.

“Nah, go ahead. Get me one too, will ya?”

When Ford returned with two cups—one black, one that was halfway to being hummingbird food—Stan was drumming his fingers on a small table. He didn’t take his cup when Ford held it out.

“I was just thinking,” he said. “About what you were saying with . . . the writing thing. I know we’re not good at talking, but if you’re good at writing maybe you wanna . . . do that. Instead. Sometimes.”

Ford nodded. “Yes. That . . . is worth considering.”

Stan pulled his hand out of his pocket and thrust something at Ford. It was a small notebook with an attached pen and an abstract design picked out on the cover in russet and gold.

“‘S for you,” said Stan, unnecessarily. “‘S got those . . . pages you can tear out without it falling apart. You can just do whatever with it, I don’t care.”

Ford flipped the slim volume open. It had one of those adhesive-only bindings that he deplored on most books, but at least it made sense on something designed to be taken apart. On the first page was a doodle of a squat little figure waving its hands. He could tell it was supposed to be Stan and not himself because the hands only had five fingers. Below the figure, in shaky capitals, was written ‘COMMUNICATION!’

“I see you’re trying to get the effect of the dance without actually doing it,” he said. “Just the level of deviousness I should have expected from you.”

Stan shrugged with one shoulder. “I’m an honest fisherman now. I do what I can.”

Ford laughed, putting the little notebook safely away in his breast pocket. “Honest, are you? Well that’s a new—” He stopped in his tracks. Stan was fidgeting with something else now—an oversized pen that currently seemed to read, “Outlook is Good.”

“Wait—did you steal this?”

Stan clicked his pen and looked up at the ceiling.

“You stole this, didn’t you!”

“Shhh!” Stan hissed. “Keep it down, will ya? I was hoping we’d be able to make this stop without getting arrested!”

Instead, Ford threw back his head and guffawed, long and loud and joyful. When he finally stopped people were staring, but for once he didn’t care.
“Thank you, Stanley,” he said, through a grin that would have made Mabel proud. It seemed to make Stan bewildered and somewhat concerned.

“O . . . kay?” he said.

“You weren’t lying to me,” Ford explained. “You really are feeling better!”


Ford kept giggling under his breath as they walked toward the exit. Stan elbowed him in the ribs. “Hush,” he said. “They’re gonna think you’re on something!”

Ford ignored him and bumped playfully against Stan’s good shoulder. “Yoooooouuu stole something!” he half-sang into Stan’s ear. “For me!”

Stan pushed him away, but he was grinning too, and this time his expression didn’t go wooden when Ford flagged down a cab.

“I’m gonna remember this when I get better,” said Stan. “I’m gonna bring it up every time you give another one of those speeches about how stealing is ‘almost always wrong’ except of course when you did it in the Stealing-Things Dimension . . .”

“It was the Thieves’ Dimension!” countered Ford. “And you know, funny story . . .”

His mouth ran on, but his brain was barely paying attention. He kept hearing the words *when I get better* over and over in his head. *When I get better. When!* He knew there was a long road ahead of them, that there would probably be some things they’d never be able to fix, that it might take a long time and a number of treatments before anything worked well. But now he also knew something else, and it made him happier than anything had in a long while. He wasn’t the only who was hopeful.
Now It's Hard To Go Ashore

The cabin hadn’t been such a mess since the time they sailed through a thunderstorm that pelted them with probability-altering frogs. Frankly, Ford thought as he snatched up one of his notebooks with a grimace, he would have preferred the morose croaking and the tiny weather systems that spontaneously generated from his coffee cup for weeks after that encounter to this. Everything was covered with overturned cups and papers that he scrabbled to pick up before they could touch the spilled coffee or the . . . other stains that dotted the cabin. Stan was no help; he’d turned off his hearing aid and was calmly feeding cold French fries to one of the three seagulls perched on their table.

Ford knew that Nuala had talked about using gulls for messages, but somehow he’d expected there to be less . . . screaming. He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose, wishing the mug in his hand held something stronger than coffee. His temples throbbed, as he expected the rest of his head would soon enough. For the first time he was jealous of his brother’s poor hearing. Maybe it was time to pull out the plans he’d started to draw up for creating a portable Silence Bubble. He’d wanted to have the option in case of sirens, but the idea had been shelved in favor of more pressing matters. As Nuala had pointed out at their first meeting, you didn’t run across many sirens in the Arctic.

The selkie finally looked up from her long, ear-splitting conversation with the gull. Ford gave her a brittle smile.

“How goes the intelligence-gathering?” he asked.

Nuala snorted. “It’s just talking to birds. They’re not that intelligent.”

All three gulls began to squawk at her indignantly. One even dropped the soggy fry it had just snatched from Stan’s hand to join in the scolding. Nuala screamed back at them.

Of course his battered Universal Translator didn’t have the decency to pick up whatever they were saying. If he knew enough about the language he could reprogram the thing, but he expected that if he asked it would go about as well as when he’d asked Nuala about how she and Luka understood each other. She’d stared at him for a moment, baffled, and then broken down into laughter. All he could get out of her was, “You’re a human,” and when he tried to push farther she just shook her head.

Apparently mollified, the gulls ruffled their feathers and turned their attention to other matters. One of them speared the fry it had dropped earlier, only to have it snatched out of its beak by its neighbor. As the two birds hopped around each other, shrieking challenges over the morsel, Stan cackled.

“Yeah!” he said. “Fight! Fight! Fight!” He glanced up at Ford with a grin. “I love these guys!”

The pain in Ford’s temples was already starting to turn into a full-on headache, but he smiled back anyway. It was good seeing his brother so animated, even if it was over something like this. Besides, gull fights were still better than boxing matches.

“So!” He did his best to get Nuala’s attention over the ruckus. “What do we know!”

She also seemed to be enjoying watching the seagulls brawl. Maybe he could get her to watch boxing with Stan sometime. Say it was . . . cultural or something.

He thought perhaps Nuala hadn’t heard him. She kept staring at the gulls for a while, still as a statue,
but when he opened his mouth to ask again she sat back with a sigh, rolling her shoulders before looking up to meet his eyes. She tried to hide it, but she’d gotten more tense as they approached port. The night before they docked he’d wandered onto the deck, unable to sleep, and found her staring over the rail. She’d jumped at the noise of the hatch and bared her teeth at him. They stood there together for a while, not speaking, just watching the still-distant lights of the city.

“The air’s wrong,” she said finally. “It’s so . . . full.”

Ford hadn’t noticed, but he remembered the feeling from his time in the Portal, what it felt like to stumble into a world that was just close enough to home that all the differences grated across you like ice across a hull.

“You don’t have to do this,” he said.

Nuala snorted. “Like hell I don’t.”

He hadn’t heard her swear like that before. Ford pursed his lips. “Did you get that from Stan?”

“Maybe.” She turned away from the city in the distance and smiled toothily. “He likes teaching me human words.”

Stan had also, apparently, taught her that punches were a human way of showing affection, which would have been less of a problem if Nuala had any idea how much strength she had in her arms. Ford now had a number of new bruises developing on his shoulders, and he expected there would be more soon. When Nuala was stressed she alternated between being loud and boisterous and leaving, sometimes mid-conversation, to follow in their wake as a seal.

“We know where she is,” Nuala said, snapping Ford back to the present, “And who has her. We don’t know where he’s keeping her skin, and we’re not sure if she knows we’re coming. The man who took her doesn’t let her outside much, so the gulls can watch but they can’t talk to her.” She spat the word ‘man’ like it was a curse.

“All right.” Ford swept everything on the table to one side, including the gulls, who abandoned their fight to flap indignantly and screech at him, and spread out a map of the city across the newly-cleared space. He pulled out one of his small notebooks and clicked the top of his pen three times in anticipation.

“Tell me.”

*

The Aquarium of the Atlantic was an impressive facility, Ford had to admit. Some of the architecture out front was a little . . . bewildering, and more triangular than he would have liked. Why did Earth have to keep emulating the architectural style of Dimension 180?

He shook his head. No, he was being too sensitive again. It wasn’t as if he could just avoid geometry altogether. He was still uncomfortable in tents—the blasted things were like some kind of triangle shrine—but he was getting better around most buildings. It was fine. He was fine.

He turned his attention away from the ominous shape of the roof and back to the brochure in his lap. This wasn’t, much to his chagrin, a situation where he could just charge in guns blazing. Those were nice. Those were easy . . . until something inevitably went wrong and he had to get dragged to whatever was the local equivalent of a hospital by some overly cheerful android or a manticore that had decided he was too pathetic to eat. The point was, they didn’t require subtlety. Ford did not enjoy subtle.
Stan, to the considerable shock and horror of them both, was actually better at missions like this. But he was exhausted from his appointments the previous day and had eventually been convinced to stay on the boat and get some rest.

The device in his ear crackled.

“Hey, Poindexter! What’s the scoop?”

Well, “rest” was probably pushing things. Ford adjusted the transmitter, which was disguised as one of Stan’s hearing aids, and smiled.

“The building exists and we’re outside it,” he said. “That’s all I’ve got for now.”

With the C-Spellz filter he’d added to his glasses back in dimension 087, he could make out the glow of the magic tether that stretched from the rather ostentatious ring on his right hand back to the boat, where Stan wore the matching one. This was a good opportunity to test the range of the rings, which they’d liberated from a couple of ghost pirates early on their journey. It was a shame they were one-way; it would be nice not to have to worry about the tiny speaker in his ear. Still, having Stan’s voice emanate from the air in front of them was probably not a good way to keep up the “subtle” aspect of this mission.

“Well, what’s taking you so long?” grumbled Stan.

Ford didn’t answer. Instead, he looked over at Nuala. She sat stiffly on the bench beside him, staring out into the harbor. She looked out of place, and not just because she was dressed in a patchwork of borrowed items—boots that were too big, a coat that was too small—over the sweaterdress Mabel had knit her. At her sides, her fingers curled and uncurled compulsively, trying to grab for something that wasn’t there.

“I told you,” Ford began. “You don’t have to—”

“Shut up, knucklehead!” Nuala spun to glare at him, and Ford could hear Stan laughing in his ear as the ring picked up her words. “I’m doing this, and if you tell me I don’t have to one more time I’ll bite your nose off!”

He didn’t doubt she could do it, so he drew back, raising his hands protectively. “All right! Just... remember what we said about human communication? Specifically volume level.”

“We” was Stan, Ford, and a very excited Mabel on speakerphone, who had attempted to give Nuala a basic course in Acting Like A Human before she left the boat. Ford didn’t feel like it had gone terribly well. But at least they were in a major city, where a certain amount of strangeness could probably pass unnoticed.

He’d gotten used to Nuala’s presence on the boat, but now that they were ashore he was realizing just how much she stood out. It wasn’t just her size, or the huge wild mass of her hair, or the fact that her outfit had been pieced together by two old men and a glitter-obsessed thirteen-year-old. It wasn’t even the mottled patches of darker skin across her face, where her sealskin was silver-black instead of silver-grey. She just moved differently, despite having spent most of her time in human form for the past ten days. And when she looked around at the city her deep black eyes were filled with wonder just barely masking her fear.

She play-snapped at him and smiled grimly when he flinched. “Come on, dork,” she said. “Let’s go. You said they had a café in there and you owe me tea and cookies.”
Stan shifted uncomfortably on his bunk. He shouldn’t be able to feel it; this was some kind of Princess and the Pea nonsense, except instead of a princess it was a decrepit old man and instead of a pile of mattresses it was just one and instead of a pea—well fine. It wasn’t the same at all, except that it was stupid.

He knew that it made sense for him to stay behind. He knew that, and he hated it. He hated being useless. He’d have to start accepting it, though. His surgery was in two days, and then he’d be laid up for the long haul. When he asked how long the doctors just hemmed and hawed and spouted a bunch of medical mumbo-jumbo that seemed to boil down to, “We don’t know and also you’re old.” Higher risk of complications, blah blah blah. As if he didn’t already have enough complications to deal with in his life.

His good hand strayed under the mattress, just for a moment, just to check.

From the air in front of him, he could hear Ford complaining that he couldn’t be held accountable just because Mabel had pledged a life-long cookie debt. He snorted, feeling the indignance in the following pause even though he couldn’t see his brother’s face. At least the eavesdropping part was fun. Uselessness had its perks.

He pulled his hand back and let it rest on his chest, relaxing back into the pillows. Ford was right about one thing; he was exhausted. The trip to the hospital yesterday had drained him more than it should have. Slowly, lulled by the white noise of Ford and Nuala bickering and the ever-present splashing of waves against the hull, Stan drifted off to sleep.

Beneath him, hidden safe under the mattress, was Nuala’s sealskin. She’d laid it out in a single layer, running her fingers over it longingly before she set her jaw and marched off the boat. It was thin and smooth, and Stan shouldn’t have been able to tell that it was there. But it felt like it was burning a hole through the bedding, and he slept fitfully. He wasn’t designed to handle that kind of trust.

* *

“If anything happens to it, I will murder both of you.”

Nuala’s hands were still curling at her sides, pulling at the fabric of her dress. They were standing in line for tickets and she’d already bared her teeth and hissed at one group that came too close.

“It might behoove you,” said Ford under his breath, “To save the threats of death and dismemberment for a later date.” He’d underestimated quite how . . . volatile . . . the selkie could be. It made sense. Surely being on land was bad enough, but to leave her skin behind . . . Still, if they wanted to find anything out she would need some way to draw less attention.

“I don’t have hooves,” she grumbled.

Ford opened his mouth to explain what the word actually meant, but was startled into silence when Nuala stepped close and rested her chin on his shoulder. She huddled against his back, glaring at the people bustling around them.


“This isn’t a hug,” Nuala replied. “I can still move wherever I want. It’s just like you’re a rock.” After a moment she added begrudgingly, “A safe rock.”

Ford blinked owlishly. As the line inched forward Nuala remained draped against him, and Ford realized that they weren’t actually getting any fewer strange looks. Just different ones.
“Um,” he said. And for a moment he left it at that, because how exactly was he going to explain this to a seal woman in a crowded public place? Other than ‘Very carefully, and as quietly as possible’?

“Um. For your information. This behavior may cause people to . . . make assumptions. About the nature of our relationship.”

Nuala didn’t move. “What, they’ll think you stole me?”

“Um,” said Ford again. “Yes? Essentially? Though most relationships, as far as I understand them which is, ah, very little, are predicated less on stealing and—”

“Good.”

Ford’s blood ran cold. “Good? Do you . . . want me to . . .?”

“Ew.” Nuala wrinkled her broad nose. “Of course not. You’re a man.” She said the last word the way she had on the boat, with a grimace on her face like it was something rotten.

Ford sagged with relief. Not that he’d really thought—surely if someone was interested in him like that there’d be fewer threats of violence, wouldn’t there? He hoped. Or rather, he didn’t, because romance was bewildering and offputting and he’d like it to stay as far away from him as possible, thank you very much.

“Wait.” He glanced at Nuala. “Why ‘good,’ then?”

“Because,” she said, digging her chin into his shoulder. “Then other people won’t try to steal me.”

Ah.

“Need to save all my vengeful fury for Doctor Whatshisname. Shellfish.”


At least that was the name the gulls had given them. They knew where he lived and where he worked, and from the extra snooping they’d done (with Dipper’s help; Ford found the internet simultaneously too primitive and too confusing to do much deep searching) they knew that he was tall and thin and had a red beard and a Ph. D. Only one, though, so Ford already felt confident that they could take him on.

They weren’t expecting to run into Dr. Smith on this mission. It was purely reconnaissance, though hopefully they would at least catch a glimpse of Nuala’s captive friend. If she looked anything like Nuala did, she would be easy to pick out of a crowd.

They’d finally reached the front of the line. Ford paid for two tickets, and then he and Nuala passed beneath the ominously triangular awning into the dark entrance of the Aquarium.

*  

“Stanford!”

“Mhm?”

“Stanford! Stop reading about fish!”

Nuala grabbed the sleeve of his coat in her teeth and started tugging him away from the display.
“But this exhibit setup is fascinating!” he protested. “The entire approach to marine biology changed so fundamentally while I was—all right, all right.”

With a last longing look at the sign, Ford let himself be pulled away. He blinked as he glanced down at the woman latched onto his coat.

“Teeth,” he scolded.

Nuala released his sleeve and rolled her eyes dramatically. “You humans don’t use your mouths for anything!” she complained.

“That’s because we have arms!” Ford hissed back.

“Arms are stupid.”

“Shh! We can talk about this later!”

It was less crowded inside, and Ford certainly felt more at ease. As far as he could tell, Nuala did too. She walked a few paces away from him now, and she snapped less—both literally and metaphorically. As they walked past the huge tanks, bathed in light that had been softened by its passage through the water, Nuala looked around her sadly.

“I see why she’d want to be here,” she said. “If she couldn’t have the ocean.”

He heard her gasp as they rounded the corner.

They weren’t harp seals. Harbor seals, Ford guessed, dappled all over instead of pale and dark-backed like Nuala was. They’d been able to see the seal exhibit from outside, but the view from there made it nearly blend in to the harbor. From here, where all they could see was the water beyond the huge glass pane, it looked more like a prison. Or maybe to Nuala it looked like freedom, and the prison was being trapped here on the other side.

Nuala stepped close and pressed a hand to the glass. One seal paused as it swam slowly past and turned towards her. She whispered something to it and the seal stopped, swimming in tight corkscrews in front of her. It was so lithe and graceful in the water, so at home.

The other animals seemed to notice its agitation, and slowly the rest of the seals swam down from their perches on the rocks, hovering in front of Nuala and taking turns to touch the glass with their noses, gently, where her hand rested.

It was beautiful, and sad, and even Ford, forever the researcher, felt as it if was something that he shouldn’t witness. At least Nuala’s face wasn’t. He turned away. Perhaps he’d just step back a few paces. Read some signs. Let Nuala have her moment.

He was looking at the floor, so he didn’t see who grabbed him.

It wasn’t as uncommon an experience as he would have liked. Sometimes it felt like most of his time in the Portal had been spent not seeing whoever had grabbed him that time, between the dimensions where humans were considered exotic pets, the ones where they were considered exotic delicacies, the ones that as far as he could tell had never seen a human before, the ones under Bill’s sway where there was a price on his head, the ones not under Bill’s sway where there was still a price on his head, not to mention the ones where people were just nasty for no reason . . .

It never got any more pleasant.
By the time he realized what was happening he'd already been shoved face-first into a wall and one arm was twisted up behind his back. He scrabbled for the blaster at his hip with his other arm, and one fingertip touched it before a knee slammed heavily into his back. As he struggled to catch his breath, whoever was holding him shifted their grip to wrench both his arms behind him.

And then there was something sharp at his throat, pressed tight enough that he was afraid he’d cut himself if he swallowed, and a voice hissed in his ear, “Let her go or I’ll kill you.”

“Nnngh?” said Ford. It was about all he could get out if he didn’t want to slit his own throat.

“Where’s the selkie’s skin, human? Tell me if you value your life!”

Ford’s eyes widened. The voice was familiar. It was deeper than Nuala’s but it had the same unplacable accent.

“Safe,” he whispered.

They’ll think you stole me.

“Ask . . . Nuala.”

The pressure lessened—slightly, uncertainly, but it lessened. Ford gasped in air.

“She’s here of her own free will, I promise—”

The pressure at his throat vanished, only to reappear at his side. He was pulled away from the wall and turned toward a door. He didn’t remember going through it; it must have happened when he was disoriented.

“Smile,” said the voice. His captor released his arms but kept the knife pressed to his side, then prodded him forward towards the door. It swung outwards under his touch.

His ear buzzed and Stan’s voice came through. “Ford? Ford, what’s happening?” He sounded bleary. Must have been asleep.

“It’s fine!” said Ford quietly. Which, look, it wasn’t that much of a lie. This thing was clearly just a misunderstanding, and they’d sort it out, and Stan shouldn’t worry.

He could see the seal tank, its residents still hovering near the glass but without the focus they’d had before. Nuala wasn’t there, but as he looked around he heard her call his name.

“Stanford! What was the point of that whole speech about not getting separated if you were just going to—”

She stopped. Stared. There was a moment of confusion and then her face split into a huge smile and she ran to the door, shoving Ford out of the way. He stumbled to the floor, and thankfully the knife that had been pressed to his ribs clattered there beside him. Nuala looked like she was about to embrace his captor, but she drew up at the last second, staring at the woman in front of her in horror.

“Sea and stars, Serinam,” she whispered. “What did they do to you?”

The transmitter in Ford’s ear buzzed again. Stan sounded much more awake, and less frightened, and grumpier. “Is anyone gonna tell me what the hell is going on?” Ford ignored him. He’d explain later.

If he had seen the woman on the street he would have thought she looked fine. Even as things were, at first he was confused by Nuala’s expression. But then he thought about what the selkie would
have been expecting, and he looked closer. The woman’s hair had been cut into a bob. The skin of her hands was still patchy, like Nuala’s, but her face was smooth, painted and powdered to take away the dark patches. And she was thin.

Not skin-and-bones thin, but she wouldn’t need to be. Ford felt his own expression change to match Nuala’s as he realized. Selkies didn’t lose their blubber layer when they transformed. Nuala needed to be the size she was to stay warm and healthy when she was in the water. Even if this woman did find her skin, her seal form would be emaciated. It was just another way to make sure she couldn’t leave.

“Why are you here?” the woman—Serinam, Nuala had said—heissed. She glared down at Ford. “If he hurt you, I’ll—”

“No!” Nuala grabbed Ford’s arm and pulled him up from the ground. “He’s helping me! Serinam, this is my . . .” She paused, cocking her head at him with a bemused smile. “. . . Friend. Stanford.” She punched his shoulder and chuckled. “You’re my friend,” she said, as if it was the funniest idea she’d ever had.

“And Stanford, this is Serinam.” She gazed at the woman. She was past her initial shock, past the fear and confusion, and though there was a sadness in her gaze, for the most part she looked . . . soft. Softer than Ford had ever seen her.

“We’re going to rescue you.”

Serinam shook her head. “This is a terrible idea! Do you know how dangerous this is? Why did you ever leave the ocean?”

“To rescue you.”

“Shh! You can’t—you can’t just talk like that! Nuala, you should leave! You should go back where it’s safe and forget about me and—”

“No.”

“You’re impossible!”

“Maybe.” Nuala set her jaw. “But I’m not leaving without you.”

They locked eyes, staring at each other in silence for a moment before Serinam sighed heavily.

“Listen.” She shot quick glances up and down the corridor. “I can’t talk now. You’ll have to wait—”

A man rounded the corner, and Ford’s hand strayed to the pommel of his blaster as his eyes swept over him. Short and dark-haired. Not Serinam’s captor. Not an immediate threat.

The man waved cheerfully at them, and Ford hoped that his smile was more convincing than the toothy rictus Nuala was sporting.

“Hey, Sarah! See you at the meeting, yeah?”

Serinam nodded. “Just finishing up this tour!”

As soon as the man passed out of sight, the smile dropped off Serinam’s face. She led them down another hallway before throwing open a door to what looked like a storage room.

“Wait here,” she said. “I’ll be back when I can. They can’t miss me at this meeting or Bill will
A chill spread through Ford’s body, as sudden and harsh as if he’d been thrown into the ocean.

“Bill?”

In his ear, he heard Stan curse.

“Doctor Smith,” said Serinam. “My husband. He goes by his middle name.”

She shut the door and the darkness rushed in.

Ford felt like he was made of ice. He tried to breathe, tried to listen to Stan’s voice in his ear and feel Nuala’s arm where she stood beside him and let them soften him back into a person, but nothing did any good against the name that pulsed through him like the blows of a hammer.

He shattered.
Their Boots We Buried Below The Tide

Chapter Notes

Warnings for panic attacks and dissociation, as well as some mild body horror in the dream sequence.

Bill.

“Did you miss me? Admit it, you missed me!”

No. It’s not. He’s not . . .

“Stanford? Stanford, are you all right?”

It’s just a name. It’s just a nickname for William, consistently in the top five male names in English-speaking countries. He’d looked it up. From Germanic Wilaheln: compound of “will, desire” and “helmet, protection.” The irony of the latter etymology hurts every time he thinks about it, hurts like cracked ribs and blood welling up from his right eye and the stab of betrayal in his heart.

He can’t get away from it so he has to get used to it. It’s just a name. It’s just a name. It’s just—

“Come on, Fordsy! Just one little equation and we can be done with this and move on to the FUN part! Not that watching you scream in agony isn’t fun, but I’ve got things to do! Worlds to conquer! Civilizations to obliterate!”

It’s stupid. He’s stupid. It’s just one syllable. Just three phonemes. What kind of scientist was afraid of phonemes? Voiced bilabial stop. Central high unrounded vowel. Velarized alveolar lateral approximant. See? None of those are frightening. The stop starts off boat and book and biology, the vowel anchors the stressed syllables in Dipper and Fiddleford, and even though that articulation of the approximant is called “dark L” it’s the last phoneme in Mabel and so it’s beautiful, whatever the con-langers say.

“Stanford, what’s wrong?”

He’s heard languages that were painful in themselves, that made his thoughts tremble and his ears bleed and his Universal Translator scream static, but they didn’t frighten him. Not like this. Not like this one ubiquitous syllable.

“This whole party is thanks to you anyway, Sixer! You might as well finish the job! Isn’t this what you always wanted? To change the world?”

And the worst part, the part that fills him with shame, is that he can talk about Bill Cipher. Bill Cipher, who is dead and gone and not coming back, not ever, and it’s been a month since Ford touched the tiny coded notebook where he writes down things Stan says that don’t sound right or times the light glinted too yellow in his eyes. He’d been paranoid at first, but he’s been getting better, and Bill is gone. He’s gone. Ford can talk about Bill Cipher and his chest gets tight but he doesn’t fall apart. He can be strong like he’s supposed to be, can look at his brother and smile stubbornly because they won, they won, they won.
“No, he won’t talk to me, he’s stiff as a frozen codfish—”

He’d trekked out to see the statue when they found it in the woods and stared at it silently for a few moments before he realized that Bill wasn’t there and there was nothing he had to say to the shell he’d left behind, and in one final act of pettiness he’d spat in the statue’s face and then turned away for the last time. He’d run test after test on Stanley as he slowly pieced together his memories, terrified that the miracle of having his brother returned to him would have some catch, some terrible price that would bring the fragile happiness they were building tumbling down around them. But there was nothing. Nothing, no matter how hard he looked. They were safe. They were safe they were—

“We’ll meet again, don’t know where, don’t know wheeeeen, but I know we’ll meet again some sunny day!”

But now, months later, when he should be fine, should be over it, hearing the name still sends him to pieces. Not the name he actually fears—he learned to expect that, to steel himself for it. But hearing it casually, dropped in restaurants and markets like it’s just a normal name—which it is, to everyone but him, it blindsides him, and suddenly he’s back—

“I’ve got the kiiiiids! I think I’ll kill one of them, just for the heck of it!”

Or he’s still there. In the restaurant. In the market. In the aquarium storage room. But everything around him has gone sharp and brittle and his mind is so slow it feels like it’s been trapped in a different timestream while the rest of the world rushes past. He feels nothing, and he feels everything, and he can’t remember how to breathe—

“Okay, tell me how to carry a human and I’ll get him back to the boat—”

He hasn’t been breathing.

*

Ford opened his mouth and gasped like he was coming up from a deep dive, gulping desperately for oxygen. He felt his chest expand, his lungs fill up, the hiss as the air entered his throat. Real. He was real. This was real, the mission and the aquarium and Nuala, not the laughter in his head. His hands balled up, fingernails biting into his palms. He should be over this. He should be better.

He just . . . he just needed to breathe. Count. In-two-three-four, hold-two-three-four, out-two-three-four-five-six. None of the tricks he used to use when he meditated. Bill had poisoned those. Just breathe. Just feel the expansion of the diaphragm, like he was preparing to sing or give a presentation. Just . . . just . . .

“Stanford?”

He felt a gentle bump against his shoulder. Nuala. Nuala’s head, one of those seal hugs Mabel had been so proud of facilitating. Ford blinked until the world snapped back into focus. It looked almost too sharp, like one of those dimensions with no atmosphere where shapes stayed crisp all the way to the horizon, but that was just his head playing tricks on him. This was Earth. Dimension 46°. This was home.

“I’m fine,” he forced himself to say, his voice distant and ethereal. He wondered if it sounded as odd to Nuala as it did to him. Wasn’t it interesting that dissociation appeared to affect sound waves the same way that water did? “Sorry if I worried you.”

Nuala cocked her head at him. The areas of hyperpigmentation across her face looked like a map to a
strange world. That curve by her ear could almost be the coastline of Denhorn IV.

“Okay, yeah, your brother says that you’re definitely lying.”

“My—?” His hand flew to his ear. *Yes. His hand, his ear, feel how they connect, how the pads of his fingers press into the tragus and flatten the lobe against his skull.* The receiver was missing. He hadn’t even felt Nuala remove it.

“You were, um . . .” She froze and stared forward with unfocused eyes, hands stiff at her sides, jaw tense. “For a while.”

“I apologize for alarming you,” Ford snapped, his cheeks coloring. “I was merely taken aback at Dr. Smith’s preferred moniker.”

Nuala blinked twice. Ford wondered what the shadows her lashes cast would indicate on the map of her face. Some unit of scale, perhaps. Measures of topography. The presence of monsters.

*Well well wellwellwellwellwell!*

No! Not monsters.

“Stan says you use nerd words when you’re freaked out, so I’m going to pretend that I understood that.” She paused. Listened. “Oh, okay. Why do you even have so many words?”

“The English language has a long history of adopting loan-words—” Ford began.

Nuala laid a hand flat on his shoulder. It was stiff. Not a native gesture. Was she trying to mirror the way Stan acted when Ford was like this? Was Stan telling her what to do, how to calm him down when he was acting crazy?

“That wasn’t a real question,” she said. “But this is. Are you all right?”

Ford smacked the hand away. “I’m fine! I don’t need coddling!”

Nuala drew back and bared her teeth at him. “I wasn’t coddling you! I was trying to be your friend, you knucklehead!”

Ford stared at her, the sudden silence ringing in his ears. What was he doing? He was supposed to be the experienced one on this mission. He’d told Nuala that he would help her but he was the one who couldn’t hold himself together. Here he was, Stanford Pines, who had escaped from the dungeons of the Duplicitous Zok, who had survived the zombie-infested plains of Dimension Z-28, who had held out for two days under the worst tortures Bill Cipher could imagine without breaking, and now he was falling apart at a single word.

Pathetic. He had to do better.

Nuala’s head snapped towards the door a full five seconds before Ford heard the footsteps. They hadn’t been watching their voices at all. They’d be discovered, thrown out of the aquarium if they weren’t thrown in jail, and Doctor Smith would be tipped off, and Serinam would remain trapped—

He turned to shoo Nuala behind a rack of shelving and she jumped away from him, hissing low in her throat.

“What—” he whispered, and then he followed her eyes to the blaster in his right hand. He bit his tongue and shoved the weapon back into its holster—when had he taken it out?—ignoring the part of
his brain that was screaming at him that he was a fool for letting go.

It wasn’t supposed to happen like this. He was supposed to be getting better. He certainly wasn’t supposed to be worse at handling stress than he’d been when he was eking out a living between dimensions and around the law.

The footsteps got louder. They reached the shelves just in time and Ford crouched behind them, Nuala dubiously following his lead. He heard the rattle of a key in the lock and the door swung open. A gangly woman with pink hair stepped inside, pulled a bin of something off the rack nearest the door, and left.

The door clicked shut. Ford could feel the tension in the room shift as Nuala relaxed. His own tension stubbornly refused to dissipate. His left hand began to tremble and he thrust it deep into his pocket where the selkie wouldn’t be able to see.

“Is it . . . a bad thing?” Nuala asked after a while, “To ask if you’re all right?”

Ford huffed, realized his breathing had gotten shallow again, and tried to take a few deep inhales before responding. He could hear a tinny buzz that meant Stan was supplying his own answer, but it was too faint to make out the words. Probably telling her that Ford was just being an idiot, as usual.

“For a long time there was no one who would ask,” said Ford eventually. “At least . . . no one I could trust.”

“Do you trust me?”

He bit his tongue and looked down at the floor. Of course she would ask. He wasn’t sure if he trusted any—no. He did. That was the paranoia talking. He trusted Dipper and Mabel. He trusted Stan with everything except his own well-being. He trusted Fiddleford. He did. They’d earned it.

Surely Nuala had too. She’d saved him. Saved both of them. She’d trusted them to help her rescue her friend. Entrusted Stan with her skin. What right did he have not to trust her in the face of that?

But he couldn’t make himself say it. His mind was screaming at him that trust was only a weakness and he’d be even weaker if he admitted it.

“Nuala . . .” he tried, but he couldn’t say it. Not with his heart whirring and his hand shaking in his pocket and the ghost of Bill Cipher laughing in his head.

The selkie turned away. Her arm brushed his. He wanted to pull away from the contact but also to lean into it. He was floating and the touch jolted him like static even as it grounded him back to the earth. The pressure of his sweater and his coat weren’t enough to make him feel real. If Stan had been there, Ford would have swallowed his pride and let himself hide in the circle of his brother’s arms until the world calmed. But Stan wasn’t there.

“Do . . . do you think that I could be a . . . a safe rock again?” he managed to say, squeezing his eyes shut. He heard a soft intake of breath, and then Nuala moved and draped her body across his. She was soft and warm and heavy. Safe.

Slowly, his shoulders softened. His fists unclenched, though one of them was still trembling. He cracked his jaw, letting it hang loose and open.

“Feel better, dork?” asked Nuala from somewhere near his left elbow. “Ugh, my head feels like it’s being stuffed. You humans are so badly designed.”
There was a pause, then she said, “Who’s the complaints department? . . . Oh, I see.”

Despite himself, despite his trembling hand and his burning shame, despite everything, Ford laughed.

*

The audio quality from the pirate rings wasn’t the best, and Stan froze for a moment to make sure that it really was laughter he heard and not crying. If Ford was crying he really was too far gone and they needed to forget about the plan and get him out of there right away. But no. Nuala laughed too, and then he was sure.

Stan relaxed.

Slightly.

He tried to glare at his own shoulder, wincing as the motion of his neck sent a stab of pain through his arm. He’d been off Ford’s alien painkillers for a few days—something about how they might interact with Earth medicine—and every movement made his shoulder twinge.

He just wanted to be useful again. Wanted to be able to help Ford. He’d had to just sit there and listen as his brother had some kind of breakdown, to try to explain to a terrified Nuala how to help when he didn’t even know what to do. When Ford had panic attacks on the boat Stan usually just hugged him and waited for whatever was eating at his mind to go away. He didn’t know anything about mental health—well, clearly. Look at him.

He heard a click and then a scraping noise. The door again. But they’d been hidden the first time, right?

“Serinam!” Nuala cried joyfully.

Good. They could have whatever conversation they needed to and then they could get the hell out of there.

“Come with me,” Serinam said. “One of the meeting rooms is empty; we can talk.” Her accent was like Nuala’s, but Stan could hear where it had been softened around the edges, where she would shift the way that she pronounced a vowel halfway through a word like she’d been told time and again that the way she spoke naturally wasn’t allowed.

Stan, who had heard plenty of people who sounded like her—not in their cadence but in the thin, tight way they tried to make their words conform to someone else’s idea of what was right—bristled at the sound.

He heard shuffling as Ford and Nuala stood. Then footsteps, brisk and businesslike, leading them through the aquarium. If they ever had to do something like this again, they were going to find a way to have visuals. He had no idea where in the building they were. No exit strategy. No way to find them. Plus maybe there were some rare fish they could steal; he wasn’t sure how else they were planning on paying his hospital bills. Charity from Fiddleford, probably.

Nuala gasped and the footsteps stopped.

“Yes,” said Serinam sadly. “These are the pups. Rescues from all along the coast. They come here to be raised, and then we release them. They will go back to the sea.” Stan could almost hear the unspoken “unlike me.”

“I take it this area isn’t open to the public?” asked Ford.
“No,” said Serinam. “If anyone asks, you are donors here for tomorrow night’s fundraiser. This is a private tour.”

The footsteps began again. Stan heard the scrape of three doors before they stopped, and then a different scraping noise—chairs being pulled out and sat in.

“Can you give me back to my brother?” Stan asked.

“Oh,” said Nuala. “Yeah, of course.”

Stan waited for a few seconds, then tried, “Hey bro.”

“Stanley.”

Well, that was . . . not ideal, but not the worst response he could get either.

“So,” said Serinam. “Explain why you’re here and what you think you’re doing, and do it quickly so that you can leave.”

“I told you,” said Nuala. “We’re here to rescue you. We’ll find your skin and then we’ll rip out your husband’s throat and go back to the sea and everything will be fine!”

Stan was grateful, not for the first time, that Nuala had decided she liked putting up with them. She looked soft and cuddly, especially in her seal form, but he’d seen her fishing. He wouldn’t want to be on the receiving end of those teeth.

“And how do you plan to do that?” Serinam hissed. “Do you think I haven’t been looking? Do you think I haven’t tried to find it every day for the last three years? It’s hopeless, and if he catches you too—”

The two selkies argued, but Stan was more aware of another sound, one that Ford probably thought he couldn’t hear: the clicking of a pen against a hard surface. It was something Ford did a lot, when he was excited and when he was afraid. The more intense the feeling, the faster the tap, and this time he sounded like a woodpecker.

“Hey,” said Stan. “Hey, Ford.”

No answer.

“Sixer.”

Nothing.

Crap. He was doing the zoning-out thing again, and this was not a great time for it. Stan was beginning to have an idea—it was a bad idea, and he really hoped Serinam had some good reason to shoot it down—but it was better than listening to Nuala and Serinam argue about how important the other one was until they got blue in the face.

Stan tried a few more gentle words. He could probably have gotten Ford’s attention if he shouted, but that was the last thing they needed. He was singing a little improvisational ditty about the situation (“Trying to talk to my bro, deedly-dee, don’t know if this is working, gonna keep singing, doodley-doo”) when finally he heard, “What—Stan?”

“Yes. Listen, I’ve got a real terrible plan but it’s still less terrible than anything else I’ve heard.”

“Oh. Oh, I . . . yes. My brother’s been listening, and he believes he has a plan. A . . . potential plan.”
So Ford was well enough for . . . Stan wasn’t sure if it was diplomacy or sarcasm. One of the two. Good enough. He took a deep breath.

“Okay, first I need Serinam to answer a couple of questions for me. Her husband—is she sure that he’s the one who’s got her skin? He wouldn’t have passed it off to someone else?”

Ford repeated the question.

“No,” said Serinam curtly. “He is too selfish to let anyone else have it.”

“Right,” said Stan. “Right, okay, now . . . is he a gloater? Because the type of man who likes . . . this kind of thing . . . some of them it’s all about personal satisfaction, and they’re tough to crack. But some of them . . . they just want someone else to see how clever they’ve been.”

There was a pause after Ford conveyed the question. Then Serinam sighed. “He gloats,” she said. “He’s careful about who he does it to, but he gloats.”

Stan nodded, knowing that none of them could see him. He could stop now, never tell them what he was thinking. They could wait. They could try other things. They could stay safe.

But Nuala had trusted him with her skin.

“One more thing. You talked about a big fundraiser. I take it your husband . . . Doctor Smith . . . will be attending?”

He would be.

“So like I said, I have an idea,” said Stan. “I hate it. I’m pretty sure you’re gonna hate it too. But it might be our best shot.”

There was silence on the other end. “If you want our input on the idea you will have to actually tell us what it is,” said Ford eventually.

“Yeah, yeah, I know, I’m just . . . building up to it.”

“Stan . . .”

“I’m just thinking . . . if Doctor Smith likes to gloat, who would he be more likely to spill the beans to than another scientist who’d captured a selkie?”

* *

When they got back to the boat, Nuala immediately ran into the cabin. Stan must have heard her coming, because he’d stood up so she could pull her skin out from below the mattress without fighting against his weight. She knelt, clutching the sealskin to her chest, and then transformed into a seal right then and there.

She barked twice at Stan and bumped her head against his leg. He was almost certain that it was a thank you.

“Sorry you gotta go through another night of that,” Stan said.

Nuala rolled over and waved a flipper at him. Stan looked up at his brother, who was standing in the hallway looking haggard. “And I’m sorry you’ve gotta be the one to go with her.”

“Don’t worry about it,” said Ford. His voice was clipped. “I’m obviously the superior candidate for
the task.”

“Ford—”

“And I have a full day to prepare. I apologize for frightening you earlier.”

“Ford, you don’t gotta apologize—”

“Don’t have to.”

Stan sighed. Okay. So this was how Ford was gonna be. Jumpy and irritable.

“Look, why don’t we just get something to eat now, yeah? Don’t feel like going out, but we can get delivery.”

Ford nodded curtly.

They ordered Chinese. Nuala, who had spent most of her life subsiding on a diet of raw fish, made them both laugh as she looked up in wonder after every bite.

“You humans are wild!” she exclaimed, showering the table with fragments of Crab Rangoon. “There’s so many things in here! And they all taste different!”

She did, however, take the existence of chopsticks as a personal insult. “What is this?” she said. “A different utensil? After you already made me learn how to use forks?”

“That fundraiser had better not be sit-down,” muttered Stan. Nuala glared at him and kicked him under the table. He laughed, and Ford did too.

Nuala’s fortune cookie read, “There are big changes ahead for you!” Stan’s read, “Your shoes will make you happy.” Ford tossed his in the trash unopened.

*

Stan awoke shortly after dawn the next day, but he wasn’t the first one up. Nuala had been out most of the night in her seal form, and when she returned in the small hours of the morning to find Ford sitting at the table she’d asked if she could catch a few winks in his bed.

“Mornin’,” mumbled Stan, groping one-handed for the coffee pot. “How’d you sleep?”


Stan paused and squinted at him. “Mmm. Bad dreams?”

“Yes.”

It was only partly true. He had dreamed at first, but most of the images that had appeared in his head that night weren’t things he could blame on his subconscious.

The multiverse haunted him.

It had since he was a child, since before he even knew what it was. He was the one who feared, every time a parent was late to pick them up, that it presaged some horrible calamity, and by the time Ma did show up, as intact and grumpy as ever, the possibility of the calamity was so firmly anchored in his head that he would lie awake imagining it. The different ways it could have happened. It occurred to him when he was about ten that most children probably didn’t spend hours staring at the
ceiling and thinking about all the ways they could have been orphaned. He vowed to stop, and managed to keep it up for four days until he was walking to school with his nose in a book and almost stepped out in front of a car. Stan had pulled him back and they’d stood there on the sidewalk staring at each other, breathing heavily, fully aware of what they’d so narrowly avoided.

There was probably a universe where Stan hadn’t been there. Ford thought about that a lot. Sometimes he was jealous of it.

And then . . .

The universes where Stan hadn’t betrayed him and he’d gone to West Coast Tech. The universes where he hadn’t ended up in Gravity Falls, for whatever reason. The universes where he’d been wise enough not to trust Bill. The universes where Stan had taken his Journal and run—though in retrospect he could think of just as many ways that could have turned out to be a worse world than a better one.

Every word, every move, every decision would fracture the timeline. A billion billion choices piling up over a lifetime. A billion futures that he’d denied himself through his own foolishness. Another billion that had been denied him by others. It was paralyzing.

This future, where the world was intact and his family was intact and they were all, for want of a better word, happy, was one that he hadn’t imagined was possible. He thought he’d ruined all his chances at happiness thirty years ago, and that Stan had ruined his own some dozen years before that. And so he was always on the lookout for the universe to shift and right itself. He imagined the ways that it could, partly out of paranoia and partly out of fear and partly out of a twisted sense that by imagining them he could warn them off, rob them of their power.

At the very least, they wouldn’t be able to surprise him.

He had dreamed, briefly. He had been walking through a long room, clearly modeled after one of the galleries on Solus R where he’d taken an interdimensional art history class under the patronage of the planet’s brood-mother. The papercut architecture was quite distinctive. In reality, he’d wandered through numerous rooms like this, taking careful notes on the canvases (well, the canvas-like substrates) mounted to the walls.

In the dream, there was one Earth-style painting at the far end of the gallery. He could make out the elaborately gilded frame long before any of the details of the painting itself. The palette was muddy, the figures fading into their background.

He approached. Judging by the poses it was a Lamentation of some sort, a group of mourners gathered around a fallen figure. Something about it already filled him with dread, but he couldn’t make himself look away or stop moving.

And then, in the manner of dreams, everything clicked into focus at once.

Ford wanted to close his eyes, and he wasn’t sure if it was some power of the dream or his own morbid fascination that kept them open.

The painting depicted a clearing in the forest. The clearing where they’d found Stan after Weirdmageddon was over. But this was a different universe.

Dipper and Mabel knelt on the grass, their heads bowed. Mabel held Stan’s fez in her hands and Dipper held the Memory Gun. And in the center of the painting, in the manner of a pieta, Soos held Stan.
Ford’s fingers hovered over the surface of the paint, tracing smooth brushstrokes that marked the tears falling down the handyman’s cheeks as he stared down at the body cradled in his arms.

“You’re not real,” Ford told the painting. “You’re a metaphor.”

“And who’s got time for those, huh!”

Ford jumped at the intrusion, but relaxed as the large, warm hand settled on his shoulder.

“Come on, Sixer,” said Stan. “Stop moping! You and me have got monsters to punch!”

The correct form should have been “you and I,” but Ford didn’t correct him. He smiled, turning away from the painting. “Yes. Yes, of course.”

“Just got one question for ‘ya,” said Stan, as the two of them walked on through the gallery.

“Hmm?”

“Why didn’t you stop me?”

Ford froze. “What?”

“I said,” Stan repeated, his grip on Ford’s shoulder tightening uncomfortably, “Why didn’t you stop me?”

The floor was tiled in smooth tessellating patterns in green and gold and coral pink, and the walls were high and arched and organic.

“Why didn’t you help me, Ford?” Stan asked. His voice was pleading and his face was contorted in pain or fear or—

There were cracks in his skin, spreading out from the wrinkles, and everywhere they traveled the skin went pale and hard. He fell to his knees and Ford fell with him, Stan’s hand still clutching his shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” said Stan, his face cracking as it moved like half-hardened clay. “You weren’t supposed to know.”

His mouth stopped moving and his eyes glazed over, white as bleached coral. His chest rose and fell twice more and then it stilled.

“No,” Ford whimpered, reaching out to touch his brother’s face. It was cold as stone. “No . . .”

This wasn’t how it happened. It couldn’t be. He—

He tried to stand up, leave the apparition behind, but as he moved he heard a sharp crack. The statue’s hand had broken off at the wrist. The fingers still grasped his shoulder.

And then, beginning at the broken wrist, the statue began to crumble.

Ford woke up in a cold sweat, his hands reaching for something that didn’t exist.

Didn’t exist in this universe.

He stumbled his way through the cabin to check on Stan, and even though he knew with every fiber of his being that the dream was a lie, he nearly wept at the sound of his brother’s snores.
He didn’t dare go back to sleep, so there were no other dreams, but his waking mind was quite skilled enough at imagining darker pasts and uncertain futures. He lay awake, seeing Bill’s yellow eyes staring out at him from his own face, from Nuala’s, from the kids’. He saw Stan with slitted pupils raising a gun at him and laughing, Stan with normal eyes weeping and turning the weapon on himself. He saw himself sitting in a hospital waiting room, looking up as a doctor arrived solemnly to tell him that Stan would never regain full use of his arm—

—that Stan was in a coma—

—that Stan was dead—

—that the surgery had gone smoothly but there was a strange surface pattern to his brother’s bones, as if they’d been carved out of coral.

He’d cheated the multiverse of its comeuppance for a few months. More than he deserved. More than he’d imagined. But he could feel the weight of all those disastrous futures pressing down on him, waiting for a chance to strike.

“Ready for the big shindig?” Stan asked, and it was the present, and Ford was sitting on the boat he shared with his brother, drinking coffee, and they were both real and both alive.

“Of course,” he said, and wrenched his mind away from dreading the future. There was no time for that.

They had planning to do.
“You’re going to a party?”

“Well, not really a party, it’s—”

“And you didn’t tell me?”

Mabel glared out from the laptop screen, hands on her hips.

“We just decided last night, pumpkin,” said Stan, his tone somewhere between soothing and defensive.

“Yeah, but do you know how much I could have done since last night? Grunkle Ford needs a makeover, and Nuala needs an advanced course in Humaning, and where were you planning to get an outfit for her, hmm?”

Stan looked across the table at Ford and gave him a one-shouldered shrug. “At . . . a store?”

Mabel rolled her eyes. “You two are hopeless at fashion. No offense, but I think it’s time to bring out the big guns.”

She pulled out her phone, dialed, and stood there tapping her foot while it rang.

“Yes, hello. Pacifica? We’ve got an emergency!”

*

Nuala stood awkwardly in the center of the cabin wearing her sealskin and one of Stan’s Hawaiian shirts while Ford took her measurements. It felt strange. They had plenty of measuring equipment on the boat, but it was for anomalies. Experiments. Not people.

From a split video window on the laptop screen, the Northwest girl watched judgmentally. The fact that “judgmental” was clearly a default expression that had been drilled into her since birth didn’t make Ford feel any less scrutinized.

“Are clothes always this complicated?” Nuala asked. She wriggled and made a face as Ford wrapped the measuring tape around her hips.

“Only super-fancy awesome sparkle clothes!” said Mabel, at almost the exact same time that Pacifica said, “If you take your appearance seriously they are.” She was scrolling through something on her hot pink phone. “We’ll have to go off-the-rack, and plus-size is a challenge, but I’m sure we can find something suitable.”

“Aww, Pacifica!” said Mabel. “You’re like her fairy godmother!”

Perhaps it was some issue with her webcam, but Pacifica seemed to go very red all of a sudden.
“Whatever,” she sniffed. “I’m only doing this so you’ll owe me.”

Ford let her walk him through the rest of the measurements. It made him almost nostalgic for the dimensions where they had machines that could just scan your body and spit out clothes in exactly your size, even though his experience with them had mostly involved disguises and prison jumpsuits. He finished taking the circumference of Nuala’s bicep—first relaxed, at Pacifica’s insistence, and then flexed, at Stan’s.

“Wouldn’t want to go up against you in the ring!” said Stan. “Once you figured out how fists work you’d be a powerhouse.”

“Fists are silly,” said Nuala, shrugging away from Ford and the tape measure. “Can you bite in this ring?”

“Eh,” said Stan. “That depends on how much you care about things like ‘rules’ and ‘consequences.’ Now, when I was a kid—”

“All right, she’s done,” Pacifica interrupted blithely. “Now you.”

Ford blinked at her. “Excuse me?”

Mabel flapped her arms at the screen. “You’ve gotta get fancied up, too, Great Uncle Ford!”

“No, but—I . . . we have a suit already . . .”

“What, that thing your brother wears? Pu-lease. It should have ended up in the rag bucket like twenty years ago.”

“It is a little . . . vintage,” said Mabel apologetically. “And it’s got that weird old-person smell, like moth balls and disappointment. Sorry, Grunkle Ford, but I think Pacifica has a point.”

“Well, obviously.” They really needed to see about color-correcting the screen—Pacifica’s face looked to be about the same shade as Ford’s sweater.

Speaking of which . . . they’d had to dress Nuala in the thinnest shirt they had before Pacifica would accept any of her measurements. There was no way she’d let Ford keep the heavy woolen turtleneck. He tried anyway. “Can’t you just measure over . . . ?”

“Not if you want it to fit, which is the entire point of measuring.”

“What about the height thingies?” said Mabel. “You can start with those, at least!”

And so Nuala, fumbling at first to hold the tape measure, took down Ford’s height and the length of his trouser legs and several other things that seemed increasingly awkward and unnecessary. He let his mind turn to more important matters than the length of his inseam.

The fundraiser began at six thirty. That gave them nearly ten hours—more if they were fashionably late—to make their preparations. The plan was simple enough. All Ford needed to do was convince B—Doctor Smith. He’d use the name tonight but he didn’t need to yet. He’d convince Doctor Smith that the two of them were equally unprincipled, and then broach the topic—hypothetically, of course—of where a man might hide a sealskin. And then, well, either it would work or it wouldn’t. There was no sense in trying to plan too far ahead. There were too many ways the future could have splintered by then. It was like trying to trace the edge of a fractal—all those tiny little curves that blossomed out into their own universes if you followed them too far.
Something tightened around his neck. Something cold and hard and—

“I’ve got ways of making you talk! It’s only a matter of—”

“No!”

Ford jerked forward and for a moment the collar tightened, snapping his head back, and then the pressure released and he was free, his hand flying to the blaster at his hip even though it was too small, much too small—

“Ford! Hey!”

Something tightened around his wrist. But it wasn’t shackles. There was give to it, and a familiar shape, a thumb on one side and one-two-three-four fingers on the other and—oh.

Oh.

The world clicked back into place like a slide advancing in a projector. Stan slowly released his hold on Ford’s wrist. Nuala stood frozen, still holding the measuring tape in one hand.

She’d been measuring the circumference of his neck. Of course. And of course he’d panicked and lashed out because he couldn’t even be fitted for a suit without ruining everything—

Stan spoke. “Hey rich kid.”

Pacifica bristled, but she looked almost relieved to have someone to argue with. “You know what my name is, old man.”

“Yeah, sure. Just, uh, why don’t you tell me what else you need and we’ll get back to you. I think my nerdy brother over here needs more coffee so he doesn’t fall asleep on his feet again, yanno?”

Pacifica looked unconvinced, but she shrugged nonetheless and listed off the remaining measurements. Stan scribbled them down, his tongue sticking out between his teeth.

“And get them to me quickly,” the girl snapped. “I haven’t got all day.”

“Thanks, Pacificaaa!” said Mabel, wrapping her arms around herself the way she always did when she wanted to hug someone at a distance.

Pacifica rolled her eyes. “You’re welcome. I guess. Whatever.”

*

Ford took the neck measurement himself. The tape stretched taut across the band of paler skin that circled his throat while his hands brushed the raised Lichtenberg figure scars that stretched down across his chest almost, but not quite, to his heart.

They had looked like fractals in the days immediately after Weirdmageddon—faint, barely-visible traceries of red branching across his body. But now they were faded. Simplified. Codified. No longer like the blossoming of universes, but like a stemma, a series of imperfect copies built from a million possibilities.

All the possibilities were imperfect, Ford knew. But they never felt that way until they existed and he could see exactly how flawed they were.

He marked the tape with his fingernail and pulled it away until he could read the numbers.
The day went by too quickly. Before he knew it Ford was standing in the hotel room they’d rented for the night, his hair damp from the shower and his skin, scars and tattoos and all, scrubbed clean. He pulled the robe tighter around himself and stared at the suit the Northwest girl had picked out for him.

He hadn’t worn a suit since Weirmdageddon.

“You need a hand?” asked Stan. He was sprawled on the other bed, twirling his ridiculous stolen pen between his fingers. “Sorry I can only offer you the one. But hey! After tomorrow this arm can stop being such a slacker.”

Tomorrow. Right. They only had one chance at this. Otherwise Stan would have to go to the hospital alone, and that was unacceptable.

“You’re sure McGucket isn’t gonnna secretly hide a flamethrower in the metal bit or anything?” Stan continued. “If I’m turning into some anime cyborg pirate I should at least know in advance.”

“No flamethrowers,” said Ford. “I promise. You’ll be the world’s most boring cyborg.”


He glanced at the clock on the wall and his face scrunched up. “Think we should go check on . . . ?” He indicated the bathroom door with a toss of his head. Nuala had been inside for a long time. They could hear her singing quietly in a strange, nasal language. The garment bag and boxes of accessories that Pacifica had procured for them—the number seemed excessive, but Ford knew very little about how women dressed—sat unopened on one of the chairs.

He stood and rapped gently on the bathroom door.

“Nuala?”

The noise stopped. “Yes?”

“Um . . . are you decent?”

“At lots of things! What do you mean?”


The door opened and Nuala peered out, her sealskin wrapped tight around her. The handle of Stan’s hairbrush was sticking out of the tangled tresses massed around her shoulders.

“I don’t understand how you make your hair do things,” she said.

“Well maybe you shouldn’t have bitten the hairdresser,” remarked Stan.

“She touched me,” snapped Nuala with a curl of her lip. Ford sympathized.

“Well, you can’t go to a fancy do looking like your hair’s going to eat the cutlery.”

“It should,” muttered Nuala darkly. “I hate cutlery.”

Stan laughed. She stuck her tongue out at him.
“Well, come on then,” said Stan, pointing at one of the chairs. “Let’s fix it.”

Ford left them to it and went into the bathroom to get dressed. He didn’t hear any shouting or snarling, which was a good sign, but he was still surprised when he stepped out and saw Stan gently working a comb through Nuala’s hair. She was smiling, and Stan laughed at whatever she had just said. He’d been expecting . . . well, not carnage per se, but certainly a much tenser scene.

Stan looked up and grinned at him. “Looking good, Poindexter,” he said. “Glad to see you still clean up okay.”

The suit was uncomfortable in the way that anything that wasn’t his usual sweater and coat was uncomfortable, but he had to admit that it fit well. It was just stiff, made him stand tall instead of letting him curl up inside it if he needed to. It smelled new and sterile.

“Grab me the conditioner, would you?” Stan asked. Ford brought it and watched with surprise as Stan slowly worked the product into Nuala’s hair and teased out the knots until it was smooth.

“When did you learn how to do this?” Ford asked.

Stan smiled. “Mabel. Went swimming in the lake and turned her hair into a rat’s nest. I said we should just cut it—lost cause, right? But she wouldn’t stop singing until I sat down and helped her comb it out. Darn kid. There!” He removed the hairbrush and set it to the side. “Now you don’t got an accessory-eating monster on your head. Huh. Come to think about it, maybe that’s an idea I should run by Soos.”

He sat back and stretched his one working arm. “You want it up?”

“Will I look more human?”

Stan considered the wild waves of hair that cascaded down Nuala’s back to pool below her hips. “Probably.”

She gave a small, stiff nod. “Then yes.”

“Can’t do anything fancy,” Stan said. “I’ve been a lot of things in my time, but never a hairdresser. But at least we can braid it.”

Ford, who had been adjusting his tie in the mirror, blinked. “We?”

Stan wiggled his fingers. “I got one hand, genius. Come on.”

It was an odd process and Nuala laughed at them as they argued about how to start. On their first attempt they split the hair unevenly and the braid looked sad and lopsided. On the second, Stan and Ford couldn’t match their tension—the braid curved to the right and Nuala snapped at Ford for pulling too hard. But the third time, as Nuala relaxed and Ford found the rhythm, it was almost soothing. Cross the strand over the middle, pull it snug but not tight, then wait for Stan to do the same and swap off which strand they were holding. There was a rhythm to it. It helped him breathe.

Finally, her braid held in place with a piece of knotted twine, Nuala gathered up her things and went to get dressed. Ford sat on the bed and pressed the receiver into his ear. Nuala would be wearing the ring this time, they’d decided. It was more . . . fitting for the roles they were playing.

Stan nudged Ford with his uninjured arm. “Hey. You all right?”

“I’m fine.” Maybe if he said it enough it would turn out to be true. There were universes like that,
where reality bent and twisted around spoken words and the native populations sang their cities into existence. But here the words fell flat and lifeless.

“Okay,” said Stan. “Sure. But, uh, somebody once told me that it’s okay not to be all right. And I think maybe he had a point. Just saying.”

Ford breathed in deeply and then let it out. One-two-three-four-five-six.

“I appreciate your concern,” he said. “But it’s misplaced, I assure you.”

Stan shrugged lopsidedly. “Suit yourself. Or don’t. I mean, technically you had to get suited by a preteen because you don’t know anything about clothes.”

“Ha ha.”

From the bathroom, they could hear Nuala arguing with Mabel on speakerphone. “There’s no point to these socks! You can see through them and they don’t have any colors!”

“Just . . . be careful, all right?” said Stan.

“I’m always careful,” Ford said.

Stan laid a hand on his back. “Ford. Bro. Don’t lie to me. I know you, and I don’t think you’ve ever been careful in your life.”

“Then what’s the point of insisting that I try?”

“I don’t know. Wishful thinking?”

More dialogue drifted out from the bathroom. “And you wear these all the time? What is wrong with your species?”

“I guess . . .” Stan fell back onto the bed, staring up at the ceiling tiles. “Remember that this isn’t a solo mission. Nuala might not be able to use a fork, but she could take someone out.”

“And I can use both forks and firearms,” said Ford. “We’ll be fine. I’ve handled much more dangerous missions on my own.”

“And how many of those didn’t end up with you hog-tied and thrown in Space Jail?” asked Stan. “I’ve done more dangerous things on my own, too, but they sucked. Even when I did make it out okay. I’m . . . look, I’m not saying you can’t do this on your own. It’s just . . . it’s nice that you don’t have to.”

The suit was perfectly hemmed and there were no loose threads for him to pick at. Ford dug his hands into the paisley-patterned blanket stretched across the bed and twisted a corner of it between his fingers.

*

It felt like only a few minutes before Mabel called Stan’s phone to let them know that Nuala was ready.

“She’s very nervous and a little bitey, so be careful,” Mabel warned them. “Also we had to lie about how women’s clothing works, so pretend that you’re super uncomfortable and don’t have any pockets, okay? Don’t worry I know it’s gonna be great love you byeeeee!”
Nuala didn’t respond to the first knock. After the second, Ford tried the handle and gently pushed the door open.

Nuala was standing in front of the mirror, still as a figurehead. She looked out of place against the white tiles and the harsh fluorescent light, like a looted artifact on display in a far-away museum.

The girls had done their job well. Nuala’s dress was made of some deep blue-gray fabric that turned to lace at her knees. The back and the sleeves and the neck were white lace, delicate as sea foam. Her earrings dangled and dazzled like they were trying to hide the fact that they were clip-ons, and she wore a heavy silver chain around her neck. Ford’s eyes should have been drawn to the pendant that hung from it, but he found himself staring at the chain instead. It wasn’t tight, but still he wished that he could just unfasten it and fling it away.

“Lookin’ good, kid,” said Stan from behind him.

Nuala jumped. “I am . . . nervous,” she admitted.

“It’ll be fine,” said Stan. “You look beautiful.”

Nuala stared at her reflection in the mirror. She touched her hair, the long braid they’d tamed her wild tresses into, the neckline of her dress and the heavy pendant dangling from her throat.

“I don’t want to look beautiful,” she said quietly. “I want to look like me.”

*

Stan made sure to give Ford his Mabel Hug for the day before they headed out. It still wasn’t quite as tight as Mabel herself would manage, but it was tighter and longer than usual.

“I’ll be fine,” Ford said, his face crushed against his brother’s good shoulder.

“You’d better be!” Stan gave a final squeeze and then stepped away, clapping Ford on the back.

“Nuala, I’m counting on you to look after this nerd, okay?”

“Got it!” The selkie headbutted Stan’s shoulder in affirmation.

“And I want you to take these, just in case.”

He produced a set of brass knuckles and slipped them into the purse Nuala had slung over her shoulder. Ford suspected that Mabel had been behind that particular purchase—it was shaped like a surprised-looking fish and had scales made of glass beads and sequins.

“Don’t worry,” Stan said before Ford could protest, “They’re my best pair. Totally reasonable accessory for a fancy shindig like this.”

Ford decided that it wasn’t worth arguing over.

*

The next thing he knew their taxi was pulling up outside the aquarium. Ford tapped his fingers across his knees. One-two-three-four-five-six, over and over again.

“You give her the ring yet?” came Stan’s voice in his ear.

Right. That. He’d been putting it off—foolish, since it was their lifeline if anything went wrong—but
it made the charade seem more real. He knew they were only pretending, but still, it felt like another chain. Like a contract that he was on the wrong side of.

He took the pirate ring from his breast pocket and turned to Nuala.

“Your hand?”

She offered him both of them. It took her a moment to relax enough that he could slip the communicator onto the ring finger of her left hand.

Nuala wrinkled her nose. “It feels wrong,” she said.

“I know,” said Ford, pulling his hands away and running a thumb along the scar tissue at his wrists.

“I know.”

*

The venue was . . .

Big. Big and bright and full of people and full of noise. Ford searched desperately for a corner while Nuala stood stiff at his side, holding on to his arm with all her might. He suspected her grip would leave bruises. He didn’t care.

He piloted them through the crowd toward the balcony at the far end of the room, snatching a drink from the tray of a passing waiter as they went by. He’d meant for it to be a simple prop, something to keep his hands busy, but before they were through the balcony doors he found that he’d already downed it.

No matter. Perhaps it would calm his nerves.

Or perhaps it would ruin everything. He could already feel the evening branching out of his control, likes cracks spreading in a sheet of ice.

There wasn’t much he could do. Just hold on to the best timeline he could make and not let go. There were universes where this worked, Ford was certain. He just needed to make sure that he was in one of those.

They’d made their way to the railing and were leaning over, Nuala taking in great gulps of sea air from the harbor. He could feel her relax as the salt spray brushed her skin.

If only it were that easy for him. He could feel the prickle of watching eyes—and of course there were people watching, that was what happened in a crowd!—and had to fight the urge to spin around so he could keep them all in his sights.

He wished he’d been able to bring his blaster. He felt naked without the familiar weight at his hip. He felt lost without the weapon to ground him. Without any of the things he usually had to ground him. His blaster. His sweater. His coat.

His brother.

But Nuala was there, and she was squeezing his arm, not with the death grip she’d used earlier but with a steady pressure that should have been comforting. And she was saying something—something about going back inside—and Ford tried to smile and nod at her, tried to turn and steel himself and brave the noise and the light and the eyes for her sake if nothing else—
The empty glass fell from his hand and tumbled over the railing. He’d forgotten that he’d been holding it. It fell as if in slow motion into the harbor below, glinting in the light, until it entered the water and disappeared with barely a splash.

“Um,” said Nuala. “Just checking—is that something we’re supposed to do?”

Ford shook his head. “No, no—it was an accident. Ignore it.”

She looked disappointed that throwing glassware into the harbor wasn’t a normal part of high society, and Ford supposed that he couldn’t blame her. It would certainly be more entertaining than the interminable small talk they’d have to endure.

But lurking on the balcony wasn’t what they were here for.

He turned, and braced himself, and entered the fray.

*  

He could pretend. Sometimes. For a moment. He could pretend until whoever he was talking to asked about Nuala, and then he had to remember who he was playing.

At least he’d gotten some practice in before Doctor Smith arrived.

Ford would have recognized him even without Serinam by his side. His thin, severe face looked exactly like the photograph that Dipper had found. Everything about him was exacting, from the cut of his beard to the cut of his suit. Ford found himself suddenly grateful for Pacifica’s insistence on the quality of his own suit; Doctor Smith didn’t look like he would give the time of day to someone in ill-fitting clothing.

Ford set down the glass he was holding and laid a hand on Nuala’s shoulder. She’d been facing the balcony, and as she turned he heard the sharp intake of her breath. For a moment she locked eyes with Serinam, and then the other selkie looked away.

Nuala took his arm. There was no doubt by now that he had bruises forming. Ford leaned into the pain, let it ground him. He tried to hide the emotion in his eyes. It had been too long since he’d needed to act like this. Not just pretending he was fine when he wasn’t—that was automatic and instinctive and had been a habit for as long as he could remember. But just . . . not letting himself feel things. Locking them away in the back of his mind with the other things he couldn’t dwell on. That was harder.

He plastered on a smile and stepped forward.

Doctor Smith noticed Nuala before he noticed Ford. His eyebrows rose momentarily, and then he smiled, tight and smug and predatory.

Bill Cipher hadn’t had a mouth, but if he had he would have smiled just like that when Ford first ran to confront him. He would have smiled just like that when he plucked Ford from the rubble of the tower after his shot went wide. He would have smiled just like that the first time he saw Ford sleeping, an eager little pawn ripe for the taking.

And Ford wasn’t afraid. There was no room in his head to be afraid, no room for anything except the hot, boiling rage that filled him so completely he was sure he must have smoke pouring off his shoulders as he forced himself, excruciatingly, to smile back.

Doctor Smith crossed over to them so Ford didn’t have to move, didn’t have to worry that if he
released the tension in any of his joints his fist would fly of its own accord right into the center that horrible, horrible smile.

Not yet. Not yet. He had to stay calm. Had to pretend. He’d lied to Bill Cipher in the end, hadn’t he? He’d lied to Atlantis. He could lie to Doctor Smith.

“Pardon me, but I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure . . . ?”

There he was, right in front of them.

“No,” said Ford. “I don’t believe you have.”

“. . . Well,” said Doctor Smith after a pause. “I’m Bill Smith, and this ravishing creature is my wife Sarah.” He smiled indulgently at Serinam. “Isn’t she beautiful?”

Some response seemed expected, so Ford nodded. “Yes.” Most people would probably have meant it, but Ford remembered the heartbroken look on Nuala’s face.

“You gotta introduce yourself, bro,” came Stan’s voice in his ear.

Right.

“Dr. Stanford Pines. Pleased to meet you.” He felt like he might choke on the words.

Dr. Smith held out a hand and Ford bit the inside of his lower lip as he took it. He’d avoided handshakes when he could, even before . . . even before Bill Cipher. There, he could say it.

Bill Smith had a firm handshake and long, slender fingers, and the handshake meant nothing except perhaps, apocryphally, as a demonstration that both parties were unarmed. What a lie that could be.

As Ford drew his hand back, Dr. Smith caught and held it.

“Oh, do excuse me. May I?”

Ford looked across at Serinam. He was hardly the most anomalous out of the group that night, or the most likely to be dehumanized for it. He nodded.

Dr. Smith turned Ford’s hand over in his own, flexing his fingers and gently squeezing his knuckles. The touch filled him with a crawling horror entirely out of scale with what was actually happening.

“Fascinating!” said Dr. Smith at last. “Fully functional postaxial polydactyly! I’m not sure I’ve ever seen an extra digit so well integrated! Do you have full range of motion?”

Ford rolled his fingers while Dr. Smith watched, then hid his hand behind his back.

“Oh, do excuse me. May I?”

Ford swallowed. Mirrored Dr. Smith’s smile as best as he could. Leaned into his friend as if asking for forgiveness.

“My fiancée, Nuala.”

“Charmed, I’m sure,” said Dr. Smith. He took Nuala’s hand in his and raised it to kiss her fingertips. She shot Ford a look of pure panic and gripped his arm tighter. Ford kept his expression carefully blank, but squeezed back.
“How long have you been, ah . . .” There was that smile again as he looked Nuala up and down. “. . . Engaged?”

“Not long,” Ford replied. “We met when I was doing research in Labrador. We’ve only been back on the mainland for a few weeks.”

“What type of research?”

“My work is focused on . . . anomalous phenomena. Investigating the scientific nature behind strange tales . . . legends . . . folklore . . .”

“Ah.” Dr. Smith smiled and smiled and Ford bit his tongue to keep from screaming. “I dabble in such areas myself. Not my main area of study—I focus on North Atlantic pinnipeds—but Sarah here has such a personal connection to the folklore. Since we met I admit I’ve found the field quite . . . captivating. She really opened my eyes.”

A muscle twitched in Serinam’s neck as she stared woodenly at the floor. Apart from those first few seconds of eye contact with Nuala, she’d barely looked up.

“What about yours? Does she share your passion for the unexplained?”

“Nuala has little interest in academics, I’m afraid,” Ford found himself saying.

“Oh, I’m sure she makes up for it in other ways,” said Dr. Smith with a smirk. “Brains aren’t everything.”

“Indeed!” replied Ford vehemently, certain that the thing he was agreeing with wasn’t actually what Dr. Smith had meant and equally certain that he wasn’t going to let himself think about it.

“Calm down, bro,” said Stan in his ear. It was comforting to have his brother’s voice muttering to him, drowning out the sounds of his own thoughts. “You can punch him later. I know you’re thinking it cause I’m thinking it too. Just take your time.”

Ford snatched a bite-sized pastry from the tray of a passing waiter. Nuala reached out to take one of her own and Dr. Smith pursed his lips and frowned at her. Without breaking eye contact, she grabbed two of the pastries and shoved them into her mouth. Ford was grateful they’d been able to convince Mabel and Pacifica not to introduce the selkie to makeup.

Now Dr. Smith was looking at him disapprovingly, almost pityingly.

“Nuala!” Ford snapped. “No more!”

She bared her teeth, about to shoot back some angry remark before she remembered and lowered her head.

“It does take a considerable amount of time and resources to train an ambassador animal,” said Dr. Smith calmly, the apparent non-sequitur belied by the curl of his lip as he looked at Nuala. “Of course, some are more co-operative than others.”

“You seem to have experience of your own,” said Ford. “Maybe we could discuss it? Or at least compare notes on our respective folklore research.”

“Absolutely!” said Dr. Smith. “I have several other groups to check in with, but then . . . perhaps we could retire to my office with a little of this very fine wine and have a chat. And I’m sure that Sarah and . . . what was her name again?”
“Nuala.”

“Nuala! Of course. I’m sure that Sarah and Nuala can find plenty to talk about. I remember when we first were married, how difficult she found it to acclimate to the mainland. But everything’s perfect now, isn’t it darling?”

“Yes, dear,” said Serinam. “Perfect.”

*

Ford enjoyed more than a little of the very fine wine as they waited for Dr. Smith to return from his rounds. It was probably a terrible idea. He decided that he didn’t care. As the alcohol took hold of him the fractal patterns of the multiverse blurred away until he was left with only the present and the liquid, honeyed glow of the future. Future, singular. Whatever happened, he only had the one.

He snuck appetizers to Nuala, too sure that they were being watched to let her take them on her own. He’d take one from every tray they passed and then palm it off to her when no one was looking. It was the only apology he could manage under the circumstances.

“It’s okay, you know,” she muttered to him as they took another break on the balcony. “Do whatever you need to make Billsmith like you until Serinam’s safe, and then you can help me eat him.”

“Um,” said Ford. “Pass. But thank you. But cannibalism really isn’t in my plans for the evening.”

Stan laughed in his ear.

“Suit yourself,” Nuala growled, biting into a canape.

*

If it had belonged to anyone else, Dr. Smith’s office would have been comforting. It was full of the clutter of academia—overflowing bookcases and post-it-covered papers with chunks of bone and baleen used as paperweights. Even with his limited computing knowledge, Ford could tell the clunky monitor on the desk was an old model. The ancient conference stickers were beginning to peel off its grimy sides, and the keyboard balanced precariously on a stack of manilla folders. The top drawer of the flat files in the corner sat half-open, revealing oversized charts and sounding maps.

It was cozy. Or it would have been, if it weren’t for the man there with him.

“So, Stan,” said Dr. Smith, pointing him to the desk chair. “Do you go by . . . ?”

“Stanford,” said Ford, taking a seat. He and Stan had discussed the possibility of pseudonyms, of introducing himself as Stan or Filbrick or something that was even less him, but Ford had protested. He’d have to tell enough lies already. As Stan always said, you used as much of the truth as you could. Used as much of yourself as you could. Compartmentalized. Ford was Nuala’s friend. Stanford—Dr. Stanford Pines, PhD—could be removed. Not the way that Dr. Smith was, never like that, but close enough to pretend.

“Fair enough.” Dr. Smith extricated the office’s other chair from the mounds of books and dragged it over. He fixed Ford with a fascinated grin. “So tell me, Stanford. How did you manage to land a selkie?”

Ford took the glass of wine he was offered. “How does anyone? Location. Research. Luck. I caught her sleeping. She nearly savaged me when she woke, but I’d already gotten her skin in safe-keeping, so I came away with only a few minor scars.”
Dr. Smith laughed and clapped him on the back. Ford fought back a shudder.

“Luck is right! You know, I wasn’t even looking for them when I left on the expedition. Didn’t think they were real. It was Sarah, if you can believe it, who found me! Said she wanted to make a difference. Study science, save the ocean. And here’s the best part; she gave up her skin herself! She wanted to follow me but she was worried about getting it through customs. Well, you know how closely regulated marine mammal parts are in this country. It was easy to take it back with the rest of our samples and then hold onto it for safe-keeping.”

“Safe-keeping?”

Dr. Smith chuckled. “Well . . . safe-keeping, study. They’re not that different, really.”

“So if she asked, would you give it . . . ?”

Ford knew the answer, but he still had to ask. Dr. Smith cackled. “Of course not! Are you mad? Lose a wife and a research subject in one fell swoop just because she asked? She hardly does anymore, anyway. You know, it was months before she even suspected.”

Doing his best to ignore the stream of increasingly creative invective in his ear and the sting of bile in his throat, Ford paused and took a sip of the wine.

“It sounds like a much smoother start than my situation, certainly,” he said.

Dr. Smith waved a hand dismissively. “She’ll come around. I’ll be very interested to see your data. Especially long-term; Sarah insists that humans and selkies can’t have children together, but I don’t know if I believe her.” He raised one eyebrow. “See how it works out for you. The possibilities for study with an inter-species child—”

Ford choked on his wine.

In a way it was a blessing, he thought as he doubled over. It gave him an excuse to hide his face.

“It’s okay,” came Stan’s comforting voice. “It’s okay it’s okay it’s okay. We’re gonna get you all out of there and then we’re gonna make that bastard wish he was never born. Yeah, that’s it, kid.”

He must be responding to Nuala as well. Ford knew she was close, close enough for the pirate ring to pick up Dr. Smith’s words. He’d need to be careful when they left.

He straightened up, still coughing into the sleeve of his suit.

“I had no idea that the thought of procreation was so alarming to you,” said Dr. Smith with a smirk.

Ford did his best to return the expression, sure he was ending up with something more like a death rictus.

“As I said, I’m early in the process of assimilation. Nuala is . . . temperamental. If she ever finds her skin . . . well, I hope you’re able to find my reports since I most likely won’t be around to send them.”

“All the more reason for you to hide it well.”

Ford drained the dregs of his glass and set it on the desk beside him.

“Perhaps that’s one thing you can help me with. She’s tenacious. I keep it under lock and key, but sometimes I wonder if it’s enough. What precautions do you take?”
“You’re asking me where I keep it?”

“How you keep it, at least.” Ford thought his voice sounded steady enough, even as the hand Dr. Smith couldn’t see drummed rapidly on his thigh. One-two-three-four-five-six, over and over.

“I’m sure you’re aware of how imperative it is that this remain a secret,” said Dr. Smith. “For both of our sakes. There are others, even other men of science, whose fear of the unknown and obsession with the petty façade of morality would prevent them from understanding.”

“Of course,” said Ford, while in his ear Stan muttered, “Please someone break this chump’s nose for me, I’m begging ya.”

Dr. Smith smiled and poured Ford another glass. “And where do you keep Nuala’s skin?”

“There’s a safe built into the floor of my boat.” He sipped his wine and fed the other man imaginary details until he seemed satisfied.

“And you?”

“Well,” said Dr. Smith. “The best place to hide a book is in a library.”

There followed an extended shuffling of keys—one from Dr. Smith’s pocket, which unlocked a desk drawer containing a huge ring of keys, one of which unlocked yet another drawer, and then finally, with a small and pointed key that looked like it could have belonged to a post office box, Dr. Smith unlocked the lowest of the flat file drawers.

It was filled with sealskins.

“Which one—”

“You can’t tell, can you? That’s the impressive part.” His eyes flashed. “I ran a DNA test on it as soon as we got back and it came back 100% harp seal. Ran one on Sarah, too, and it said 100% human.”

“Well, yes, magic isn’t encoded in DNA,” said Ford. “It’s an entirely separate system! The scientific instruments in this dimension don’t pick it up at all! What you need—”

Stan was shouting at him to shut up and Dr. Smith was looking at him hungrily. Ford clamped his mouth shut and panicked.

“What I need?”

“Oh, well, it doesn’t matter. It’s entirely hypothetical. I was just... carried away by scientific excitement and said something that is not true! It happens. Occasionally.”

Dr. Smith stood and stalked towards him, smiling the same way he’d smiled at Nuala. Ford was frozen in place. One chance, one future, and he’d messed it all up. Ruined everything because he didn’t know when to just stop talking.

Bill Smith grabbed Ford by his wrists and pinned them to the arms of the chair, his grip tight and his nails digging into the flesh of Ford’s arms. He stepped uncomfortably close until his impeccable suit and his predatory smile was all Ford could see, and then he leaned in further to meet his eyes.

“Why, Doctor Pines,” he said. “I do believe there are some rather crucial things that you’re not telling me.”
Ford's breath caught in his throat. His mind reeled, searching for an excuse, a bluff, anything to get them back on track. Stan could have managed it. Perhaps under different circumstances Ford could have too. If that smile wasn't so familiar. If the grip on his wrists wasn't so tight. But try as he might, his mind remained blank.

“I . . . don't know what you mean,” he said. His tone hovered somewhere between confusion and bravado. It wouldn't fool anyone.

He should have brought a weapon. Something to remember for next time, if there was one. Note to self: don't listen to children who complain about how a high-caliber plasma blaster would ruin the outline of his suit.

“Tell me, Stanford,” said Doctor Smith. “Do I look like an idiot?”

“No?” Ford replied. You look like a triangle, he thought, and almost giggled at how absurd that would sound if he said it.

“Really?” Doctor Smith straightened up and stood back, crossing his arms. “Then how did you expect me to fall for your transparent little scheme? Did you think I wouldn't suspect?”

“I . . . suspect what?” said Ford. He could feel his heart picking up, a drumbeat of terror slicing straight through him. Did he know? Did he suspect? If he knew where Nuala's skin was truly hidden . . . if Stan was in danger—

“I knew what you were here for from the beginning. You wanted to steal Sarah away from me!”

“That's preposterous!” Ford blustered, hoping that he could pass the quaver in his voice off as anger. “Now unhand me or I—”

Doctor Smith laughed, and it was cultured and germane and terrible as his situation was Ford felt himself breathing easier. It wasn't a cackle. It wasn't like—he almost thought “his Bill” and felt the bile rise at the back of his throat. It wasn't like Bill Cipher. This was just a man. No more powerful than him.

“Hey,” came Stan's voice in his ear. “It's gonna be okay. We just gotta figure out how much he knows.”

At least Serinam had been right; Doctor Smith was a gloater.

“You shouldn't have tried to meet with her beforehand,” he said. “I knew something was amiss
when she was ninety seconds late for yesterday’s meeting. Adam said something about a tour, but she didn’t have one scheduled. It was a simple matter to investigate the security footage, and after that . . . well. Barely a point to checking the additions to the guest list; your hands were identification enough. Doctor Stanford Pines . . . graduated with top honors and then became obsessed with anomalies and vanished into the woods . . . no scientific presence for the past thirty years but quite an impressive criminal record, I must say. What were you doing all that time, Stanford?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” said Ford, and he thought I was traveling through the multiverse being chased by a creature more powerful than you can possibly imagine, but he is dead and I am alive. I was lost but I made it home and I won’t let you take that from me. From anyone.

“Oh?” said Doctor Smith.

When Ford remained obstinately silent, he continued, “It was obvious from the moment I saw you. You planned to take my research for yourself. It was only fitting that I attempt the same, although I must say it was a disappointing match. I thought you were supposed to be clever. For a moment I hoped I might have discovered a kindred spirit . . . someone intelligent enough to truly understand. But I suppose the outcome would have been the same either way. Now . . . tell me what you know about magic. And what was the other thing you said? Other dimensions?”

“I have no reason to tell you anything,” said Ford. “Come on, Bill. Do I look like an idiot?”

Doctor Smith—Bill Smith—slapped him hard across the face. Ford shook his head and then glared up defiantly. This he knew how to take. He could do this all day.

“Okay Sixer, I think you’ve had enough chit-chat. Time to get the hell out of there.”

Right.

It should be easy to make Doctor Smith chase him. If he bolted now he could lead the other man away, clear up the office for Serinam and Nuala. They might be right outside the door—he should make noise as he stood, warn them away—

He sprung up. It should have worked, he was sure . . . but his head spun and the edges of his vision went black and he collapsed back into the chair.

Doctor Smith chuckled. “Feeling a little under the weather, Stanford?”

“What did you—” Stan and Ford hissed at the same time.

“Oh, nothing permanent. Just a little touch of retrograde amnesia. You’ll wake up tomorrow and this will all be a blank spot in your memory. Of course, you’ll also find that secret compartment in your boat mysteriously empty. And as for Nuala . . . I’m not sure. Once she’s no longer beholden to you, I might encourage her to take her revenge. Dealing with a man-killer would certainly make things more challenging, but I suspect I could make it work to my advantage. Convince her that I’m not like you. I’ll be her savior. Just imagine how she might thank me.”

Ford felt sick. Not just from whatever Doctor Smith had put in his wine—though he should have suspected, should have noticed, shouldn’t have accepted the drink in the first place. Now he was all slow and sluggish. His fault.

But Doctor Smith’s words made his stomach turn. If he thought he had any chance of landing a blow, he would already have struck.

Doctor Smith smirked. ”Why Doctor Pines, you seem distinctly unwell. It would be terribly impolite
of me not to offer to walk you home."

"I'm fine," Ford growled. He wasn't sure why he bothered saying anything. Surely it would just egg Doctor Smith on, encourage either his nauseating gloating or the insipid facade of politeness. Ford wasn’t sure which was worse.

"No, no, I insist."

He grabbed Ford's arm and pulled him upright. His fingers were slender and his grip was firm.

Ford didn't try to struggle. If they left the office, then perhaps there was a chance . . .

He didn't know whether any of the skins in that bottom flat file drawer actually belonged to Serinam or if Doctor Smith had been bluffing the whole time, but he knew they needed to find out for sure. If he played along for a few minutes . . . if he distracted Doctor Smith, exaggerated his unsteadiness . . . there was plenty of time to investigate the office before they made it back to the boat and Doctor Smith discovered that there was no secret compartment.

Whatever happened to him, Nuala’s skin was safe. Safe back at the hotel with Stan.

Stan was safe. Nuala was safe. There was still a chance they could rescue Serinam. That was what mattered.

Ford took a few lurching steps towards the door, nearly stumbling. Doctor Smith laughed. Good. Let him underestimate him. Let him assume that he could barely walk, so if he had to run it would come as a surprise. He felt like one of those birds that feigned injury to lead predators away from their nests or the decoy golems that the people of Kabbleth V used to mislead invaders.

"Do you need me to get to the boat?" Stan asked in his ear. "Actually, you know what, I don’t care. I'm heading you off."

"No, really, you don't need to escort me," said Ford out loud. Not the most subtle example of doublespeak he'd ever pulled off. Fortunately, Doctor Smith just laughed again and patted him on the back.

"Of course I do!" he said. "What with this weather we've been having and the frankly appalling state of snow removal around here . . . why, if a man in your condition were to try walking along the harbor by himself it would be so easy for him to slip . . ."

Stan had stopped making coherent sentences and now was just swearing under his breath. The sound was comforting—oddly so, given how obviously distressed his brother was. But having his voice there made Ford feel at ease. At least much more at ease than he should be in the company of a man who he suspected had just threatened to murder him.

"They're out of the way," Stan said. "The girls. I might not be able to hear you if you get much farther, so be—"

They were at the door now. The flat file was still partially open. Still unlocked.

Doctor Smith paused and looked behind him, and Ford took advantage of the opportunity to topple forward onto the carpet outside. From this new vantage point he glanced around from side to side. No sign of Nuala or Serinam. Doctor Smith clicked his tongue reproachfully against the roof of his mouth and locked the door behind them.

All right. One locked door in the way. If Ford had brought his blaster it would be no problem at all.
If he'd brought Stan the lock would already be in the process of being picked.

Surely Nuala could deal with one door. One locked door with something inexpressibly important behind it.

"Okay, I hope they try to follow you. We should have thought through this whole 'getting separated' thing, huh bro? I'm just sitting here being useless . . ."

He remembered how hard Stan had tried not to whimper when Ford checked his shoulder the first day after Atlantis. “How did this happen?” Ford had said, running his fingers gently—so gently but still not gently enough—across the swollen joint.

Stan had laughed. “Tried to fight a door.”

“Why?”

“Because you were on the other side of it.”

As Doctor Smith turned, Ford reached up impulsively to his ear. He clutched the earpiece in his hand for a moment. It was warm from the heat of his body. A tiny, shell-shaped lifeline.

He dropped it to the floor right before Doctor Smith pulled him upright again. He hoped the selkies would see it. It was all he could do.

Then, continuing to stagger every few steps, he let himself be led, first to the elevator and then out a side door into the cold salt tang of the harbor air.

*

“I’m sorry,” Serinam whispered over and over again. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have let you come. I shouldn’t have let you put yourself in danger for me . . .”

“Hey,” said Nuala, her voice uncharacteristically soft. “We’re going to save you.” And then she said something in a language Stan didn’t know, a language that didn’t sound like anything he’d ever heard before. Serinam responded in the same tongue, haltingly at first and then with growing confidence. When she next spoke in English that strange accent that Nuala had and that Serinam pretended she didn’t was stronger.

“They’re gone. We should see . . .”

Stan heard the sound of shuffling footsteps as they crept out from wherever they’d been hiding.

“Hey bro,” he whispered. “I can’t hear you but I’m just about to call a cab so I’ll meet you soon, okay?”

He moved towards the nightstand, flipping through room service menus and restaurant recommendations and endless piles of glossy tourist pamphlets. Who needed all this stuff? Why hide the things that were actually useful under all this junk?

His elbow caught the pile and it slipped off the table and scattered. Stan swore quietly. Fine. Time to bother whatever sod was working the front desk.

Then he heard Nuala say, “Hello? Stanley?”

“. . . Yes?”
“Stanford dropped your magic ear thing. I need to—”

“He what?” Stan slapped his own forehead. Just like Ford to go off on his own with nothing—no backup, no weapon—with a man who’d just been making not-so-veiled threats. Just like Ford to give up his one means of contact. Stan told himself that he was furious and tried to tamp down the terror building in his chest. If anything happened to Ford, Stan would . . . Stan would . . .

Stan would wish he’d never left Atlantis.

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll be there as soon as I can. Just—”

“Stanley!” Nuala snapped. “How do I open a door?”

“You don’t! You go after Ford and—”

“No. I open this door. Then I go help Stanford. The faster I do this the faster I can get to him. Now tell me what to do!”

Stan closed his eyes and took a deep breath. His heart was pounding and his brain was just jumping from thought to unhelpful thought. But no. Okay. He knew this. This was easy. Picking it would be better, but if you couldn’t—

“Kick it,” he said. “Kick as hard as you can—right next to the lock, not on it.”

He listened as Nuala followed his instructions. It took three blows until he heard splintering wood, and then a rush of footsteps, and then the rumbling of a metal drawer, and then—

Serinam made a choked gasp.

“Is it there?” Stan asked. “Did he . . .”

“It’s here,” Nuala whispered, her voice heavy with awe and sorrow. “It’s . . . oh sea and stars . . .” Her voice low and hushed, she spoke to Serinam in that other language and got only a shocked silence in response.

Stan breathed in. “Okay, I know you’re having a . . . a moment, but Ford—”

“Yes,” said Nuala, sounding almost like Ford did when Stan interrupted him from one of his reveries. “Yes! Serinam, get to the water. You’ll be safe there. I’ll make sure Stanford is all right and then I’ll come find you. Come on, hurry!”

They sped off, and Stan could hear Nuala laughing as she ran. He reached for the phone.

*  

Doctor Smith was gripping the same arm that Nuala had held earlier that evening. Ford’s bruises ached. He focused on that, the one-two-three-four-five pattern that his friend had put there as she clung to him like a buoy in a strange sea. It was like he had the ghost of her presence still there on his skin, and no matter how hard Doctor Smith grabbed him he couldn’t take that away.

They walked away from the aquarium with its triangles and its brightness and its people and headed down the dock. If he looked hard enough he could probably pick out their boat amidst all the others bobbing gently in the waves. It wasn’t far. But far enough. Far enough to give Nuala and Serinam time.

A lonely gull swooped overhead and then settled in the harbor. The water was several feet below the
tideline, and Ford couldn’t remember if the tide was going out or coming in.

Doctor Smith turned to look at him again. "I must say, you're not what I expected," he said.

"Oh?"

"No. I thought you'd be much . . . tougher. I mean, you could barely control Nuala yourself. Honestly I'm doing you a favor. Maybe I'll even keep you appraised of the results."

“I thought you were hoping she’d kill me.”

Doctor Smith shrugged. “There are advantages to either eventuality.”

They passed beyond the pool of light that the aquarium cast and onto the wharf beyond. The slush leeched into Ford’s shoes. He took what satisfaction he could muster in the knowledge that Doctor Smith’s feet would be equally soaked and his beautifully polished shoes would be stained with water and salt.

“Now tell me Stanford,” said Doctor Smith. “Man to man. How far did you get with your . . . assimilation? I wouldn’t want to re-tread the same ground.”

Ford blinked. “Why would I tell you anything? The time for information-gathering usually comes before the death threats.”

“Now, now. You’re being overdramatic. I’m a man of practicality, Stanford. A man of science. These creatures are a fascinating field of study. I didn’t want to risk losing my only specimen, but with two of them . . . imagine what they would give me in exchange for not revealing their existence to the world at large. And imagine how grateful Nuala will be when I take you out of the picture. Sarah adores me, you know. She’ll do anything I tell her. With her to sing my praises, I wouldn’t be surprised if Nuala fell for me all on her own.”

Ford’s hand was moving before he even registered that he’d raised it. The punch was weak, but it connected and Ford felt a savage thrill of satisfaction.

Doctor Smith drew back, looking almost affronted, as if it hadn’t occurred to him that Ford would dare lay hands on his perfect suit and immaculate face.

“Fuck you,” said Ford, with feeling.

He’d barely gotten the words out when Doctor Smith reached up and pushed him sharply towards the dark void of the harbor. Ford’s feet slid out from under him and he pinwheeled his arms as he tumbled backwards. His head cracked on the edge of the wharf.

Without pausing, almost without thinking, he braced himself against a piling and threw himself sharply towards the opposite direction, bearing Doctor Smith to the ground. The other man was thinner than he was, but taller, like the insectoid inhabitants of Sclaraxid V. Ford struggled to hold him down as hands snaked up, reaching for his throat. He spared a glance behind him to check how far they were from the edge.

It was a mistake.

The elbow connected solidly with his jaw and Ford tumbled down, spots dancing in front of his eyes. No time to wait for them to clear. He struck out with legs and fists, hoping desperately that at least one of the blows would land. One of his kicks found its mark, glancingly, and then there was a knee being driven into his stomach and his ears were ringing as his head slammed into the ground.
He could taste blood and bile and there was the distant sound of someone shouting.

And there was the lie of the adrenaline shooting through his heart, trying to tell him—

*Face it, Fordsy, you’re NOTHING without me!*

—that he was in a different place, facing a different enemy, that there was no point because his punches never connected, his defiance led to nothing but mocking laughter, he had no choice but to stay and burn—

*Ready to talk? No? Then get ready for round thirty-two!*

—and he couldn’t breathe! The collar was too tight, was choking him—

No! No, he wasn’t there! He wasn’t . . .

A void opened up beneath his head and the world was spinning, the future narrowing down to a single dark point as something pressed inexorably against his windpipe.

And then there was a thud, and then the void was above him too, and he threw off the rope that had been pressed against his throat.

Nuala crouched beside him, her teeth bared and the glint of brass on her fists. Her dress was torn and her braid unravelling and she was glaring at Doctor Smith with unadulterated fury.

He picked himself up from the ground where she’d flung him. “Listen,” he said, a tremor of uncertainly entering his voice for the first time. “I’m trying to help you. I know where he’s hidden your skin! I can—”

“Shut up,” Nuala growled. “I won’t let you hurt my friends!”

Doctor Smith blinked. “Your . . . ?” He turned to look at Ford, his face twisted with disgust. “You’re working *with* them?”

Nuala struck at him again, but she slipped in the slush and he dodged the blow. Ford tried to stand, but before he could move there were hands on his shoulders and then his arms were being twisted up behind him. He could hear Doctor Smith panting in his ear as he tightened his grip, holding Ford between himself and Nuala. She bared her teeth and drew back her fists.

“Wait!”

Nuala froze.

Ford craned his neck to see behind them. Serinam stood at the very edge of the light from the Aquarium. She’d taken off her high-heeled shoes and her shoulders heaved with every breath. She was holding her sealskin to her chest.

“I don’t . . . I don’t want anyone to get hurt,” she said. “Just . . . just stop. Please.”

“Serinam, what are you doing?” Nuala shouted. “You found your skin! You run!”

“I’m sorry.” She was crying. “I shouldn’t have let you come here. I shouldn’t have thought about running away. Bill, I— Just let Nuala go. This isn’t her fault. It’s mine. I . . .” She held out one arm with the sealskin dangling from it. The silvery pelt rippled like water. “I’ll stay.”

“No!” Nuala stood and started towards her.
Seriman shook her head. “You don’t understand. It’s not all bad. Nuala, he loves me. I know you
don’t see it, but we can work things out.”

Ford couldn’t move. The future was unraveling, rushing ahead without him.

They’d failed. You couldn’t save someone who didn’t want to be saved. He knew that better than
most.

Doctor Smith released his grip on Ford’s arms and let him collapse onto the dock. As he stood
brushed himself off and smoothed out his hair. “That’s my girl,” he said.

“But he hurt you!” Nuala looked helplessly at Serinam and then at Ford for backup. “He stole you,
and he wanted to steal me—”

“Only because I wasn’t good enough!” Serinam’s outstretched arm was trembling now. “Only
because I couldn’t give him everything he needed. I just . . . if I’m better you’ll be safe. If I’m better,
we can be happy.”

“That’s not how it works,” said Ford.

There was fear in Serinam’s eyes, fear she was doing her best to cover up, but Ford recognized it.

“I can keep you safe,” she said in the helpless tone of someone telling a lie they desperately wanted
to be true.

“Well then, it’s settled,” said Doctor Smith, striding forward. “Nuala and her . . . friend . . . can do as
they please. We’ll all do our best to forget this unpleasant little mishap, and—”

“No!” Nuala cried. She nearly charged Doctor Smith but Ford reached out and held her back.

“Serinam, you don’t want this!”

He didn’t steal my skin; I let him take it!”

“That doesn’t matter!”

“It does! It’s my fault! If I leave and then he hurts Nuala, if he hurts anyone else that’s my fault!”

“It isn’t!” said Ford.

Serinam looked up at him, empty-eyed, and shook her head.

“You don’t understand.”

“I do,” Ford said, still doing his best to hold Nuala back. Despite everything a part of him wanted to
laugh at the irony. He’d trusted the wrong Bill and it had nearly doomed the world, doomed
everything. He could have been a pawn in the endgame of all reality.

He couldn’t let this happen. Couldn’t give Bill Smith the satisfaction of winning—not just keeping
Serinam, but making her think she couldn’t belong anywhere else. Making her think everything he’d
done to her was just some cosmic punishment for trusting him in the first place.

“How?” Serinam cried furiously. “How can you possibly—”

“Because!” Ford shouted back. “It happened to me and it wasn’t my—”
He stopped as his brain caught up with his words. “Wasn’t—”

His hands rose to cup his mouth, tight like he was trying to hold himself together, tight like he was afraid that if the words came out it would make the world crumble down around him. The world wasn’t there at all. It was just him, floating, trying to fathom the enormity of the thought fighting its way out of his throat. His fingers were trembling.

There was a theory he’d read somewhere that said the universe was constantly destroyed and re-created moment to moment on a timescale so rapid that no one noticed. That was what it felt like, like he’d somehow slowed down enough to feel the death and rebirth of dozens of universes between each breath. Like the newborn realities had some fundamental shift to them as subtle as the flapping of a butterfly’s wings but as profound as re-writing the laws of physics and he was left reeling, trying desperately to comprehend a truth that hadn’t existed before this universe, this moment.

“It wasn’t my fault,” he whispered. “I . . . I didn’t deserve it.”

He looked up. Serinam was staring at him.

“I didn’t deserve it,” he said again, and he was laughing, and there were tears in his eyes.

Doctor Smith tried to take another step towards Serinam, but she drew back out of his reach. Her sealskin was still held out in front of her.

“How long?” she asked.

Ford couldn’t tell whether everything felt unreal or if it felt so real that it was overwhelming. His heart was pounding in his chest and Nuala was standing at his side and there was ice in his hair and it hadn’t been his fault.

He blinked. “What?”

“How long since you escaped?”

“It’s . . .” It had been thirty years, and it had been less than one. It had been a lifetime and it had been yesterday. Sometimes it felt like Bill had never found him and sometimes it felt like he’d never left.

“Thirty years since I got away,” said Ford. “A year . . . nearly . . . since I’ve been safe.”

Serinam nodded. Then slowly, tremblingly, she lowered her arm and clutched the sealskin to her chest.

Doctor Smith laughed nervously and took another step.

“Come on now, Sarah,” he wheedled. “Be reasonable!”

Serinam’s eyes flicked down to the skin in her hands and her fingers twisted tightly into it. Then her head snapped up to meet her husband’s eyes.

“My name is Serinam,” she said, “and I am not yours anymore!”

Doctor Smith raised his hand and Serinam flinched away, but the blow never fell. Nuala charged, knocking Doctor Smith heavily to the ground. Her lips were drawn back in a snarl.

Ford closed his eyes, expecting carnage. Instead he heard Serinam say, quietly but firmly, “No.”

Nuala had paused. Beneath her Doctor Smith was whimpering, but the selkie ignored him. Her gaze
was fixed on Serinam.

“Why?” she said. It wasn’t a plea, although Ford could see her right fist clenching and unclenching where it rested on the ground, shaking with barely contained rage.

Serinam didn’t speak for nearly a full minute. She stroked her sealskin as her face cycled through a series of expressions that seemed achingly familiar, the faces of trying to talk to someone whose reality was so different from your own that they might as well be from a separate universe.

“Because I love him,” she said at last, and before Doctor Smith could respond she continued, “And I hate him. And this is . . . going to be difficult enough without having to mourn him.”

Then she laughed, low and bitter in her throat. “You see, Bill?” she said. “I’m better than you after all.”

In the silence that followed, Nuala cocked her head as if listening. After a moment, she called out something in a language Ford didn’t know, the language of the song she’d sung as she got ready. Serinam’s mouth became a grim line, and she nodded.

Then, just as the distant rumble of a car’s engine cut through the stillness, Nuala stood up.

*

Stan was about ready to climb out of the car and punch the red light. Of course he’d managed to find the only cab in Boston that actually obeyed traffic signals.

“Come on come on come on,” he muttered, craning his neck to peer around the next corner. They were almost there. Just a couple more blocks.

The light refused to turn. God, at this rate it would probably be faster if he just got out and ran!

Not that he was sure what he planned to do when he got there. Smack Ford for dropping the earpiece or hug him for making it out alive. Or both. Make sure Nuala didn’t make too much of a mess dealing with Doctor Smith. Maybe see if there was room for him to get a fist in himself.

. . . No. It seemed like things were taking a different direction.

“This is going to be difficult enough without having to mourn him,” said Serinam, and the words echoed through Stan’s head. His left hand, with the pirate ring on his index finger, was pressed up against his ear to muffle the sound. Any cab driver who obeyed speed limits wasn’t going to be bribable, and this wasn’t a conversation he wanted other people to overhear. Especially what Ford had said.

But with Nuala’s first choice off the table, what were they going to do with Doctor Smith? The man was the vengeful type, and if he remained at large none of them would be safe. Stan wasn’t going to let him stick around to keep hounding after Nuala and Serinam. Or Ford.

His mouth went dry remembering those interminable minutes where his brother had been out of contact. He’d heard Nuala gasp when she made it to the dock and then ignore Stan’s desperate questions, and he’d feared the worst until he heard Ford croak, “Nuala?” and then suddenly he’d been able to breathe again. He already knew his nights would be haunted by visions of what might have happened if the selkie had been just a bit slower. The water here was warmer than the Arctic, but not by much.

Wait.
“Hey.” He spoke into the phone that was also clutched in his left hand. From the ring, he heard Nuala make a small sound of recognition. “You gotta be careful. If they’re fighting, get ’em away from the harbor. No human can survive long in that water.”

As he silently begged anything listening that Nuala would understand, the driver shot Stan a quick look over her shoulder.

“Look, mister,” she said. “You need me to call the police or something?”

“I don’t know,” said Stan. “Just hurry!”

The light finally changed and they sped through the intersection. The Aquarium loomed to the right, but Stan was scanning the empty wharfs to the left, trying to pick out movement amid the docked tour boats and outbuildings.

“There!”

He pointed and the driver spun the wheel, pulling off the road. Her headlights fell on the small group of figures at the harbor’s edge.

“Oh my god,” she said.

Stan used his teeth to wrench the ring off his finger. They were close enough now to hear without amplification.

Doctor Smith, his suit torn and disheveled, was struggling with Serinam at the very edge of the wharf. Approaching them from one side with Ford leaning heavily on her shoulder, Nuala screamed for him to stop.

Bill Smith reached out his hands for Serinam’s neck. As they closed she looked up and, just for a second, Stan could see a grim smile on her face.

Then she fell.

“You bitch!” Doctor Smith screamed, stumbling forward to his knees as his hands suddenly grasped at empty air. “You stuck-up bitch! I’ll kill you! I’ll—”

Stan rushed past him to join Ford and Nuala in peering over the edge of the wharf. There was no woman there, just, for a moment, an undernourished seal and the ripped party dress that would be all the Coast Guard could recover in their investigation into the murder of Sarah Smith.

“She’s free,” Nuala whispered, pressing her face into Ford’s shoulder to hide her grin. If she started giggling, he’d blame it on shock. Blame anything Ford did on shock too. It was a good thing they had Stan around to lie for them.

Behind him, the cab driver was already on the phone with the authorities. On the ground, Bill Smith kept flinging empty curses into the sea. Out in the harbor the seal rose and bottled, staring back at the wharf. She barked once and then disappeared, and in response every seal in the aquarium began to cry out all at once in a great wild chorus of jubilation.

*  

Giving their statements didn’t take as long as Ford had expected it to. The seals’ barking had drawn most of the guests out of the fundraiser, so there were dozens of people who witnessed Doctor Smith shouting threats and curses, first at the sea and then at Stan and Ford and Nuala. Some of the threats
were quite graphic. The officers who responded to the call didn’t take long to make up their minds about what had happened. Ford thought he would feel happy when they took Doctor Smith away, but instead there was only a certain grim satisfaction laid over his bone-deep tiredness.

Afterwards, Nuala slipped away to the boat to reunite with Serinam, while Stan and Ford stood side by side looking out over the harbor.

“You all right?”

Ford kept staring ahead. “I’m fine.”

He saw Stan nod out of the corner of his eye. “Okay. Good.”

They stood in silence for a while, watching the reflection of the lights on the dark water, and then Stan said, “You know. Hypothetically. If you weren’t fine . . . that’d be okay too.”

“I know.”

“Yeah, I know you know. Just . . . if you need to be not fine for a while, you don’t gotta feel bad about it.”

Ford nodded stiffly. “I . . . thank you, Stanley.”

Stan gave him a one-shouldered shrug.

“What you said . . .” said Stan. “Before. I . . . did you believe it?”

Ford swished his tongue along the back of his teeth, pondering. The realization had felt like it was breaking him open, splitting him apart at the seams. It had felt so raw and real, and now he felt . . . hollow. Like a blown-out eggshell. Like the bones of a bird.

“I . . . believed it then,” he said eventually. “I don’t now, but . . .”

Stan clapped him on the back. “But you did. And that matters. So just . . . hang in there. Talk to your damn seal therapist, she’ll do you good. And . . .”

He paused. Sighed. Looked at Ford and then looked away at the dark horizon. “Listen . . . I know me telling you ain’t the same as you knowing it, but . . . Bill was the worst type of conman. Usually, you get conned, you know it was someone else who screwed you over. People like him—they’ll get you thinking that it was all your idea in the first place. And it—it wasn’t, Stanford. I might have missed out on a few decades, but I know you. You can be a mule-headed jerk at times—which, heh, runs in the family—but that doesn’t matter. You didn’t deserve what he did to you. Not any of it. And . . . I hope you can believe that again sometime.”

Ford breathed in. The air was cold in his throat and he could feel the blood pulsing through his body, feel the warmth of Stan’s hand on his back. Safe.

You’re here, he thought. You’re real.

We’ll make it through this.

“It seems . . .” he managed, “. . . not impossible.”

Stan squeezed his brother’s shoulder and pulled him close.

“I’ll take it!” he said. “Not impossible . . . that’s a good start. Hell, it’s better than some of the odds
we’ve been up against. Now, I’ve got an hour before I’ve got to stop eating for ‘medical reasons.’ Whaddya say we go get ice cream, huh? My treat.”

They turned and began to walk inland. Behind them, the reflections of the city lights broke apart into tiny glimmering segments on the surface of the harbor, like a sprinkling of multicolored glitter across the waves.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!