He’s practically surrounded in a ring of blue fire now. No way to back out.

(He wants to cry but he won’t. If he’s going down, he’ll go down with a grin. He’ll go down lying ’til the bitter end.)

“Heh,” he chuckles to himself. He cradles the fading photograph in his hands as blue flames lick at the corner of the picture frame. “Guess I was good for something after all.”

Then, he closes his eyes, draws in one last breath.

And he lets go.
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

Ooh boy, did this plot bunny bite hard. First time (officially) posting in this fandom. Hi! *waves*

So Gravity Falls happened, the ending happened, and I was one of those suckers who couldn't get the ending out of my mind. And with all things I love, I am not satisfied until I've injected a healthy dose of angst into my headcanon. This is the result.

Do let me know what y'all think of this.

Unbeta-ed so all the mistakes present are due to my own incompetence. \o/

I. The End

_Just one more push, Stanley._

He could not contain his laugh, smug and utterly victorious, at the feeling of warm surface giving way to his punch before shattering into a shower of golden, sparkling shards. The one-eyed demon didn't stand a chance, not with the wall of blue flames trapping them in a literal hell of Stan's own making.

Bill probably had no idea that Stan's mind would be last place he ever saw, that he'd be taken down by a con and a pull of a trigger.

Well, as the saying goes, it takes a con man to know one. Naturally, it would take a con man to bring another one down as well.

The fire around him rages on, casting the room in flickering, pale blue light.

Truth be told, Stan didn't picture himself dying like this either. Yet here he is, stuck in his own mind in a raging infernal, watching everything that made him him burn in a blaze of glory.

He thought he'd go out at the ripe old age of 90. He thought he'd go out in style.

(That's a lie. He thought he was going to die when he was nineteen years old on the streets of New York as a broke and hungry, nameless nobody. He thought he was going to die when he was twenty-four years old with a knife held against his neck while he choked on a mouthful of cock. He thought he was going to die when he was thirty-four years old, on the sixth anniversary of his brother's disappearance, as he sat alone in the Shack, thinking. The oppressive silence in Ford's house weighed on his shoulders, and Ford's handgun weighed comfortably in his palm.)

(If anything, he's surprised he made it this far in life.)

(He isn't surprised that he is dying alone though.)

The fire around him burns brighter.
Somewhere in his mind, a voice echoes out, *Everything’s going to be okay.*

The framed picture of his smiling niece and nephew catches his eye, and he reaches for it. Slowly, he brushes his fingers across the smooth surface of the glass. The children’s bright, shining faces send a surge of relief coursing through his veins, chasing away the last of his lingering fear until all that is left behind is a sense of hollow acceptance.

His lips twist in a wry smile.

He’s doing this for the kids. He’s doing this for his family.

“The kids will be safe,” he repeats like a mantra, drawing comfort from the weight of those words. He’s going to miss those two, but they’ll bounce back. They’re fighters. Wendy and Soos will also be fine. Gravity Falls will rebuild from its ashes.

*Everything’s going to be okay.*

And Ford, his twin, will finally be free to live his life without the constant fear of Bill lurking in the horizon.

Ford will be free to live his life in his house with his identity restored, doing all the research he pleases.

(Ford will finally be free from Stan.)

Really, Stan did good. Everything that everyone wants is delivered in a neat little package. This con is his best work yet, a real *magnum opus.*

(He couldn’t care less about that. What he does care is his brother’s last shot at happiness, which he refuses to deny. After all the times that he’s ruined things between him and his brother, the least he could do is finally get out of Ford’s way and let him live his own life. Stan owes Ford this much. He understands that now.)

He’s practically surrounded in a ring of blue fire now. No way to back out.

(He wants to cry but he won’t. If he’s going down, he’ll go down with a grin. He’ll go down lying ‘til the bitter end.)

“Heh,” he chuckles to himself. He cradles the fading photograph in his hands as blue flames lick at the corner of the picture frame. “Guess I was good for something after all.”

Then, he closes his eyes, draws in one last breath.

And he lets go.

---

II. What Comes After

The man who claims to be his brother is staring again.

The man – *his name is Ford, your name is Stanley, and you are brothers* – does that a lot, although Ford only stares when he thinks Stanley hasn’t noticed.

From his periphery vision, Stanley catches the series of emotions fluttering across Ford’s face like a
twisted kaleidoscope of colours.

Anger, pain, relief, curiosity, sadness, pain, always more pain –

Guilt.

He doesn’t know why but seeing that particular expression on Ford makes him uneasy.

(A lie, but only just barely. It’s more that he doesn’t want to know. He’s not sure why he feels that way either.)

He turns to Ford with a small quirk of his lips, and watches Ford return a pale imitation of his own.

God, that man does not have a poker face at all. For a genius who travelled the multiverse, it was surprising how Ford did not pick up a few tricks or two on how to goddamn lie properly. If he had to sit Ford down and teach him how to school his expression for the fifth time, he swears –

His mind stills. Fifth time?

“Stanley,” Ford, the brother, asks in concern. “Are you alright? You’re being very quiet.”

He – your name is Stanley, and Ford is your brother - shakes the stray thought from his head.

“Yeah, I’m doing fine. Sorry, do you need me for something?”

“I was wondering if you wanted some breakfast?” Ford says with a voice full of fragile hope. Stanley feels his heart ache at how hard the poor bastard is trying. “We can go to Greasy’s Diner if you like, or I can make us something.”

The ‘yeah, sure’ is at the tip of his tongue but a half-thought – somebody's gotta get paid to scrape the barnacles off of it, all you ever do is lie and cheat, and ride on your brother's coattails – crosses his mind in a split second.

It’s enough to give him a pause.

“Stanley?”

“No, thank you.” He shakes his head instead. “You’ve done a lot for me already. I don’t want to be a bother.” He gives the man – Ford, his brother – what he hopes is a gentle smile to soften the rejection.

It doesn’t help.

“Stanley, you’re not a bother,” Ford says, his expression crumbling. “You live here.”

(That’s a lie. Stan Pines lived in the house. Stanley is simply a guest.)

“Look, I’m not hungry anyway.” He throws in a casual, loose limbed shrug to diffuse the awkward situation. “Maybe, we can do this at another time?”

Ford grudgingly nods. “Alright, if you’re sure. Another time then.”

Stanley grins. “Sounds good.”

(He doubts he’ll bring this up again, not until the other man stops looking at him like a charity case.)
That night, he dreams of blue fire, glass shards, and an old, decrepit boat that will never sail. He dreams of broken dreams, broken promises, and broken families.

He wakes up shaken to his core.

When Ford asks him how he slept the next morning, he lies and says that he slept like a baby.

---

III. Jumpstart

The man claiming to be his brother is strangely persistent in dragging Stanley on adventures after the children – his niece Mabel and his nephew Dipper – leave for California. More often than not, the man – Ford – would appear out of thin air first thing in the morning with a new mission.

Case in point –

“Stanley,” Ford popped out from his basement the day after the children left with two backpacks in hand. “I’m visiting the pterodactyl today. Would you like to come with me? I could really use your help.”

The next day, Ford burst into the kitchen, making Stanley jump from his seat at the kitchen table. “Stanley, I’m glad I found you,” he said in a rush, “I am bringing something to the Multi-Bear and I need an extra pair of hands.”

When Ford isn’t dragging him around the outdoors, Ford would bring him to the storefront to watch Mr. Mystery – you can call me Soos, Mr. Pines! – run his tours.

At first, Stanley doesn’t know what to make of all this. On the up side, he's never bored.

It takes him five days and a quick glance at the scrapbook that Mabel gave him for him to finally clue in.

“Look, not that I don’t appreciate you inviting me to do, er, whatever this is,” he says the next morning before Ford can launch into his spiel, “but aren’t you sick and tired of dragging me around? The places we’ve been to haven’t jogged my memory.”

(A small lie. He catches the occasional bouts of déjà vu here and there, quick flashes of the other him punching the pterodactyl in the face, or that of Multi-Bear using the last of Stan’s toilet paper. Nothing substantive and nothing lasting beyond a few seconds. Certainly nothing to write home about. For all he knows, his imagination could have filled in the gaps of the stories that the children were telling him.)

(More importantly though, he doesn’t want to raise Ford’s hopes for no good reason. Something tells him that Stan, the other him, didn’t take well to disappointing Ford. Stanley figures that he could respect those wishes well enough.)

“I haven’t been dragging you around, Stanley. You’ve been helping me,” Ford scowls, sounding offended for Stanley. At least he doesn’t bother denying what he was trying to achieve. “If the adventures aren’t working, we can always try something else. We just have to find the right trigger to start jogging your memory.”
“But don’t you have, I don’t know, things that you need to do?” Stanley asks. “Look, all I’m saying is that you’re spending an awful lot of time with me, and I’m thankful that you’re trying to help. I just – ”

*Isn’t it suffocating?* He hears a voice, one that’s painfully familiar, echoing in his head. *Can you honestly tell me you never felt like you were meant for something more?*

*You have two sons,* says a different voice this time, all matter-of-fact. *One of them is incredibly gifted. The other one is standing outside of this room and his name’s Stanley.*

Stanley looks away from Ford and grimaces. “I just don’t want to get in the way of your life.”

“Stanley?” Ford slowly approaches him, worry dancing in his eyes. Gently, he places his warm hands on his shoulders. “Where are you – where is this coming from? Are you remembering something?”

Stanley shakes his head. “Nah, I just don’t want to be holding you back.”

(He isn’t sure why he’s not telling the truth, but every part of his body is flinching away from those stray thoughts like a terrified animal. He wonders if this instinct is a remnant reaction from the other him.)

Ford sighs and squeezes his shoulders. “Well, I’ve said this once and I’ll say it again. You’re not getting in my way, and you’re not being a bother.” He adds with a touch of hesitation, “But if you remember anything, just…let me know, alright?”

Stanley nods.

*(Stanley almost believes Ford.)*

On some days, Stanley wonders who the other him was and what kind of life he led to inspire such fierce loyalty from the people around him. The children have been diligently calling every day to check up on him, and they’d spend hours telling him stories about their summer together or about their new school year. His supposed former employees would provide their own accounts of his day in the life of a businessman, some of which were so ridiculous, they have to be made up. They’ve also been more than patient with him by showing him the collection of bizarre attractions around the Shack.

His personal favourite is the Sascrotch. It’s got a catchy name that rolls off the tongue.

And as for the odd man who’s calling himself his brother, well…

He’s been clingy.

There’s a part of him who is absolutely thrilled to go on adventures with Ford. Whenever he spent time with the man, he’d feel a deep-seated sense of satisfaction. It was as if he’s finally achieved something that he has been longing to do for a very long time.

Another part of him wants nothing more than to get far, far away from Ford, as if he’s just waiting for something bad to happen, for the other shoe to drop. As if he’s afraid of, afraid of –

Afraid of what exactly?
Stanley has no idea.

IV. Floodgates

“Stanley, do you have time? I’m looking for a player for this.” Ford announces to Stanley in the living room after a morning of blissful peace. He holds out a box with flourish.

Stanley turns off the television, fixes his glasses and reads out, “Dungeons, Dungeons, and More Dungeons.” He looks at Ford. “What is that, some kind of a nerd game?”

For some reason, that comment only makes Ford beam. “It’s my favourite game of all times! I ordered a new edition and it finally came in the mail. It’s a game involving math, statistics and you need to look at the amount of quadrants…” he trails off at Stanley’s raised brow, and sighs. “It involves taking risks and making things up on the fly, Stanley.”

“Well when you put it like that, how can I refuse?” Stanley chuckles, and joins Ford on the floor.

He watches Ford gleefully pull out the contents of the box like a child opening his presents on Christmas morning.

Stanley may not have known Ford for very long, but even he can tell that Ford is, simply put, the most brilliant person he has met and will ever meet. The man’s mind shines like a beacon that inevitably draws other curious, like-minded individuals to him. His inventions speak for themselves: the light bulb that lasts for a thousand years, the gloves that let him shoot lightning like an angry, vengeful god; any of these could have made Ford millions.

Stanley doesn’t need the other him’s memory to know that Ford is destined to do great things.

Which is why Stanley can’t help but be a bit mind-boggled as to why someone like Ford, a man with twelve PhD’s, a man who, by his own account, travelled the universe across several dimensions, wants to sit around and play board games with him.

“And now we roll the die to determine your charisma points!” Ford hands Stanley the bag full of dice.

Stanley blinks. “My what now?”

“Your charisma points.”

“I,” Stanley balks a little. Never mind, he understands why a man with twelve PhD’s would play board games with him. Everyone else around these neck of the woods is too sane to do it. “How is charisma point a fantasy power exactly?”

Ford rolls his eyes. “Just roll the die, Stanley.”

Despite his gentle ribbing, and for all the bizarre math application involved, Stanley couldn’t help but get caught up in the game and in Ford’s story-telling.

“Probabilitor the Annoying commands his griffin to seize them. The griffin swoops down and clutches two of your team members in its talons and flies off.” Stanley groans, but Ford holds his hand out. “Probabilitor has taken off with two of your team members. From your position in the cabin, you can see that they’re heading towards the Woods of Foreboding Darkness.”
“Wait, which two did he take?”

“The elf mage and the elf thief.”

Stanley groans harder. “Oh c’mon! The mage is my favourite! He’s the smartest one out of the bunch!”

For some reason, Ford flushes and his lips curve into a soft, shy smile. He clears his throat. “What do you wish to do next?”

“Well I can’t just leave them hanging! I gotta go after them!”

“The rest of your party chase after the griffin, following the old forest road. As you travel further into the forest, the thick canopy of leaves obscures your view of the sky. You lose sight of the griffin.”

“You’re not giving me a break at all, are you,” Stanley grouches. He refills Ford’s glass with the bottle of whiskey that he pilfered midway through the game, and waves away Ford’s thanks.

“What do you want to do next?”

Stanley takes a sip of his whiskey and relishes in the burn. “Might as well follow the road we’re on. See what happens next.”

“You follow the meandering road and with each step you take, you can feel the air thicken with magic. The flowers around you become more vibrant, the grass is greener, and birds around you sing as they fly overhead. The walk is peaceful. But wait! It’s a trap!” Stanley throws his hands in the air.

Ford grins and continues, “An ogre jumps into your path. You recognize him as one of Probabilitor’s henchman.”

“‘Halt, Interlopers!’ he says, ‘If you wish to pass, you must first complete seven unworldly quest, each, more difficult than the –”

“Yeah, no. I bash him on the head.”

Ford pauses. “You what?”

Stanley sips his drink casually. “What? It’s one guard right? And there’s no one else around.” He shrugs. “I bash him on the head.”

The judging silence stretches on.

Stanley rolls his eyes. “Look, nobody’s got time to do seven quests when there are lives in danger. I’m being practical here!”

Ford huffs a laugh and shakes his head. “Alright, alright. You bash him on the head and,” Ford waits for Stanley to roll the die, and stares as Stanley cheers, “I can’t believe this. You kill him in one shot!”

“There are no cops in the forest. We take this to the grave,” Stanley winks.

He pauses. Now why does that sound so familiar?

Ford didn’t seem to notice though. “Alright, fair enough!” he laughs. “Your gambit pays off and you walk around the Ogre’s fallen body with ease. What do you want to do next?”

Stanley shoves the odd feeling to the back of his head. “Keep going of course!”
“As you follow down the forest path, you notice that the trees around you are getting thinner. It seems like you are approaching a clearing in the woods. As you move closer, you can hear the familiar voices of your captured teammates shouting at Probabilitor to let them go. What –”

“I’m charging in!” Stanley crows. “Guns blazing! I got some math wizard’s butt to kick.”

“Stanley, this is a medieval fantasy world. There aren’t any guns,” Ford says, amused and exasperated. “But roll the die to see if you’re successful.”

The die lands on a five. They both wince.

“Probabilitor hears you coming and spins around in time to block your attack. ‘Drat,’ he screams with rage, ‘How did you get past my one guard?!’”

Stanley snorts into his glass.

Ford continues, “Very well, I challenge you to a duel! I choose my two champions versus the two I captured from your team!”

“What? Come on!” Stanley complains. “Can’t we just duke it out or –?”

Can’t we just, like, arm wrestle or something? A half-thought crosses his mind but it dissipates just as quickly. Stanley furrows his brows.

“Or what?” Ford asks patiently.

“Sorry.” Stanley snaps back to attention and rubs the back of his neck. “Lost my train of thought there. It doesn’t matter anyway. Keep going?”

“Probabilitor explains that the dual is a battle royale. If you win, he would return to the world he’s from. If he wins then he gets to eat the elves’ brains.”

Stanley makes a face. “Ergh. Alright, now I’m doubly glad I didn’t go on those stupid seven worldly quests. Is it too late to challenge the nerd-wizard to an arm-wrestling contest instead?”

“No dice!” Ford smirks and rolls the 38-sided die. “Probabilitor’s henchmen take a swing at the wizard and the thief with their clubs.”

“Oh, no, they don’t!” Stanley swipes the die quickly off the board, rolls it and – “C’mon defence spell, I need a defence spell!”

Grunkle Stan, make something up! It’s just like lying!

I cast –

“Shield of shielding!”

He looks up at the ensuing silence to see Ford staring at him with shocked wide eyes. “What?” he says a bit defensively. “I know it’s a lame name but it’s the best I could come up with on short notice! Cut me some slack here!”

“No, no, that’s not it.” Ford dismisses. “Stanley, where did you come up with that?”


“Why don’t we keep going,” Ford says instead, and Stanley could almost swear that he sounds
shakier than usual. “I cast shield reversal spell!”

They went toe-to-toe, each shouting out more and more ridiculous spells, until – “Probabilitor summons Impossibeast!” Ford rubs his hands together and positively cackles. “It can only be defeated if you roll a thirty-eight!”

“Well, for the record, that thing is stupidly overpowered!” Stanley accuses. “He’s literally impossible to beat!”

Ford sends him a nonchalant smirk before tossing the rest of his drink back. “If you think it’s so impossible, you can give up right now. I’m not stopping you.”

Stanley feels his eye twitch a little.

That arrogant asshole.

“Never!” Stanley snarls, swiping the die off the ground. “Long odds are what I live for! Prepare to lose big!” He rattles the die in his hand, and utters, “C’mon, Stan! Papa needs a thirty-eight!” He tosses the die.

They both watch with baited breath as the die tumbles across the game board.

And lands perfectly on a thirty-eight.

“Yes! Yes!” Stanley jumps up and fist pumps. Ford’s dejected groan of misery only makes the victory taste that much sweeter. “I said I could do it and I did! In your face, Ford! In. Your. Face!”

Ford only shakes his head. “I just. How is that – what just – ”

“How does it feel to know that all your planning couldn’t match up to my dumb luck? HA! Am I good or what? I am a God. I am a gambling God!”

“Alright, alright, let’s get this over with.” Ford grumbles, and oh dear Lord is he pouting? This makes the win that much better.

Stanley sits back down, grinning the largest shit-eating grin he can manage. So he’s an asshole. He never claims to be otherwise. “I cast – ”

Hot flame-y sword, a familiar voice whispers in his mind. “Hot flame-y sword!” he declares. “Wait, no, make that super hot flame-y sword!”

He continues before Ford could complain, “And for the record, that roll is completely legit! I could’ve easily rigged the die roll like last time to beat your cheaty, overpowered monster. Don’t think I forgot that that monster is supposed to be banned either, you cheater! Serves you right for losing!”

“Stanley?”

The hushed, almost timid, way Ford says his name jostles him out of his mental victory jig. Stanley snaps to attention.

Ford is staring at him with wide, wide eyes full of wonder as if he’s seeing Stanley for the first time, as if Stanley is the biggest mystery he’s just solved.

“Stanley,” he repeats, and this time, Stanley can definitely hear his voice shaking. “I didn’t know you rigged your die roll. None of us knew that. I don’t think anybody mentioned that the monster was
It takes a few seconds before what Ford implies hits Stanley, and when it does, it hits him like a punch to the gut, leaving him breathless.

*A gambler never reveals his secret – Now you listen to me! As long as I live, I will never, EVER, play your smarty pants nerd game – Mabel, I am so confused but so proud – Long odds are what you want when you're a wor – Papa needs a new set of twins!*

“STANLEY!”

Stanley blinks at the six-fingered hands gripping his shoulder and his arm so tightly that the knuckles turn white. He looks up. The other man – *Ford, his name is Ford, and really he should start calling him that* – is peering into him with a wild and panicked expression. Ford is opening and closing his mouth in rapid succession.

Stanley squints and tries to make out what Ford is doing, what he’s saying.


“Holy – ” Stanley swallows to get rid of the dry taste in his mouth. The feeling of vertigo is slowly receding from his body. “I’m okay. I’m okay.” He slowly sits up – *how did he end up lying on the floor anyway* – and rubs his throbbing temple with his fingers.

“I’m fine, Ford,” he repeats. He takes off his glasses, presses his palms against his eyes, and continues when his voice is steadier, “I’m fine. Just got a lot jammed into my head in one go. Ow. Ow!”

Memories, crisp and terrifyingly clear ones, trickle into his head. He remembers poking fun at Dipper for his nerd game, he remembers Ducktective the season finale, he remembers yelling at Ford to move, he remembers his sweet, imaginative Mabel, kicking butt and taking names, oh God he remembers that stupid, annoying math wizard.

He remembers Dungeons, Dungeons and More Dungeons, the live edition, the fear that he’ll mess up so badly, he’ll actually end up killing his family this time around.

He remembers, he remembers, he remembers.

And then, the memories stop as abruptly as someone turning off the water faucet.

“The game, I remember playing it with you, Dipper and Mabel,” he rasps out. He chuckles when Ford whoops and pulls him into a crushing hug. “Hey now, easy on the back.”

“Stanley, that’s amazing!” Ford tightens his grip on Stanley, and ow. Ow! He wasn’t kidding about the back. “Do you know what this means? This means that there’s a way to get you your memories back!” He pulls away, and he’s beaming so hard, his cheeks must be aching. Stanley doesn’t think he’s ever seen the man in front of him look so ecstatic. The realization hurts his heart a little. “Don’t worry, Stanley. We’ll get you your memories back in no time!”

“Sounds good. Can’t wait,” Stanley says with a weak smile through his pounding headache and his racing heart.

(It’s his first lie of the day. He’s absolutely terrified.)
Chapter 2

V. Rolling with the Punches

Stanley learns a few things about the man who calls himself his brother while living in the Shack. First, Ford is brilliant so understandably, his mind is constantly thirsting for new information to soak up, for new puzzles to solve, for new mysteries to debunk. Second, because Ford is so brilliant, he can easily shut out anything that distracts him until he resurfaces for a break. Third, when Ford shuts out any distractions, Ford essentially ignores the world around him.

The latter has the horrible consequence of letting everything fall to the wayside, like keeping the house in running order, or keeping the pantries stocked so that he doesn’t die from starvation.

Or from scurvy.

It wasn’t until Stanley is greeted with the sight of an empty fridge one Sunday morning, half-awake and barely dressed, that he makes a fourth discovery. The task of keeping the house, and their lives, in running order belonged to Stan Pines.

And that task has, apparently by default, passed on to Stanley.

(The thought of asking Ford for help crosses his mind, but he dismisses that option quickly. He’d only get in Ford’s way by disturbing him with something so minor. It’s bad enough that he’s living in his brother’s house, eating his brother’s food, using his brother’s utilities. He refuses to be a useless bother on top of everything else.)

The trip to the grocery store ends up being rather uneventful.

His stay at the grocery store is a different matter.

“Good morning, Mr. Pines!” waves a random stranger with a green Mohawk, the fifth random stranger who waved at him within the span of fifteen minutes, in fact. “How are you this fine morning?”

“Fine, thank you!” he waves back. He nods politely at another waving stranger, a lady with one eye closed, and hurries away.

He wasn’t fast enough to escape their whispered conversation.

“Mr. Pines looks happy.”
“Yes, he does.”

“Wait! Do you think he – ?”

“No, I’m afraid not. Still doesn’t have a clue as to who I am or who anyone is.”

“Oh. Poor fella. You think he’ll ever remember?”

“I don’t know. It doesn’t look like it, though.”

(That’s not completely true. Ever since the board game incident, he’s been getting more and more déjà vu moments. It is as if the floodgates that once held his memories back are starting to crack. He sees the Mohawk-ed stranger – Toby - without the Mokawk, the lady – Lazy Susan – in her waitressing garb, placing a stack of pancakes in front of him. “On the house, Mister Big Shot!” she said, bright and cheery.)

He ducks into the first empty aisle and sags against the shelf. He shuts his eyes to will away the headache.

“Breathe, Stanley,” he utters to himself.

He just has to keep it together until he’s done getting his groceries. He’ll be fine. Besides, people talk, especially about the man who supposedly saved the town. It’s not a big deal.

(He knows that they’re disappointed that he’s not the Stan Pines they know. He can see it in their eyes, and he can feel it crawling up his back. He hates being reminded of what he lost, he hates being looked at like a goddamned charity case, and he hates how they tip-toe around him like he’s some sort of damaged goods.)

(Most of all, he hates how when they look at him, all they see is the ghost of Stan Pines.)

A word of advice kid, don’t let them know your weakness, a voice drawls out in a heavy New Jersey accent from the recesses of his mind. Tuck your chin in, keep your elbows tight against your body, and keep your defences up! Roll with the punches if you need to, Boy!

Right. Keep his defences up. Roll with the punches.

He can do that.

He opens his eyes, straightens his spine, and adjusts his grip on his grocery basket. Then, he takes a deep breath.

And slips on the the cockiest smile he has in his repertoire.

He’s got this.

He makes it through the rest of his grocery trip without any incidents. His drive home is surprisingly pleasant.

(The moment he’s inside the Shack, he sinks to the floor and puts his head on his knees.)

(From then on, he gets Soos to do their grocery shopping.)

Memories of the summer, the happy ones with Mabel and Dipper, come back in brilliant, glimmering pieces.
They mostly wait until he sleeps before gently slipping into his dreams, filling his mind with laughter, music, and the sepia-toned visions that come with the sound.

The morning after, he’d wake up with a smile on his face. He’d feel eager, and surprisingly excited even, to share these newly unearthed gems with Ford over their morning coffee.

Those are the good memories.

The bad ones like to lie in wait, ready to ambush him when he least expects them.

VI. Bonding Activities

The board game adventures continue every week on Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights, slotting themselves neatly into Stanley and Ford’s schedules like a puzzle piece.

Sometimes, Wendy and Soos will join in. Other times, the children will participate in their gaming sessions through Skype. Those sessions inevitably end up with Team Mabel-Stanley – *we’re called Team Exploding Kittens!* – pitting against Team Nerd – *No, we’re not Mabel! We’re the Dyad of Erebor!*

Most of the times though, it’s just Ford and Stanley.

To be honest, Stanley rather likes it when it’s the two of them. Never mind the fact that they always end up bringing the worst in each other, good-natured trash talk, cursing and drinking included.

Ford, for all his bookishness, has a mouth of a sailor after a few shots of whiskey.

Stanley respects that.

“Your party clings to the branches for dear life. Below them, the orcs from the scouting troop pull out their axes, ready to chop the trees down. But wait, from a distance, you see a convocation of eagles approaching! They’re the Eagles of Manwë.”

“The Eagles of what now?”

“The Eagles of – ” Ford sighs, and shakes his head. “Never mind, Stanley. Think of them as massive eagles.”

Stanley shrugs and takes a swig at his beer. “So another set of enemies then? Well, bring it. It’s not like I haven’t punched eagles before.”

As soon as the words leave his mouth, the tell tale sign of a memory-induced headache presses against his temple, coupled with the familiar sensation of vertigo and –

_Eagles, three of them, swooping down on him with their talons out, but Stan doesn’t have time to deal with this crap. He’s got his kids to save. He swings, fast and deadly just like his coach taught him a lifetime ago, and his knuckles smash against the side of the birds’ head. He didn’t bother watching them fall before resuming his frantic climb up the scaffolding. Mable and Dipper are screaming for help, the only thing stopping them from plunging to their deaths is a thin, fraying rope, and oh God, he’s not going to make it, he’s not going to make it –_

Stanley gasps and snaps his eyes open.
Ford stares back inches away from his face, his lips pressed in a thin, worried line. “Easy now, you’re alright, Stanley. You’re alright.” He murmurs. He hands Stanley the customary post-flashback water and an aspirin. “I dimmed the lights just in case your head is hurting,” he says by way of explaining. “The good news is that you’re still sitting up this time, and you haven’t hit your head. I couldn’t save your beer though.”

He gestures the damp spot on the rug and at the empty bottle standing upright beside it.

“At least I didn’t break any glass this time,” Stanley manages to croak out. The pulsating pain in his head is spreading down his neck, and he hisses. “Christ. Is…this normal?”

“I have no idea.” It looks like it physically hurts Ford to admit that from the tight way his brows are drawn together. “But I intend to find a way to fix this. I won’t have you keeling over in pain every time you remember something.” He reaches behind Stanley’s neck, and lightly presses his fingers along the spine. “Where are you hurting? The neck and your head?”

“Got it in one,” Stanley manages a weak chuckle before wincing. “Ow, ow. Okay, laughing right now is a bad idea.”

Ford’s frown deepens. “Do you think you can move to the chair?”

“Yeah,” he breathes out. “Just give me a sec.”

Roll with the punches, Stanley, he reminds himself as Ford guides him to the chair, settles him in, and tucks the ratty blanket he leaves on the chair around him. Stanley forces a smile on his face. “Thanks. I remember punching the eagles, by the way. Sucker punched them right in their smug eagle faces.”

Ford chuckles and Stanley feels a rush of warm satisfaction in his chest. “You can tell me the story when you feel better, Stanley.” Ford says, low and gentle. He smooths out the wrinkles on the blanket.

“Nah, I’ll be fine. Pain is going away. The aspirin is kicking in.” (It hasn’t, but he’ll say anything to get that worried look off Ford’s face.) “I was saving the children. It’s from that time when I was running for mayor. God, what was I thinking?”

The rest of the story tumbles out in slow progression. By the time he reaches the end, the pain has died down to a dull throb. What little energy he has in his reserve has trickled away like water down the drain.

He’s almost asleep when something cool presses against his forehead, a wet towel from the feel of it. He hums in appreciation.

“You’re a lifesaver,” he manages to slur out. “Thanks, Sixer.”

He thinks he hears a breath hitch, and a voice choke out, “You’re welcome, Lee.”

Then, he’s out like a light.

VII. Receding Tide

“I haven’t found a solution yet, but in the meantime, I want you to have this. Stick this under your ear.” Ford holds up a small silver disk a quarter of an inch wide in front of Stanley. “This should
detect when you’re about to have another flashback, and it will send me an alert so that I can make sure you’re alright.”

Stanley grimaces and leans away from the disk. “Look Ford, it’s not that I’m not grateful for your help but is this such a good idea? I really don’t want to be –”

“If you say you don’t want to be a bother, I swear I will punch you in the face,” Ford growls out. “For the last time, you are not a bother. If anything, knowing what will happen to you will give me some peace of mind, so you’re doing me a favour.” He softens his tone and adds after a few beats of silence, “I worry, Stanley. I worry that when you’re hurt, I won’t be there to help, and I can’t let that happen.” He shakes his head roughly and reaches a six-fingered hand to grip Stanley’s shoulder. “Please, Stanley. Take it.”

Stanley takes the disk.

It works like a charm for the next three flashbacks: he’s smashing undead skulls under his fists, because he’ll be damned if they get to the kid. He swings a solid left cross at the animatronic Badger hell-bent on murder, his punch crashing into its hideous, electronic face. He kicks the table into the two FBI agents, the force of his movement launches him backwards towards the wall – but what the hell was he doing with the FBI anyway?

As violent and sudden the flashbacks were, like cresting waves surging into Stanley’s mind, all of a sudden, they just…stopped.

(He breathes a mental sigh of relief. He’s getting sick and tired of feeling sick and tired.)

“That’s great, Grunkle Stan!” Mabel squeals over the phone. Stanley has to hold the receiver at an arm’s length away from his ears until the noise dies down a little. “I know you wouldn’t forget me and Dipper that easily!”

“How can I forget?” Stanley mock growls. “You knuckleheads singlehandedly destroyed my house not once, but three times! I punched more things in the face that I can count to save you nuisances. You made me do karaoke –”

“You remember Love Patrol Alpha! Dipper! Grunkle Stan remembers Love Patrol Alpha!” For the second time, Stanley thrusts the phone away with a wince. He hears mumbling from the background: “Still a terrible name, Mabel!”

He chuckles.

“What else do you remember?”

“Soos and Wendy, the time I hired them, bits and pieces about the rest of those Gravity Falls weirdos.” Stanley shrugs. “Not much else aside from that.”

(He can’t say he regrets his limited memory either. As far as he’s concerned, he just needs to know enough to function in town.)

“But what about Grunkle Ford?”

He pauses at the the innocent question.

What about Ford?
Aside from the incident with that math wizard, Ford’s presence is surprisingly muted in his memories. Ford himself hasn’t offered up any information except for the vague account of them growing up together in New Jersey before separating ways, each driven by their own goals, dreams and ambition.

If that’s the case, then when was it that Stanley and Ford finally met up again?

What was their relationship like?

“I’m sure I’ll remember more about him soon enough, Sweetie,” he says gently. “Why don’t you tell me about what you’ve been up to lately?”

(For some reason, there’s a part of him, the other Stan, who recoils at the notion of remembering Ford. He doesn’t understand why, and to be frank, he’s not that motived to dig deeper into the past to find out.)

(The warm weight of the small metal disk behind his left ear serves as a constant reminder as to why remembering is a bad idea.)

(Some times, ignorance is bliss.)

He feels like he should at least say something though.

“I’m sorry,” he blurts out to Ford one evening when they are out hunting for a cycloptopus in the woods. They are taking a break from their trek and have made themselves comfortable by sitting on a fallen log in the middle of a clearing.

Ford looks up from writing in Journal #4. “Hm? What was that, Stanley?”

Stanley runs his hand through his hair and mentally steels himself for an awkward conversation. “I’m sorry for not remembering enough,” he elaborates. “All I seem to remember is the summer I spent with the kids. And some of the town folks.”

(“I’m sorry I don’t remember you” is what he wants to say, but doesn’t have the courage to do so.)

Ford stares back in stunned silence for a moment before his eyes turn soft. He closes his book and tucks it into his trench coat. “There’s no need to apologize, Stanley.” he says with a quiet warmth that soothes away Stanley’s nervousness. “None of this is your fault. Memories are tricky things. They’ll come when they do.” He shuffles closer and nudes against Stanley playfully. “Is that why you’ve gone all weird and quiet? You’re worried about this? Don’t be!”

“Yeah, I guess I was.” Stanley shrugs. “It’s just…it’s been a month of radio silence. You’re…okay with all this?”

“I’m fine with what you remember, Stanley.” Ford assures him.

(There is something about that response, about the way it’s phrased and about Ford’s easy acceptance to all of this, that is making Stanley feel a bit uneasy.)

VIII. Guilt

His suspicions are right.
When Stanley passes by Ford’s bedroom door later that evening, he catches the tail end of his conversation with the children.

“I’m trying, Mabel, but there’s not much I can do about the rest of Stanley’s memories,” Ford says with more weariness than Stanley has ever heard from him. It makes him cringe back in shame.

A sigh. “No, Dipper. I haven’t found anything that could reverse the effects of the memory gun. Fiddleford is looking into it, but so far, he hasn’t had any success yet.”

Then, a little quieter. “I know, children. I know it’s not fair and I miss him, but the last thing I want to do is push him any further. I won’t have him in pain like that. I can’t do that to Stanley.” A pause. “He remembers the two of you, he remembers Wendy and Soos, and he remembers the people of Gravity Falls. That’s more than enough. I’m fine with that. I’m fine with what he remembers.”

Quietly, Stanley treks back to his room. He shuts the door behind him with a soft click.

*I’m fine with what he remembers.*

*I’m fine with what you remember, Stanley.*

His hands curl into fists at his sides.

Bullshit. The whole lot of it.

(The worst part is that a part of him knew that Ford was lying to him that day in the clearing. He just didn’t want to see it for what it is – Ford’s disappointment and fear that he’s hurting Stanley. God, he’s such an idiot.)

He lowers himself on the bed, takes off his glasses and pinches the bridge of his nose.

He isn’t eager to dredge up any more memories, hasn’t been since he woke up to a crowd of strangers gazing at him like he held their hearts in his hands. Admittedly, he hasn’t lifted a finger to provoke more memories to come his way. Why should he when he was happy with the status quo?

(He was ready to bury what’s left of Stan Pines under six feet of denial and willful blindness just so he could live.)

It’s always been Ford who’s the one trying to get Stan Pines back. Ford’s the one who drags him out on adventures. Ford’s the one who sets up the board game nights. Ford’s the one who’s working with others, with Fiddleford, to get Stanley his memories back.

(He was okay with forgetting. But he can’t make himself be okay anymore. Not after this.)

He isn’t being fair to Ford by doing nothing. The least he could do for the man who not only claims to be his brother, but has acted above and beyond what a brother should do, is try.

He looks around the other him’s room, at the furniture that he hasn’t touched save for the bed, and wonders.

His eyes slide to the large cabinet to the side of the room.

Time to do a little digging.

But first, he reaches for the metal disk behind his ear and removes it from his body.
His enthusiasm is replaced by growing horror when hours later, he digs up newspaper articles of the other Stan’s crimes, a plethora of fake ID’s, and what looks to be a heist kit.

Despite what the children had told him and the snippets of the summer he remembers, Stan Pines was clearly not a good man. The hard paper evidence in front of him speaks to that.

He picks up a yellowing newspaper clipping – *Knife-wielding serial thief jailed for stealing $2k worth of clothes and jewelry* – and drops it like it scalds his fingers.

The other him, flanked by two police officers while his hands were cuffed behind his back, glares hatefully back at him from the picture.

Christ. Stan Pines was not only a bad man, but he was a dangerous one.

And judging from this collection of newspaper articles that Stan Pines collected like some sort of bizarre trophies, like they were something he was proud of, this Stan Pines person was a sick man as well.

Stanley feels physically ill.

Oh God, how much do the children know about Stan Pines? Do they know just how dangerous Stan Pines was? Does Ford know? He mustn’t have known. No one would harbour a dangerous criminal under his roof.

Did Stan Pines manage to dupe everyone in this house? In this town?

He hastily shoves the clippings and the IDs back in the brown box, his fingers brushing up against a passport for Carlos Vesco and –

*The cold darkness pressed in on him, around him, smothering him from all sides. He couldn’t see past the ringing pain radiating from his temple – the bastards had gotten him with a pipe – and judging from the warm cascade running down his face, and the heavy scent of copper around him, they got him good too. He thrashed as much as he could with the ropes binding his torso, his arms, his wrists, his legs, ignoring the growing nausea from moving his injured head and the way his bindings cut into his flesh. His shoulders and knees occasionally scraped up against the side of his confinement – and where the hell was he anyway? Suddenly, the space around him jostled violently, and the familiar hum of a motor filled his surroundings. His breath lurch; he was in a trunk of a car and shitshitshit they were moving –*

*Blood filled his mouth, thick and hot, and he spat it out quickly before he could choke on it. He took another bite at his binding. The rope sliced deeper into the tender flesh of his mouth and it tore at his gums and the inside of his cheeks. He spat again, ignoring the pulsing agony in his mouth and the bleeding mess of saliva and coppery tissue that ran down his chin. He was almost free, just need to get the last of his rope –*

*The voices were getting louder. They were coming. He needs to get out, he needs to get out, he needs to get out nownownownow –*

Stanley manages to lunge for the waste bin before he throws up.

“Stanley?” Ford asks with obvious worry the next morning. “Are you alright?”

Stanley forces his tired eyes to focus on Ford, and flashes him with a weak smile. “Yeah, just…you know, had a bad dream.”
(He couldn’t stop shaking until 4 am. He didn’t sleep a wink.)

Chapter End Notes

Holy cow, you guys. I wasn't expecting this level of response for the first chapter. Thank you so, so much for taking the time to read and to review my work. I'm beyond flattered.

With that said, I hope this chapter continues to entertain! If you like what I'm doing so far, please do let me know. I love hearing what you guys think, even if it's just a comment filled with exclamation marks, haha!
IX. Rico

There are seven little holes in the wooden beam above him.

Stanley squints his bloodshot eyes.

Seven little holes and they are clustered in the form of the Big Dipper.

Huh. Why hasn’t he noticed that before? He should take a picture for Mabel and Dipper. They’ll probably get a kick out of it.

_You’re sleep deprived, Stanley_, a familiar voice – it sounds suspiciously like Ford – whispers to him in disapproval. _Why don’t you close your eyes for a little bit?_

“Easier said then done, Ford,” he whispers in the darkness, and God, he’s sounding like a real nutcase, talking to himself.

It’s the third night in a row since the Incident. It’s also the third night in a row that he hasn’t gotten any rest aside from brief, snatches of sleep. Two nights ago, he was busy trying to stop himself from shaking like a leaf as he struggled to breathe through the panic that blanketed his mind, and through the nausea that churned in his stomach. He couldn’t shake off the feeling of the phantom rope around his wrists, rubbing against his soft flesh until it became raw, swollen and hot to the touch.

It took three hours of huddling, three hours of choking through gasping breath, before the heady, metallic taste of blood began to dissipate from his memory.

Groaning in annoyance, he shifts and burrows himself deeper into his covers. He could feel his heavy lids shutting but his mind is whirring away like a pair of clock hands.

Last night, he spent it teetering between sleep and consciousness, kept awake by the lingering fear of the fresh hell that was awaiting him in his dreams. He eventually passed out after helping himself to the last of his whiskey.

As for tonight, well…

He rolls over so that he’s lying on his side. Maybe, he just needs to find that perfect spot in bed so that he could curl up, shut down his brain, and let his weariness handle the rest. Besides, third time’s the charm, right?

(It’s an exercise in futility and Stanley knows it.)
He sighs and runs a tired hand over his face. Fuck it.

He throws his blankets back, and slowly pushes himself off of his mattress, ignoring the unpleasant cracking sound that his back makes from the sudden movement. Laying in bed is not going to help, and unfortunately, he’s run out of liquor. Might as well try something else, like good ol’ fashion warm milk or something equally wholesome and desperate.

*Or maybe,* he thinks as he manoeuvres around the creaking planks on his way down the stairs, *Ford’s willing to share some of his gin.*

But that would involve talking to Ford, and having Ford stare at him, face pinched and brows furrowed, asking uncomfortable questions like, “Are you alright, Stanley?”

Or worse yet, “You know I’m here if you need to talk, right?”

God knows Ford has repeated himself enough times in the last few days. His brother is starting to sound like a broken record.

(What he can’t stand is having to shrug nonchalantly and tell Ford, “Yeah, I’m fine. I just can’t sleep,” and then seeing his brother’s expression crumble from the hurt over the obvious lie.)

Stanley manages to drag himself to the kitchen without tripping over his own two feet – a small accomplishment worthy of celebration in his books. He mechanically pulls the carton of milk out of the fridge, gives it a cursory sniff, empties what’s left of it into the sauce pan, and places the pan on the heated stove. The fog in his head parts enough for Stanley to remember to keep the noise down as he rummages for a mug and a wooden spoon.

He steps back and idly waits, the soft humming of the fridge keeping him company in the dead of the night. The sci-fi light that his brother installed during the summer casts the room in a warm, soft glow.

Speaking of Ford, Stanley still hasn’t got a single clue as to what he should say to him about the Incident. But in his defence, how the hell does one even begin to breach a topic like that? It’s not as if it’s something he can casually introduce while they’re having dinner – “Oh, by the way Ford, everything you and the children know about me is probably a lie and I may or may not have been a dangerous criminal. Can you pass the butter? Thanks!”

He frowns and rubs his bleary, heavy eyes. He can feel his frustration building up like a pressure cooker.

So what if he comes clean with the family and tell them that Stan Pines was a dangerous criminal? Why should he even care what the family thinks of Stan Pines anyway? It’s not as if he even remembers what he’s done in the past aside from these annoying flashbacks. As far as he’s concerned, his name is Stanley, he hasn’t done anything dangerous beyond punching a few mythical creatures in the face, and he can get a bit competitive when playing board games. He’s a separate entity from that old bastard Stan Pines.

(But isn’t Stanley a pale imitation of his former self? After all, he’s slotted himself neatly into Stan Pines’ life. He looks like Stan Pines, talks like Stan Pines, and finds himself perfectly comfortable with calling Stan Pines’ family his own. Hell, he’s even remembering Stan’s memories.)

(Is there even a line that’s separating Stan from Stanley any more?)

(He may not remember much now, but who’s to say that he won’t revert back to the ways of Stan Pines with every new memory that he regains?)
He closes his eyes, his thoughts chilling him to his bones. And, oh God, the kids. What will the kids think if they find out who Stan Pines was? They clearly adore the man from all the stories about the summer that they shared with him. How will they react when they realize that everything they love about their odd grunkle is nothing but a well-constructed lie? They’ll be devastated.

Grunkle Stan, I don’t even know if you’re my grunkle! I want to believe you, but –

He’s lying! Shut it down now!

A sudden, sharp pain flares in Stanley’s head, and he brings his hand to rub his temple with a hiss. He doesn’t stop until the ache ebbs away like the changing of the tide.

Here’s one thing that he knows for sure: he’s getting real tired of receiving these little ‘gifts’ from Stan Pines.

“Your milk is boiling over.”

“Jesus!” Stanley’s heart lurches painfully in his chest as he jumps back, whipping his head to the open doorway. From his spot beside the stove, Ford stares back at him with a questioning look on his face, his beloved Journal #4 tucked under his right arm. He’s in his usual red turtle neck and dark pants.

“Ford?” Stanley blinks a few times and croaks out, “What are you – ”

The pot is making more hissing noises. Cursing, Stanley stumbles to move the pot and to kill the heat on the stove.

“At least I didn’t burn anything.” Stanley gives an awkward chuckle as he grabs a wad of paper towel and haphazardly wipes everything down. He’ll get Soos to clean the stove again in the morning. “So, what are you doing up so late anyhow?” he asks again, pouring a cup for Ford and himself.

Ford stares a little as if in a daze before he seems to snap to attention and takes the cup with a quiet “Thanks”.

“I was up working,” he answers after taking a small sip out of the mug. “I wanted to get the last bit of my research done before going to bed. Didn’t want to lose my train of thought.” Ford pauses, fidgets with his mug a little, and adds a touch too casually and innocently, “What about you? What are you doing up so late?”

Stanley barely stops himself from scoffing into his mug. Really, that man is terrible at hiding his tells.

“Couldn’t sleep,” he answers instead after taking a slow sip of his milk in a show of sleepy relaxation. “That’s why I’m making this. Heard it helps so I figured why not?” He shrugs. “So what nerd experiment has been keeping you bus – ”

“Why?”

Stanley’s words stall at the abrupt interruption. Ford is being strangely pushy and it's not good. But, as they say, when in doubt, play dumb.

“Why, what?” he throws back in mock-confusion. He even includes a blank look and a small quizzical frown just for show. “Why the milk? I heard it’s good for you. Speaking of which, we’re out. Remind me to tell Soos to grab us some in the morning. While we’re at it, we might as well – ”
“Stanley,” Ford cuts in flatly with narrowed eyes. Without breaking eye contact with Stanley, he calmly sets his mug down on the stove top beside him with a small resounding clink.

Well shit. Looks like Ford is done playing around.

“You haven’t been able to sleep for the past three nights.” Ford says, all matter-of-fact. Stanley forgets how unnerving it is to have his brother’s calculated look laser focused at him. “You’ve been quiet, withdrawn, and you’ve been jumpy around people. What’s going on?”

Right. Stanley is definitely pleading the fifth on this one. He takes a long sip out of his mug in defiant silence.

Ford scowls. “Stanley!”

“Look,” Stanley runs his hand through his disheveled hair. “I don’t know what you’re expecting me to say here.”

“How about you tell me what’s been bothering you?”

“And I told you that already. Couldn’t sleep. Bad dreams.”

Ford’s gaze sharpens, and Stanley can feel his breath hitch a little. Shit. “So the bad dreams are recurring?” his brother says, deceptively calm with an undertone of frostiness. “You only told me you had nightmares once. What else have you been hiding?”

Alarms blare in Stanley’s mind along with the instinctive itch to toss a smoke bomb and run for the hills. Except Ford zeroes in on the way Stanley’s fingers twitch, and connects the dots instantaneously. In one smooth motion, before Stanley even lifts a foot, Ford takes a half step to the left, right in front of the only exit to the kitchen.

He crosses his arms over his chest and cocks a challenging look at Stanley as if to say, “What now?”

Stanley grinds his teeth and he mentally counts to ten. Fucking Ford and his Indiana Jones' reflexes. “Move, Ford,” he forces out amidst the rising panic in his head. “I’m not doing this. Not here, not now.”

Ford shakes his head with clenched jaw. “No,” he grits out, and Stanley is half-surprised by the genuine anger that’s bleeding into his voice, and at the frustration that is marring his face. “Stanley, I’ve tried being patient, but I refuse to watch whatever that’s been bothering you eat at you like this!”

“For Christ’s sake, Ford!” Stanley growls low. He tightens his grip on his mug to stop his hand from shaking. “There’s nothing to talk about and even if there was, I don’t want to talk about it now – ”

“Well, I think we should talk about it, Stanley!” counters Ford hotly. “God knows we’ve been dancing around this for the past few days!”

“It’s four in the morning! Are you insane?”

“Then explain it to me quickly, because I’m not budging until we’ve talked!”

“Explain it to –” Stan splutters. “Are you even listening to yourself?!”

“If you’re not hiding anything, then why aren’t you wearing the sensor that I gave you?”

Stanley feels his heart drop to the pit of his stomach. Well, fuck. “What?” he furrows his brows in
confusion and croaks out in what he hopes sound like genuine surprise. Slowly, he reaches for his ear lobe. “Oh, heh. Whaddya know? I guess I must have just dropped it or –”

“Don’t patronize me,” Ford spits out. He takes a measured step forward, enough for Stanley to stumble back and slosh some of the milk on the floor in the process. “You weren’t wearing it yesterday either. I noticed that during breakfast.”

Shit. Damage control. “Look, Ford, it’s not what –”

But Ford is not interested. He ploughs on, “You’re not wearing the sensor, and you’ve had recurring nightmares that are so bad, you’ve taken to draining your sixteen year old whiskey like cheap beer. Don’t think I didn’t notice that. Worst of all, whenever I get close to you, you flinch away like a wounded deer.” Stanley cringes at that, but Ford continues, relentless, “All of this started two nights ago, and I haven’t received any warning from the sensor since last week. My guess is that you’ve taken the sensor off at least three days ago. You –” He pauses with furrowed brows.

Stanley watches Ford eyes slowly widen with understanding and counts in his head with something akin to resignation.

Three, two, one.

“You remember something.”

Bingo.

“You remember something, and you’ve been going out of your way to keep it from me.” Ford’s face twists with hurt, frustration, and confusion. “Why? What do you remember?”

“Ford, I don’t –”

“Why won’t you tell me?” His brother takes a bold step forward, and Stanley can see the creases forming on the cover of the Journal from where Ford’s fingers are digging into the page.

Stanley shuffles back, but the spark of annoyance in his chest is starting to flare up into something more volatile and dangerous. This is getting out of hand. “Christ Ford! Will you knock it off?” he growls, “I don’t have to tell you every sordid detail about my life! I don’t need you to constantly hover over me either!”

Anger flashes in his brother’s eyes. “Maybe I won’t have to monitor you if you actually bother to talk to me!”

Stanley clenches his jaw. “What. The. Hell. Ford? Monitor me? What are you, my prison guard?” He slams his mug down on the counter beside him, and the hot milk spills on his fingers. “What makes you so goddamned entitled as to think that you can just waltz in here and demand –”

“It’s my house!” Ford squawks in indignation, “I can waltz wherever I damn well please!”

“And I paid the mortgage!” There is an annoying prickling pain in his head, but Stanley wills the damn thing away. Not now, not when he’s got his holier-than-thou brother to verbally smack down. “I also lived in this damn thing for the last thirty years!”

“Using my name!” Ford counters just as hotly, “My name that’s also on the deed of this house!”

“And your name wouldn’t have stayed on the deed if it wasn’t for me!” In fact, some grunt from the bank had come pounding on the door for the mortgage payment his brother had apparently defaulted on. It was all thanks to Stan’s quick thinking and schmoozing that saved the house. Although in hindsight, there is some good that came out of that incident. His fear of the bank repossessing the
house did manage to snap him out of his desperate, sleepless search for –

Sleepless search for –

Stanley frowns. What the hell was he looking for, and why was he so desperate to find it?

“Dammit Stanley! Enough! This isn’t about the house and you know it!” Ford’s sharp, annoyed tone cuts through the temporary white fog that had blanketed Stanley’s mind. “This is about your stubborn refusal to accept help when you clearly need it!”

“Hey!” Stanley snaps, offended, but the barb manages to hit its target. He knows Ford viewed him as a charity case, but that doesn’t mean he wants to be reminded of it, let alone have it thrown in his face. You’re just a dumber, sweatier version of him, comes a distant echo, and goddammit, not now. “I said I was fine! I don’t need your help, so why don’t you just let it go?!”

Ford only shakes his head and throws his hands in the air. “Unbelievable,” he utters with disgust. “If you were fine we wouldn’t be having this discussion right now! You wouldn’t have taken off the damned sensor in the first place!” He adds, under his breath, but in the stillness of the kitchen, Stanley catches every word, “I knew I should’ve made the damn thing stick to your skin permanently. Would have saved us all the hassle.”

Just a dumber, sweatier version – at least you’ll have one son here in New Jersey forever – someone’s gotta get paid to scrape the barnacles off of it.

Stanley sees red.

“Are you kidding me?” Because of course, Ford would think that. Why should Stanley be surprised by this? He’s forgotten what a condescending asshole that his brother can be. “Maybe I don’t want to be monitored? Have you thought about that, Brainiac?!” He stalks towards Ford but his nerdy brother’s posture remains ramrod straight, and his lips are pressed into a thin, unimpressed line. “Maybe, I just want to be left alone to sort out what little I have left in my head!”

The small flinch that he sees in response sends a rush of sweet, vindictive victory singing up his spine. He takes another step towards Ford and jabs a finger to his brother’s chest. “And really? That’s your solution? You’re going to tag me like a farm animal?” He gives a harsh bark of laughter and snarls, “Well, news flash, Poindexter! Even you can’t expect to monitor me forever. You’ll slip up and when you do, when you do –”

“Things change,” comes a quiet, distant response, and the tone is so unfamiliar to Stanley that it takes him a few seconds to process that his brother’s voice is hushed with horror, with fear.

“I – what?”

Ford’s head whips up and pins Stanley with icy, suspicious eyes. The worry and frustration that were once present gone in an instant. “What do you remember, Stanley?” he says low and dangerous.

Stanley stares back blankly. He feels like something monumental has happened and it went completely over his head. “Look, Ford, I don’t –”


Stanley gulps and his heart rate picks up. He’s seen eyes like this before. He’s seen them glaring down at him before the trunk door slammed shut to encase him in darkness. He’s seen them stare at him from across the dirty, dingy cell, watching him hungrily as he huddles in his hard bunk bed for warmth.
He takes an instinctive step back.

But Ford is not having it. As quick as a snake, his hand whips out and catches Stanley’s forearm in a steel grip that Stanley is certain will leave bruises. “What do you remember, Stanley!”

“Oy! What the hell! Let go!”

“What are you hiding from me?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“No, you don’t understand, and you won’t even listen! I need you to answer the question! I need to know if Bill is – ”

You won’t even listen – you won’t even listen – you won’t even listen -

The rest of noise fades into muffled mumbling as if Stanley has suddenly been submerged under water.

I’m giving you a chance to do the first worthwhile thing in your life, and you won’t even listen!

You ruined your own life!

The vertigo hits Stanley like a freight train and – searing pain burning into his left shoulder, lighting up the nerves along his arms, his chest, his neck white hot like an electric current passing through a naked wire. The scent of charred meat and burnt hair fill the air. He could feel his skin bubbling, his flesh peeling as he’s being cooked alive and Ford is staring back, wide-eyed, gaunt, and dishevelled. He’s babbling – oh my god I’m so –

There’s a hand on his shoulder, holding him in place on his knees and – the hand in his hair yanks his head back and Rico swims into view under the glaring fluorescent light of the warehouse. He grins, sharp and twisted as he begins to twirl a butterfly knife in his hand. “Mr. Pines! You’re late with my payment!” he singsongs. “And that’s after I’ve given you so many warnings as well.”

Behind Rico, Jorge chuckles, low and dangerous. He drags the crowbar rhythmically against the floor so that the end scrapes against the cement with a soft, scratching sound.

“Don’t tell me you already forgot about what happened in prison?” Rico tsks. “We can always have a repeat performance. Jorge has been so looking forward to seeing you pinned down again.”

He thrashes violently against the grip – fucking Rico’s goon. “Espero que te mueras, puto!” he snarls, but he knows that his face has gone pale and his stomach is roiling at the mere mention of that happening again. His hand latches on to something heavy and with a twist of his arm, he hurls it against Rico’s smug face.

The hold on him loosens. He twists himself away and scrambles to safety on his hands and knees. His palms are getting shredded by the shards of glass on the warehouse floor – he can feel the sensation of warm slick blood coating his skin, and the stinging, throbbing pain in his flesh – but he brushes all that aside. He breathes and tries not to gag when he catches a heavy thick stench of copper.

He doesn’t have the time to care. He can’t afford to. He needs to find a place to hide now, he needs to get out, he needs, he needs -

“Get him! Don’t let him leave!”
He trips. He lands sprawling face-first into the ground in a graceless heap, his teeth clicking painfully as his jaw connects the floor. A hand tries to tug the back of his shirt and he recoils away.

No escape. No escape. No escape.

“Stanley? Come out, come out, wherever you are.”

He rolls around and backpedals until his back hits something - a wall, judging from the rough surface scratching through the thin cotton of his shirt. His heart feels like it’s getting ready to burst out of his chest, and his lungs are burning from the way he’s heaving for breath. His hands are leaving smears of vivid red lines along the cold grey floor, a morbid parody of minimalist paintings.

He needs to get out. He needs to - no escape, no escape -

“You should know better than to run, but I enjoy the chase. So did our other five friends from Colombia. Do you remember them? Carlos took a real liking to you.”

He claps his trembling hands over his ears and squeezes his eyes shut. He can feel his bones rattling in his body and he can’t – he can’t -

"After we’re done with you, you won’t be walking."

Oh God, he’s going to die. He’s going to die alone as a nameless nobody and nobody on this planet would give two shits about that. He’s going to die before he could see Ford again, before he could tell his brother how sorry he was for everything, for being a bad brother, for ruining Ford’s dream, for destroying all the good things he’s ever touched.

“I’m sorry, Ford,” he rasps out. “I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry.”

*Just one more push, Stanley.*

*Everything’s going to be okay.*


He shudders at the soothing tone. He doesn’t dare to move an inch.

“It’s alright,” the voice continues soothingly, slow and soft like a lullaby. It’s getting louder and crisper, as if someone is adjusting the knob on the radio until the sound is free of all the background, static noise. “Everything’s alright. I’m not going to hurt you.”

He lowers his hands from his ears but he keeps his eyes clenched shut. He thinks he remembers who this person is. “Sixer?” he croaks out through shaky breath.

“I’m here. I’m right in front of you. Everything’s alright. We’re at home in Gravity Falls. We’re in the kitchen. You’ve had a flashback.”

The day’s events filter into his brain, one piece at a time, and they snap back into place like puzzle pieces connecting together to form a coherent picture.

Right. He couldn’t sleep so he went to the kitchen. He went to grab something to drink to put him to sleep. He got into a fight with Ford and his brain decided that that was the perfect moment to crap out on him.

His name is Stanley, he’s at home in Gravity Falls. His brother is called Ford and he’s safe. *Safe, safe,*
The lingering adrenaline rush out of his body, and the restless energy that cackles under his skin dissipates like dark storm clouds after a heavy bout of rain, thunder and lightning.

His name is Stanley, he's in Gravity Falls, his brother is called Ford, and he's safe.

He repeats the mantra under his breath until his heartbeat calms, and he's left feeling hollow and weary to the bone.

“Lee?”

Stanley blinks open his eyes.

The kitchen around him is an utter mess; the chairs and the table lay on their sides, bits of glass and porcelain from broken dinnerware litter the floor, and long streaks of vibrant red stain the wooden floorboards. His gaze follows the blood trail until it ends right under where he’s resting his palms.

He lifts his hands up. Sure enough, thin rivulets of blood trace the lacerations on his flesh. They criss-cross along the surface of his palms, flowing into the crevasses and folds of his skin, and they snaked down his wrists.

“You got hurt.”

His head snaps up.

Ford is looking back at him with huge glassy eyes, a mixture of heartbreak and fear swirl in their depths like a stormy sea. “Lee?” he says, slow and fragile. “Are you with me? Are you alright?” It’s the quietest that Stanley remembers Ford being.

Stanley manages a stiff little nod before he pulls his brother into a desperate hug, gripping the back of Ford’s red turtleneck with his injured hands like a drowning man clutching on to his lifeline. He nuzzles into Ford’s shoulder and breathes in the familiar, comforting scent of ozone and sandalwood that cling to his brother. He ignores the stinging in his eyes.

He feels Ford tense before wrapping his arms around Stanley’s torso so tight that his ribs ache.

“I got you, Lee. I got you,” he whispers again and again like a mantra.

Neither brothers let go until the tremors in Stanley’s hands die down.

“I’m so sorry, Stanley. I didn’t mean to push you like that. I thought that he came back and I was terrified.”

A sound of mild confusion.

“I know, I know it’s not Bill, now. I figured that out during the…during what happened.” A pause, and in a quieter voice: “I’m not going to ask you to share with me what you’re not comfortable with. However, I want you to know that if you do, I won’t judge you.”

A disbelief scoff.

“Stanley, I’ve done a lot of things that I’m not proud of while I was travelling the multiverse. I
created the portal that brought about the apocalypse because I got duped by a space demon, one that I made a deal with after the first time I met him.”

A soft snicker.

“Yeah, yeah. Laugh it up. But I’ll tell you what, if you share something with me, you can ask me for one of my stories. Fair’s fair. So how does that sound?”

They fall asleep tucked against each other in a tangled mess of limbs on Ford’s couch.

X. Storytelling

It becomes one of their late night traditions. Stanley would knock on Ford’s door, and Ford would invite him in.

Sometimes, Stanley wouldn’t say anything. He’d just sit quietly in the old, dusty arm chair in the corner of Ford’s room, listening to Ford read out loud his latest entry in Journal #4 until his heart stops racing, and his nausea dies down.

Other times, Stanley would launch into his story without preamble.

“I remember when I was in Utah. I was twenty-six years old.”

“I was twenty-four years old, and I was in Vegas, turning tricks for a living.”

“I was nineteen and I was in New York City, half-starving.”

Ford never interrupts. He’d always wait until Stanley finishes before wrapping him in a reassuring hug. “Thank you for telling me,” he’d say without fail every time. “Now, what would you like to know?”

Stanley never asks for Ford to recall the bad memories. He’d always make requests like:

“Tell me something funny that we did when we were dumb kids.”

“Tell me what was the best place you’ve visited while you’re roaming the multiverse.”

“Tell me what are some of the weirdest aliens you’ve ever come across.”

Ford would offer the bad with the good anyway.

“When I was twenty-nine years old, I stumbled into Dimension C321 where I got arrested and was imprisoned. I broke out with the help of a gang of murderers and thieves.”

“I barely made out of Dimension 187 alive. I was thirty-three then.”

“I was thirty-six when I created a weapon of mass destruction in Dimension 589. I almost destroyed an entire planet.”

The story telling sessions are never easy. More often than not, they are accompanied by copious
amounts of gin and whiskey.

Even more frequently, Stanley and Ford would find themselves asleep on the narrow sofa, pressed tightly against each other like sardines in a can just so they’d both fit.

The next morning, Stanley would complain incessantly about the crick in the neck and the pain to the lower back.

(The pain is worth it every single time.)

---

**XI. Tells**

The day he remembers pushing Ford into the portal, he spends it locked up in his room in bed with his curtains drawn, his covers and his deep sense of shame wrapped around him like layers of a cocoon.

Throughout the day, he hears the sound of heavy footsteps outside his door; the individual would storm briskly down the hall, stop when he gets to Stanley’s door, pace in front of the door a few times, softly, almost hesitantly, before power walking back down the hallway.

Stanley adds another item on the list of tells that Ford needs to work on disguising.

Then, he rolls to his side, draws his covers over his head, and shuts his eyes to sleep the rest of the shitty day away.

The next morning, Ford takes one look a him, at his dishevelled state, his sallow skin, the purple under his eyes, and makes a soft, “Ah.”

“Stanley, there’s nothing to apologize for.” He passes Stanley the whole coffee pot. “It was an accident and it happened thirty years ago.”

Stanley gapes at him a little. “How the hell did you – ”

“You have these tells, Stanley.” Ford looks at him fondly. “I meant to tell you about them because they tend to give you away, but, well,” he shrugs and smiles a little sheepishly. “I rather like being able to know what you’re thinking just by observation.”

He gives Stanley a quick pat on the shoulder. “Anyway, you got me home, so thank you, Stanley. Thank you for doing that for me. It’s something I should say more often.”

With a last squeeze of the shoulder, Ford whisks out of the room, but not before adding, “Let me know if you’re up for some D, D, and more D later tonight or if you’re up for some hunting adventure this afternoon.”

Stanley stares at the blank spot where Ford was standing. His hand is still clutching on to the cooling coffee pot, and his ears are ringing with Ford’s “Thank you.”

(Something warm settles comfortably over his heart, and it spreads outwards to coat every last bit of him like honey on toast. He has a feeling that the other Stan Pines had been waiting for this moment for so long, he all but gave up on it ever happening.)

If he spends the rest of the day humming the Stan Wrong Song under his breath, then no one is the
[AN] Almost to the end you guys! Thank you so much for your support. I was originally a bit hesitant to post this fic mainly 'cause I wasn't too sure if it'll be met with silence and indifference. Your kind comments and genuine enthusiasm in this piece mean the world to me, and I try to respond to every single one of them as my way of saying thank you. (My sincere apology if I happen to have missed any of you!)

For those who are interested, I have a tumblr account!
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

[AN] Sorry for the late update. When real life hits, it hits hard. I have not forgotten about this fic though (in fact, I’ve made quite the few edits to the previous chapters, so feel free to revisit those before starting this chapter.) Thank you so much for your patience, as always.

[EDITED - May 20, 2017. I rewrote some parts of this because I was unhappy with some of my choice of words. Minor tweaks only though.]

See the end of the chapter for more notes

XII. Stars

There are some things that Stanley will never tell his brother.

Most of them are stupid inconsequential tidbits that he shelves at the back of his head without a second thought, things like how he genuinely enjoys playing Ford’s nerdy dungeon game or how he prefers his eggs over-easy and his coffee black.

(Ford tends to make his eggs sunny side up and his coffee with milk and sugar. Stanley doesn’t have the heart to tell him what he actually prefers, not with Ford beaming at him as he hands him the plate of food, his smile lighting up the room and warming his chest like fire chasing away the winter chill. Besides, food is food, and he’ll cram just about anything down his gullet. Beggars can’t be choosers, after all.)

(The occasional flashes of phantom hunger pangs clawing at the inside of his stomach serve as a useful reminder of that.)

(Beggars can’t be choosers.)

Then, there are the not-so-little things he avoids telling Ford; things like how every now and then, he’d feel a white-hot searing pain radiating from his shoulder, almost always accompanied by the sickly scent of singed hair mingled with cooked meat. The low churning nausea in his gut that follows has, on more than one occasion, sent him bolting for fresh air.

Neither does he tell Ford about how he’s gotten used to dropping his gaze whenever he enters the kitchen. If he happens to catch a glimpse of the funny lightbulb over the kitchen table, well, then Stanley definitely doesn’t tell Ford about the inexplicable wave of irritation that would wash over him, or the bitter acrid taste of hollow defeat that would coat the back of his tongue.

And the whispers of once-familiar voices, remnants from the ragged remains of his memories, would surge up and –

Does anyone see this? This is what a hero looks like right here. Anyway, where were you?

You’re just a dumber sweatier version of him.

Look, there’s a saltwater taffy store on the dock. And somebody’s gotta get paid to scrape the
barnacles off of it.

At least you'll have one son here in New Jersey forever.

Instead, Stanley would close his eyes, take a deep breath and –

Just one more push, Stanley.

Everything’s going to be okay.

And he would shake his head and force away the dark, clinging tendrils of his sombre thoughts as far from his mind as possible.

He’s good at being in denial. Then again, he’s always been an excellent liar.

(Above all else, he wishes he could tell Ford how utterly terrified he is of losing himself to Stan Pines. He’s still not entirely sold that past him was as good of a man as his niece and nephew were saying. Sure, from what he remembers, the other him had his moments of bravery, but more often than not, he only acted that way because he was fixing the problems he himself had created in the first place.)

(Not like he’ll ever say anything to Ford though. Ford is oddly defensive about his brother. Ford would be horribly disappointed if he said anything negative about Stan Pines, and if there is one thing he shares with Stan Pines, it’s that they both hate to disappoint Ford.)

What Stanley ends up settling for is this: every morning, he gets out of bed and shuffles to the kitchen with a gruff “g’morning” to his brother, taking care to tilt his head just right to avoid looking above the kitchen table. He’d then hum a quick thanks as Ford hands him yet another cup of coffee that is too sweet for his tastes. He’d eat the eggs that are a tad too runny to his liking.

Ford would ask how he’s doing. He’d answer with a nonchalant, “Good, thanks.” Sometimes, he’d shrug.

It’s a coward’s way out, and he knows it.

Stanley never proclaims himself to be a hero anyway.

He’s a lot more vocal with his concerns when it’s his brother who’s acting dodgy as fuck.

“Why is this a good idea again?” Stanley pulls his jacket tighter around his body, shivering as another gust of ice cold wind from the lake whips up the water surface and wraps around him. He squints at the vague, Ford-like blob on the wooden dock a few feet away from him, but hell if he knows what he’s even looking at in the dark. “And why can’t we do this later in the day when it’s not the ass crack of dawn?”

“We’re looking for water sprites, Stanley,” Ford answers, as if that explains anything. He steps closer to Stanley and hands him a coiled rope and a flashlight. “They’re nocturnal creatures who live in the water but rises to the water surface a few hours before dawn. Think of all the things we can learn from them!”

At Stanley’s judging silence, he huffs out, “This won’t be like last week with the carnivorous hippogriffs. Now, help me load the boat.”

Stanley blinks. “We have a boat?”
He doesn’t know why his heart skips a beat when he sees the words ‘Stan O’ War II’ displayed proudly on the battered hull. And something that feels like almost fondness wash over him – Kings of New Jersey! Kings of New Jersey!

(It’s a perfect name.)

(Then, he squashes that tendril of thoughts down viciously.)

“Are you sure we’re at the right place?” he murmurs once they have reached the center of the lake and have lowered the anchor. “I’m not seeing any of those, er, water-things out here.”

In the darkness, Stanley can just make out the white of Ford’s teeth as he flashes him a smile. “Water sprites, Stanley. And by my calculations, we should have another half hour to an hour before they show up. Might as well make ourselves comfortable in the meanwhile.”

A gust of wind blows across the lake, sending icy tendrils up Stanley’s spine. He grimaces and curls into himself. Right. He’ll just make himself real comfortable as a frozen corpse-cicle.

“Here.”

He blinks at the cup of hot chocolate under his nose.

“Thought you could use it.” Ford says with good cheer, clutching on to his own Styrofoam cup. “I know how much you hate the cold. You always have.”

(Stanley’s glad that the cover of darkness is hiding his tells from his brother because he wasn’t sure if he could have adequately disguised his wince just then.)

“Thanks,” he says, cupping the tiny cup into his frozen palms. The warmth seeping into his numb fingers feel like absolute bliss.

“Wish I brought some reading material out here though,” Ford mutters. “We could use something to help pass the time. Never did find out who stole those capers.”

(The butler, a voice chimes in Stanley’s head, clear as bells. He ignores it.)

“Heh, figures you’re going to bring your nerd books with you.” Stanley chuckles. “Why don’t you let me know if we’re doing this again so that I can bring us something that’s actually fun.”

Ford snorts. “If you’re talking about your joke book, Stanley, then I beg to differ.”

Stanley can’t help but gasp a little in offence. “Lies. Nothing but filthy lies. Some of those jokes are comedy gold!” Especially the ex-wife ones. Those are great.

As if sensing those thoughts, Ford gives his brother a flat stare. “I heard the ex-wife jokes, Stanley. They’re the furthest thing from comedy gold there is.”

“Yeesh, tough crowd.” Stanley rolls his eyes and takes a slow sip of his drink. “Ah well. I guess I’ll just have to find something in that book that floats your boat?”

It takes Stanley a few seconds to clue into the silent disapproval that’s radiating from Ford. It takes another second for the positively shit-eating grin to slowly spread over his face.

“Stanley,” his brother warns, mildly fearful and it warms the bottom of Stanley’s cold, dark heart. “Don’t you dare – !”
“What?” he asks with the innocence of a mayoral candidate caught committing voting fraud, “was that knot to your liking? You said we should do something to pass the time!”

“Stanley. No.”

“I’m seas-ing the occasion! You know, *carp-e diem* and all?”

“I wasn’t expecting you to drown us in puns!” And then, as if realizing the error of his ways, Ford splutters, “Wait, that is not an invitation – ”

“Too late!” Stanley crows, jabbing a finger in Ford’s direction. “You responded. The pun war is on!” He narrows his gaze and crosses his arms over his chest. “Of course, you can always just give up and admit defeat.”

“I’ll have you know I was the champion of puns in Dimension C209-1,” Ford leans forward close enough for Stanley to see his challenging glare and his annoyed scowl. “If I were you, I’d get ready for a real bass kicking!”

Stanley barks out a laugh. Now that’s more like it! “Hey, you don’t need to get crabby with me. At least we have something to occupy our brines with for the next hour.”

“Knowing you, this will inevitably get out of sand.”

“You’re finding this reel fun, don’t lie.”

Ford harrumphs. “I shrimply don’t know what you mean. But I suppose that it will take an act of cod to get you to stop at this point.”

“Why would I stop when everything’s going so swimmingly?”

“On the contrary, this whole conversation is heading towards shipwreck.”

“It wouldn’t be if you have a great sense of humor like mine, first mate.”

“I’m sardine to think you’re delusional.”

“Well, I’m aboat to think that you’re – ”

A speckle of glowing light lands delicately on Stanley’s nose. He gapes at it, cross-eyed.

“What on Earth?”

Before Stanley or Ford can move, the light flutters away from its perch, and circles above the boat in a slow, lazy arc. It meanders through the air, drifting to and fro seemingly without a care in the world like a dandelion puff caught in the wind.

“Stanley. Look!”

One by one, small flickering orbs break out from beneath the mirrored surface of the lake as if answering their sister’s siren call. Gently, they rise, swaying and swirling in a shimmering cloud as if dancing to a silent waltz. Some flit several feet above the boat, looping casually above Stanley and Ford before drifting back down to skim the surface of the lake, trailing tiny ripples along the calm water. Others float away from the boat in wide zig-zags, their soft glow casting a silver halo around them and reflecting dots of light against the water.

“Incredible,” Stanley hears Ford breathes with reverence. The twinkling glow of the orbs is filling
their surroundings with pinpricks of shining silver against a backdrop of deep indigo as night sky seamlessly blends with calm water. Stanley takes a shuddering breath. It’s as if he’s downing in an vast, glimmering galaxy of stars that stretches out as far as the eyes can see, the feeling of solid wood beneath his feet being his only anchor.

“Yeah, it’s really something,” he agrees just as softly and no less awed.

The voice in his head is blissfully silent.

———

That night, Stanley dreams of a starlit sky over a lonely highway that stretches on over the horizon. He finished off the last of his cigarette and exhaled a plume of white smoke, watching the lazy trail rise above his head to slowly dissipate in the cool mountain air. The sky was clear enough for him to make out the Little Dipper and the Cassiopeia hanging above the horizon of bristly pine trees that carpeted the Oregon landscape.

Ford would’ve loved this. Those were his favourite constellations when they were children. He wouldn’t shut up about them whenever they went stargazing on the beach.

Stan shook his head and peeled his gaze away from the stars. When he gets his brother back, he’ll have all the time to make amends. Then, he and Ford can go stargazing out in the water like they always wanted to do.

He quirked his lips in a lopsided smile. Maybe they’ll name the new ship Stan O’War II for old time’s sake.

But until then, he has work to do. One last loose thread to tie up.

He placed a loving hand on the trunk of his Stan-mobile and gave the battered, cool metal below his palm a few soft pats. It was the one thing he managed to keep from his home from Before, the one proof he had that his father loved him once, and it was his home, his escape, his everything for the past decade. He loved her like nothing else, but there was no way for him to keep her if he wanted his plans to work, sentiments be damned.

He couldn’t keep her if he wanted to get Ford back.

And wasn’t that the story of his life? If nothing else, his life had been a massive test of endurance to see how much Stan Pines was willing to sacrifice, how much he was willing to give without shattering.

What’s one more sacrifice in the grand scheme of things?

Stan huffed a humourless smile. “Just one more push, Stanley. Just one more push. You got this.”

Just one more push. And then, it’d be good bye Stan Pines, liar, cheat, grifter extraordinaire. Good bye, Stan Pines, the failure. The lesser twin.

Just one more push.

He closed his eyes, drew in one last shaky breath. Breathed out.

And he pushed.

———

As he watched the remaining proof of Stan Pines crash and burn, a fleeting thought crossed his
mind. At least he went out in a blaze of glory. At least he went out for something bigger than himself.

Stanley wakes up with tears in his eyes. He lays in bed until his heart stops aching.

If Ford realizes that Stanley is more subdued, he doesn’t give it away by saying anything out of the ordinary.

Stanley does, however, notice the freshly brewed pots of chamomile tea readily available whenever he wanders into the kitchen, or the mountains of baked goods piled high on a plate on the counter. He’d have to be blind to miss the new joke book – ‘Even More Yuk ‘Em Ups: Ex-Wife Edition! – sitting conspicuously on the seat of his armchair beside his favourite blanket, neatly folded and warm to the touch.

He brings the blanket to his face and inhales. The scent of fresh laundry detergent mingled with a hit of soothing lavender hits his nose, and he feels some of the tension along his shoulders leave his body in a wave as he breathes out.

He doesn’t need to fake the soft smile on his face when Ford finally bolsters the courage to ask if he’s alright.

(No, he’s not alright, but as he’s slowly getting to know Stan Pines better, he thinks he’ll get there.)

Chapter End Notes

[AN] I know I said this in the previous A/N but now we're really getting close to the end. :o/ As always, thank you so much for reading and for reviewing. Comments help light the fire under my ass to get this fic done, haha!
Chapter 5

XIII. Kings of New Jersey

The Pine twins find themselves back on the boat at the lake with Ford scribbling madly in Journal 4 while Stanley steers them to wherever Ford commands. “Stanley! Can we get closer to the sprite over there, the one that’s doing that funny waggle flight dance?”

That is, Stanley tries his best to steer them to wherever Ford commands. “Ford, they’re all doing that waggle dance. You’re going to have to specify. Left or right?” he asks, stifling a yawn. The twinkling glow around him was awe inspiring the first time around, but after four hours of sitting in the boat in the cold, he’s ready to go back to his warm toasty bed, magical glowing orbs be damned.

Ford hums and squints his eyes. How he manages to tell the individual orbs apart is beyond Stanley. “Let’s see here, ah ha!” He points towards the left to a speck of light zigzagging lazily towards the shore. “This way! Quickly, it’s getting away!”

Stanley perks up. Finally, some excitement. “Hold on to your seat,” he chuckles and revs the engine. “This is going to be a bumpy ride.”

“Wait! Stanley!! Don’t you daa---AAAH!”

Ford’s panicked outrage trails behind them, mixing with Stanley’s whooping laughter as they race through the lake to chase down a flying glowing speck amongst a sea of flying glowing specks. As if sensing Stanley’s thirst for mayhem, the cloud of glowing orbs in front of the boat parts like the Red Sea least they become flattened like bugs on a windshield.

“Slow down, Stanley!!” Ford screeches over the howling wind.

“Quit complaining and start directing!” Stanley hollers back, grinning only wider at the filthy string of curses his brother utters. “Besides, I’m an expert at steering this thing! I know what I’m doing!”

“Welp, the good news is that we managed to escape relatively unscathed,” Ford sighs and unbucks his seat belt after the car sputters to a stop. The water sprites did not take kindly to Stan O’ War II barrelling towards them and have eventually mounted a vicious counter-attack in the form of a buzzing, stinging death cloud. The Pines managed to dodge the sprites by running their boat aground before running to the shore for their lives. “The bad news is that we’re probably not welcomed there anymore.”

“Eh,” Stanley shrugs, pulling the keys out of the ignition. Being perpetually banned from the lake during the hours of 2 to 6 am sounds positively delightful to him. Besides, “How long can those things hold a grudge for anyway?”

“A lifetime.” Ford replies dryly. “They’re Fae. Fae are notorious for holding grudges.”

Stanley winces. Whoops, definitely screwed the pooch there. “I guess that means we’re just going to have find another spot.”
Ford’s annoyed glare gives way to a resigned sigh. “Absolutely ridiculous,” he utters with a soft shake of his head, but the fondness bleeding into his voice takes the heat away from his words. “I suppose we can. It will probably have to be outside of Gravity Falls where the other anomaly hot spots are located.”

Stanley blinks. “Other hot spots? What other hot spots?”

Ford’s face brightens, probably at the opportunity to give a mini lesson, the nerd. “There are other hot spots on this planet, places where a high concentration of anomalies and weirdness congregate. Some of these spots are larger than others but luckily, they are not as easily assessable to humans. Here, let me show you.”

He activates the holographic map on his watch, casting the inside of the car in soft blue light. Spots of red bloom across the surface of the map one by one, an angry cluster particularly centered in the Arctic Sea.

“Wait,” Stanley tears his gaze from the glob of red on the map and frowns. “When you mean anomalies and weirdness, you mean like those things that crawled out of that creepy giant X in the sky back in August?”

Ford nods. “Right. That dimensional tear served as a point of entry for those anomalies to get to our world. There are other places on Earth where the wall between dimensions is particularly thin so it’s easier for temporary micro tears to form. These hot spots tend to also emit a certain type of energy that attracts weirdness and other supernatural creatures.”

He pauses, purses his lips as if gathering his resolve, and continues. “Stanley,” he hesitates, and there’s something so inherently wrong with his brother being less than his usual confident self that Stanley finds himself sitting up, alert.

“Yeah, Ford?”

“I’ve been meaning to ask.” Ford pauses to clear his throat and yeah, he’s definitely nervous about something. “Weirdmageddon has been contained but as you can see, there are strange new anomalies across the planet. I want to investigate but I’m too old to do this alone.”

Ford’s eyes flicker down to his lap. “I…I was hoping you’d come with me,” he confesses in a hush. “I know we haven’t gotten along in the past, and I can’t begin to say how much I regret losing all those years to being angry over a stupid – ” His voice breaks and he shakes his head gruffly. “Never mind that. These past months have made me realize how much I miss having my brother back and how I’ve been blessed with a second chance to make things right. I’ll be damned if I’m wasting it now.”

He reaches into his jacket and pulls out a faded, crinkled, well-loved photograph from the pocket closest to his heart. Slowly, carefully, he smooths it out and hands it to Stanley with slightly trembling hands.

“So what do you say?” Ford asks with a bashful smile. “Will you give me a second chance?”

Two near identical boys grin back at Stanley, their stance proud from their spots atop the remnants of a wooden dilapidated ship as tattered sun-bleached sails flapped proudly behind their backs. Their mousy brown hair is wind-mussed, their glasses crooked, but their teeth gleamed from their thousand-watt smiles against their dirt-caked, sun-tanned skin.

Stanley’s lips curl into a slight smile. They looked happy and carefree. Like children ought to.
From the edge of his hearing, he can barely make out the distant sound of crashing waves, the cries of seagulls, and bright, shrieking laughter – *Kings of New Jersey! Kings of New Jersey! Kings of New Jersey!*

His gaze roams across the photograph, zeroing in on the “Stan O’ War” blazoned proudly across the side of the ship, and he feels the air rush out of his lungs in realization. *Oh, so that’s where that name comes from.*

Something in his head snaps into place like a well-fitted puzzle piece slotting itself perfectly in a half-finished canvas. A rush of sensation surges through his mind – the salty scent of the sea, familiar and comforting; the gritty feel of sand between his toes; a view of the sunset, orange and pink and purple bleeding together across clear skies; the warmth on his skin from the last rays of the setting sun. Above all else, a child’s voice, achingly familiar, calls out:

*Hey, don’t worry, bro. Wherever we go, we go together.*

Sweet nostalgia coats the back of his throat thick like molasses, and his eyes slip shut. He remembers how he and Ford would always scrounge for the supplies to fix the Stan O’ War. They would spend days scouring the beach, salvaging anything they could find that wasn’t half rotted or rusted, dreaming a fool’s dream that one day, their hard work will free them from their wretched home. This was their solace from a town too small, too stifling, too unwelcoming for two boys with big dreams. It was them against the world and it has always been that way. But that’s okay.

He only ever needs one person to have his back. He only ever needs Ford.

*One of these days, you and me are gonna sail away from this dumb town. We’ll hunt for treasure, get all the girls, and be an unstoppable team of adventurers.*

Warm, fluttery, amusement fills his belly. Him and Ford are already a team when they have their adventures. They just haven’t gotten to the sailing part yet.

But is that what Stanley wants?

Flickers of doubt creeps into his consciousness and it chases away his gentle mirth. He knows what Stan Pines wanted. Stanley, though, Stanley is satisfied with his status quo.

From his mind’s eye, he sees Young Ford wipe his dark doe eyes with the back of his hands. *You really mean it?*

What does Stanley want?

Young Stan doesn’t answer, can’t answer, forever preserved in Stan’s memories as the happy, bright-eyed youth he once was before the bitter harshness of life strips him of his innocence. Here, the child nods before holding his hand up towards his twin and with his heart on a platter. *High six?*

Relief blossoms across Young Ford’s face and he smiles, a small wavering, fragile thing. *High six.*

“Stanley?” A solid hand lands on his shoulder, shaking him gently. “You okay there?”

Just like that, the mirage dissipates like smoke, taking with it the pleasant sunny warmth of the beach. The cold night air hits him at once, filling his lungs with ice and wrapping his chest in tendrils of sharp numbing pain. He shivers.

“I don’t – ” Stanley stammers through chattering teeth. Another shiver runs down his spine and his
core feels so blisteringly cold, he can barely concentrate on anything else. “I – sorry. Memory,” he hisses out.

Ford curses under his breath and quickly strips off his jacket to drape it on Stanley’s shoulders. “Hey, hey, don’t worry about it.” He gently removes the photo from Stanley’s leaden fingers and rubs Stanley’s arms up and down to stop his visible shaking. “Shit, your lips are turning blue. Let’s get you back to somewhere warm.”

That night, as Stanley lays in bed under the three extra comforters his brother piled on him, he thinks about how he would have responded had he had the chance.

(Stanley is never more glad for his well-timed flashback. He honestly didn’t know what to say. Still don’t, in fact.)

Young Ford’s fragile smile clings to his last waking moments.

The memories from his life before the Falls come flooding back in a torrential downpour, filling around what little he remembers. They consume his waking moments, flashes of previously felt senses sneaking into his daily routine – the hot leather seat of Stanmobile, the dry desert breeze whipping across his face as he crosses New Mexico, the sight of a lonely, dusty highway stretching on forever in front of him, everything around it as dead and grey as Stan – and they absolutely wreak havoc with his head.

Stan Pines is coming back like an unstoppable force of nature, and Stanley has never felt more torn. He’s relieved that the disturbing blank fog in his head is receding but with those memories come the emotions tied to them, the constant barrage of anger, fear, melancholy, wrapped around a choking layer of self-loathing so thick that even Stanley knows isn’t healthy.

Amongst the tangled dark knot of feelings, a constant stream of thoughts shines quicksilver bright.

I wonder if Ford is doing alright. Pointdexter always gets himself in trouble with the way his head is stuck in the clouds – I wonder if Ford’ll be proud of me if he sees this – I wonder how he will react if I send him a letter. No, can’t chance it, with Rico on the hunt. Maybe at the next pit stop, I’ll give Ma a call instead to see how he’s doing. He can’t still be mad, can’t he?

I wonder if he thinks about me as much as I think about him.

I wonder if he’ll ever forgive me.

I wonder if he’ll ever want to see me again.

I wonder if he’ll ever call me his brother again.

All the while, Ford’s offer to travel the world continues to rest heavily in his heart.

(Underneath it all, he’s terrified that the things that make up Stanley are slowly eroding away with every fresh barrage of memories.)

His turmoil did not go unnoticed because Ford asks one evening during dinner, “Are you doing alright, Stanley? You’ve been very quiet lately.”

Stanley sighs and puts his fork down. “I’m fine, I’m just,” trying to sort through the hot mess that is Stan Pine’s life, trying to reconcile with the fact that Stan Pines was not a bad man, but he sure as
hell wasn’t a happy one either, trying to figure out what Stanley wants, but to do that, I'll need to sort out where Stan Pines ends and where Stanley begins first.

Trying to figure out if separating Stanley and Stan Pines even matters at the end of the day, not with the rate the memories are coming back.

“Remembering,” he finishes lamely with a shrug. And before his brother can panic, he adds, “I haven’t hurt myself. Just got a minor headache is all. Nothing serious.”

Ford frowns, “Alright, if you’re sure it’s nothing serious. I’d still prefer if you were to take it easy for the next few days though.”

“Hold on a sec,” Stanley huffs, because he sees where this is going, “If I’m taking it easy then I don’t want you running about in the woods on your own either. Heaven forbid the sort of shenanigan you will end up in.”

“Yes, yes, I will reserve our adventures until you feel better,” Ford rolls his eyes. “I’m working on something new and exciting at the moment and it will keep me busy for a few days. If you need me, I will be in the lab.”

The next few days are peaceful. True to his words, Stanley barely sees Ford aside from the odd times he ventures out from the bowels of the basement for food and caffeine.

Ford does not bring up the trip even once.

Stanley isn’t sure what to make of it.

I’ll talk to him once I figure out my answer. I just need a bit more time to get myself sorted, Stanley promises to himself. It’ll happen soon.

(His promise rings painfully hollow in his too full head of jumbled memories.)

He continues to be haunted by dreams of wavering fragile smiles and hopeful eyes.

Soon happens one week later when all hell breaks loose.

“Ford! Duck!” Stanley screams and tackles his brother to the dirt ground as the laser beam skims the top of their heads and burns the tree trunk behind them with a faint sizzling sound. Without a second thought, he drags Ford up and together, they scramble behind a wall of jutting rocks.

“It’s got lasers,” Stanley huffs as he clutches his racing heart with shaking hands. Hell, he’s getting too old for this. “Why the hell does it have lasers? What did you do?”

“I never installed the laser gun!” Ford snaps back defensively. His face and clothes are slightly smudged with dirt, but otherwise, he looks perfectly fine. He’s not even out of breath, damn him. “It must have given itself that upgrade!”

Something slams into the pavement beside them with a resounding crash. Ford and Stanley throw their arms over their heads and duck lower behind their makeshift barrier.

“This is why you don’t install AIs into anything!” Stanley hisses from his crouched position. “Haven’t you read any dystopian sci-fi book? AIs plus robots always equals to world destruction!”

“As I’ve told you, that prototype is supposed to act as an assistant field worker!” Ford hisses back
Frankly, the robot his brother created looks nothing like an assistant field worker and more like a seven-feet, metal alien egg thing from hell. The prototype has an egg-shaped body made entirely of smooth, matte metal save for the tiny dotted lights that wrap around its circumference. This in on itself wouldn’t be nightmare-inducing if it weren’t for the six metal spider legs that protrude near the base of the body, which, as Ford has boated, enables the robot to “move through any terrain completely unhindered.” And, for some godforsaken reason, Ford decided to give his creation two metal clawed arms with which it can use to “better grip and/or crush things.”

And to top it all off: a 360 degrees rotating canon that fires laser beams from its head, albeit that apparently isn’t Ford’s doing.

“The damned thing sure as hell isn’t doing its job unless you’ve programmed it for murder!” Stanley snipes back. “Do you have something that can shut it down?”

“Yes, I have.” Ford says with a determined glint in his eyes, and warning bells are sounding in Stanley’s head because oh shit, he recognizes that stupid look. He wears the same one whenever he’s about to do something reckless.

Before Stanley can open his mouth to retort, Ford whips out his battered laser gun from its holster and tosses it to him. “Here, take this. I’ll need you to cover me. It’s got enough charges left on this thing, so go nuts.”

Then, without so much as a by your leave, or any explanation on how to use the damned gun, Ford bolts out of his hiding spot and runs towards the deathbot like the mad man that he is.

“What the – Dammit Ford!” Stanley yells and fumbles with the gun. “Get back here, you maniac!”

“Cover me!” Ford shouts back and roll dives to the side as the murderbot fires on him. The laser beam misses him by an inch and carves a straight glowing line of molten rock on the ground. He spring back to his feet without missing a beat and continues to rush towards the deathbot, zigzagging as he goes with quick, nimble steps.

Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit, oh shit! Stanley panics but somehow, miraculously, he has his brother’s gun firmly in hand and is exchanging shot for shot with the murderbot.

“New and exciting my ass. I shouldn’t have told him to stay indoors. Should’ve let him run wild outside,” Stanley grumbles under his breath through gritted teeth. He takes another pot shot at the robot and his shot ricochets harmlessly off the metal plate of its body, but the impact of the blow sends it reeling back a few steps, its limbs flailing in the air. “Ford! Whatever you’re planning to do, do it now!”

Ford apparently thinks the same. Using the last of his momentum, he slides under the waving claws, stopping right in front of the robot’s body, and with a flick of his hand, he stabs what looks like an electric rod into its chest until the rod goes through the metal plating. The creature writhes frantically and screeches as bolts of bright blue current jump and arc across its body and limbs, sending yellow sparks flying.

“Ack!” Ford cries. He instinctively scurries back from the sparks and brings his arms up to protect his face.

He doesn’t see the claw until it’s too late.

“Ford!!”
The claw slams into his brother’s side with a sickening crunch and sends him flying. Stanley can only watch with mounting horror as his brother sails through the air and lands heavily on the ground in a crumpled heap.

He doesn’t get up.

The noise around him muffles to a dull roar.

*No. Nononononono. Get up Ford! Get up!!*

Something bright and hot flares up in Stanley’s chest, and it expands out like an explosion, scorching his heart, his lungs, his guts, his bones, until all he can feel is this deep, searing, burning pain from head to toe, and he feels –

His hands ball into a fist so tight his knuckles are bone white, that his nails are digging into the fleshy palms of his hands, and he’s practically shaking from all the pent up something that’s building up in him.

*And he feels –*

He sees the robot, sparking, twitching, and barely functioning.

*And he feels nothing but rage.*

Red hot, all-encompassing rage that wraps around his mind like a thick cloak.

Because how *dare* it. How dare it lay a finger on his family. How dare it lay a finger on his twin.

(For a second, he thinks he can hear Stan Pines howling in his head with the same mix of *ragelovegrief*, but he isn’t sure if it’s just a figment of his imagination. For the first time, he finds himself not caring whether he can tell himself apart from Stan Pines.)

Distantly, he can feel the gun in his hand dropping to the ground with a clatter. Distantly, he sees the prone robot on the ground, but it’s getting closer and closer to him. Distantly, he sees fists adorned with knuckle rings smashing the living shit out of the remnants of the robot, metal plating caving more and more under each unrelenting blow until it punctures open. Distantly, he sees those same hands, bloodied and torn, prying the metal plates apart and reaching into the guts of the robot to wrench out fistful after fistful of sparking wires.

He doesn’t come to until the metal creature lays still and cold under aching fingers.

“Ford!” he cries and scrambles off the machine. He rushes to where Ford is laying on his front, and sinks to the ground, knees buckling under his weight, his chest tightening at how utterly still his brother is. His shaking, cut-up hands hover over Ford’s prone form, but he doesn’t dare touch him. Crap, crap, crap. What should he do? He doesn’t know any first aid aside from patching up the occasional cuts and bruises. Should he move him? Can he move him? Does he need to put pressure on something?

A pained groan cuts through his haze of panic. “Ford?” he stutters, his heart in his throat.

Another groan, louder, followed by a string of colourful curses. “Stanley?” Ford wheezes and gingerly rolls on to his back with a grimace, eyes fluttering open when he manages to lay still. He blinks a few more times to steady his gaze on Stanley. “Wha, what happened?”

A rush of relief floods over Stanley and he draws in a shaky breath, finally feeling like he can
breathe again, like the world that has been horribly tilted before has straightened itself into normalcy. “Oh, thank God. Thank God,” he chokes out, his body sags as an immeasurable weight of emotions lifts from his chest, his eyes stinging something horrible. He shuts them tightly and tries to focus on his heavy breathing, on the stinging pain of his torn, bloody knuckles.

He almost lost him. He almost lost his twin again. And it had happened in a blink of an eye over something so small, something as insignificant as Ford being distracted for a split second. This brilliant man could’ve been snuffed out just like that, this man who had been nothing but patient and caring since Stanley had opened his eyes in the clearing, reborn into someone that nobody, even himself, had recognized.

This man who drags Stanley out on adventures, who plays that stupid D, D & More D game with him, and who spends countless late nights reminiscing so that they could reconnect and reconcile with each other.

This man who kept trying and trying to bring his brother back despite that same brother had condemned him to spend thirty years wandering the stars with no hope of ever returning home. Despite what little Stanley has done to help.

And Stanley had been too far to do anything to stop. Had been too far to do a damned thing but watch.

His breath hitches at that thought. Too far. Too far.

He can’t do that again. He won’t. He refuses.

“Stanley?” A familiar hand is on his arm.

“You idiot. You stupid, reckless idiot,” Stanley hisses out. “Don’t you ever do this to me again. What the hell were you thinking, bum rushing into the fight alone? You almost – you could have, what the hell were you thinking?”

“I’m sorry for making you worry, Stanley. I’m fine though.”

“Damn straight, you should be sorry! Do you know what I’ve been through?”

“But I didn’t go into this alone.”

Stanley opens his eyes. His idiot brother is gazing up at him with eyes so soft that Stanley’s heart hurts.

“You covered me. You had my back.” Ford cracks a grin. “I didn’t doubt for a second that you wouldn’t.”

That damned stupid fool.

“Yeah,” Stanley says, his voice breaking, “yeah, you idiot. I have your back. I always do.”

Hey, don’t worry, bro. Wherever we go, we go together.

Later, after Ford is patched up by his advance healing tech and the deathbot is thoroughly scrapped, Stanley asks as he helps his brother ease into bed, “Do you miss those days?”

Ford, who’s making himself comfortable against a small pile of pillows, cocks his head. “Miss what days?”
“Those days when you’re jumping between dimensions and galaxies, where the universe is your oyster?”

Ford hums. “Parts of it, to be honest. I love travelling to new places, seeing new things, the possibility of endless discovery is enticing but at the same time, I miss Earth. There were a lot of things that I haven’t studied, still haven’t in fact.”

Stanley can’t think of a better opening than the one before him.

“Say, Ford. About your offer to sail the world. Is it still on the table?”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading <3

The premise of this fic is mostly derived from the series and not from the published contents in Journal 3, regular or limited editions.
XIV. The Calm Before the Storm

They decide to set sail to the Arctic in the upcoming summer, which gives them a good amount of time to prepare and to recover.

“In the meantime, I want you to take care of yourself,” Ford warned after they have decided on their travel date. “Especially if you’re experiencing pain from recovering more memories. Let me know.”

“Yeesh, talk about the pot calling the kettle black,” Stanley scoffed. He wasn’t the one who had come out of that deathbot escapade all black and blue. “I’ll be fine, my memories haven’t been giving me too much grief aside from the slight headaches. I think they’re starting to slow down.”

Stanley likes to think that for the most part, he’s pieced together a near full picture of Stan Pines’ life, whether it includes the good, the bad, or the ugly. This may explain why he hasn’t gotten any new major flashbacks in a while, what with the well about to run dry. Hell, aside for remembering his love for old men gold chains, which has the hilarious effect of mildly horrifying Ford, things have been quiet. Blissfully so.

He’s not complaining at all especially when it means he’s being left alone to enjoy his days in relative peace. Peace and quiet are rare things in Gravity Falls that should be coveted. His time spent with his brother and the children has more than taught him that.

(There’s a part of him that can’t shake off the fear that there are only a small handful of memories left for him to discover, and with those exposed, Stan Pines will become whole again.)

(He has no idea what will happen to Stanley with Stan Pines back at the helm. Maybe he’ll simply… cease to exist in a blink of an eye. One second, he’s Stanley and the next, he’s not. Or maybe, he’ll fade away bit by bit into the background until he’s gone, sort of like an old photograph that’s slowly being bleached by the sun.)

(However he dies, he hopes it’ll be painless.)

“Just one more push, Stanley,” he utters to himself one night when his dark thoughts are threatening to choke the air from his lungs. He just needs to focus on pushing through the next hour, day, week, month, however long this will last.

Because if he knows his days are numbered, then he might as well make it his personal mission to squeeze out every last bit of living he has left. It’ll be his last defiant stance against the shit cards life has dealt him. It’ll be Stanley Pines’ version of waving two middle fingers in the air.

He has a feeling that Stan Pines can get behind that.

He breathes. “Just one more push. Everything is going to be okay.”

His days are spent keeping the shack in running order, making sure their sailing preparations are on schedule, and, most importantly, keeping tabs on what his brother is doing in the lab. That last task is a new add-on but Stanley feels it’s warranted given Ford’s injury, which he refuses to go to the
doctors for, and Ford’s tendency to straddle the line between brilliant genius and mad scientist when it comes to his inventions.

Also, his brother does not do bed rest well. At all.

“Screwdriver please, Stanley.”

Stanley sighs and obediently reaches into the tool kit on the ground beside his chair, snags the required tool, and hands it to Ford. Despite Ford’s promise to take things easy, Stanley walked into the lab earlier that day to his brother at his desk, elbows deep in what looks like an unfinished miniature replica of the murderbot, except sans claws.

Stanley promptly threw a shit fit. As one does, really.

“Why are you building another one?! Are you a glutton for punishment or something?”

Ford jolted from his desk and whipped his head towards the entrance. “Stanley,” he said, his hands out in a placating motion. “I know what this looks like, but I think I know where I went wrong with my last design.”

“The whole design is wrong. It’s a robot that murders people via laser beam.” Stanley crossed his arms with a scowl and leaned against the door frame. “And what happened to taking it easy? You’re supposed to be resting.”

“I am taking it easy,” grumbled Ford. “I’m sitting down, aren’t I? And for the record, I did not design it with laser beams. Or for murder.”

Stanley scoffed. Semantics. “And how many hours have you been working on that thing straight? Five hours? Six?”

“I do take the occasional breaks.” Ford sighed in exasperation at Stanley’s raised brow and judging silence. “Look, if it makes you feel better, you can pull up a seat and help me with this. Besides, the sooner I’m done, the sooner I can get back to bed. How does that sound?”

Which brings Stanley to the present, slouching in his chair by the work station beside his brother and bored to tears. So far, his duties entail handing random things to Ford so that he doesn’t have to get up and jostle his injuries, and reigning Ford back from trekking into mad scientist territory.

Stanley yawns and scratches his stomach. “I still don’t know why you’re so eager to make that robot work. What’s so great about it?”

“It has a lot of potential to be useful for our travels,” Ford mutters from his desk without turning around. The components of the robot are splayed before him in an explosion of nuts, bolts and other doodads, and Ford is seemingly plucking random bits to screw back into the machine. “I originally designed it to collect data on the water sprites for us so that we don’t have to be there to do it ourselves, but I redesigned it as a scouter instead. Spanner, please.”

Stanley blinks as he fishes out the spanner. “Wait. You mean, we didn’t have to wake up at the ass-crack of dawn when this thing could’ve done all the data collecting for us? Why the heck didn’t you invent this sooner?”

“I only thought it necessary when you drove the boat like a madman.” Ford snorts and grabs the spanner. “But yes, it could’ve done the work for us and then some. The original design was also waterproof, heatproof, shockproof and it ran on solar power. Self-sufficient and nigh indestructible!”
He pauses and breathes a little “huh” in realization. “In hindsight, I see how the AI is a bad idea,” he says, a touch contrite. “Ah well, you live and learn!”

With that, he sets the robot upright, pulls a set of exposed wires from its back and hooks them up to the large battery beside it with a level of gusto that Stanley will never understand.

The metal egg starts vibrating violently. Stanley scoots back with a perfectly manly yelp as the dotted light bulbs lining its circumference begin to flare to life. One by one, the spindly legs twitch, initially slow, almost lethargic little movements that grow more rapid and violent with every passing second.

“It’s alive!” Ford all but gushes like a proud father. The robot has barely managed to lift itself to standing with the way its legs are shaking like a newborn fawn. Stanley leans a little closer and is torn between being impressed at Ford for making his design work so quickly, feeling horribly curious at what the robot can do, and feeling marginally terrified at what the robot can do.

“See?” his brother laughs. “Nothing to be afraid of at all! What the –”

The robot shudders violently with an electric crackle and all at once, its lights wink out with several faint popping noises. The legs immediately turn motionless, buckling under the egg’s weight, and the whole thing collapses on the table with a thump that rattles the remaining bolts and nuts on the desk. A stream of dark smoke starts pouring out from the machine.

Ford’s face turns crestfallen. “I don’t understand! What happened?”

“Don’t know and you’re not about to find out either.” Stanley bats Ford’s hands away from his pet project while breathing a mental sigh of relief. “That’s enough freaky science for today. You can finish this tomorrow after you’ve rested. Come on, it’s bed time.”

Tomorrow becomes the day after that, then one week, then two. Although the initial problem with the robot is resolved quickly, fresh ones keep cropping up with every new feature added to the machine’s design.

Stanley is a bit surprised that Ford, now fully healed and as energetic as ever, keeps asking him to join in on every single robot-building session.

He’s accepted every time despite having no idea why Ford even bothers. It’s not like Stanley contributes anything meaningful to the project, even when he’s helping to assemble bits and pieces of the bot.

Still, he’s glad to be included in one of his brother’s nerdy projects. Working on the robot is growing on him along with the realization that lab time with Ford is becoming another activity they do together, like D, D, & More D, or their nightly Airing of Grievances, where they get to spend time side-by-side, cracking jokes and ribbing on each other.

Something small ricochets off the back of his head and hits the ground with a soft clinging sound. “Oy, knucklehead! Have you finished screwing everything together yet? You’ve been hogging the screwdriver for the last hour.”

Stanley glances up from his portion of the robot and rolls his eyes at a smirking Ford who’s standing a few paces away from his workstation.

“No, your Highness.” Stanley drops the screwdriver and idly rubs the spot where he’s been hit probably with a stray nut or something. “Putting these bits together doesn’t magically happen in a blink of an eye. Although we could’ve built this deathbot faster if we just duck-taped everything together like how I wanted, but some people vetoed that idea and called it, ‘utterly ridiculous.’”
“You keep your uncouth ways away from my robots,” Ford sniffs with such an air of faux offence that Stanley can’t help grinning his shit-eating grin. Ford doesn’t last for more than a second before his composure breaks and he chuckles. He strides next to Stanley and claps his brother on the shoulders. “It’s coming along nicely though, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. How long do you think we’ll need before we test this baby out in the wild?”

“Maybe a few more days, we’ll see.” Ford fishes something out of his pocket and places it on the table. “I got you a snack in case you’re hungry. There’s more upstairs if you want.”

The bag of toffee peanuts stares back at Stanley.

A wave of vertigo hits Stanley like a freight train and his mind spins and his stomach lurches - *Can you explain what this was doing next to my broken project?!*

*This was no accident, Stan; you did this!*

*You ignoramus! Your brother was gonna be our ticket out of this dump! All you ever do is lie and cheat right on your brother's coattails. Well this time you cost our family potential millions!*

He jerks himself back with a sharp inhale of breath as awareness swims back into focus. He can feel the pinpricks of sweat dotting his forehead, and the wild hammering of his heart, like he had just run a marathon.

The bag remains sitting there, untouched and unblemished.

*What in the holy hell was that?*

“Stanley? Is everything alright?” he hears Ford ask, and it grounds him to the present like a rock.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” he winces at the croakiness of his voice and clears his throat. “Just got a bit dizzy from sitting too long. No big deal.” Stanley pushes the packet away from him, making sure not to look at it this time. Whatever that was, he most certainly does not want to deal with it with Ford nearby. “I’m good with the snack, thanks. I think I’ll take a breather upstairs instead. Do you want to come up with me?”

Ford shrugs and thank goodness, it looks like he buys Stanley’s explanation. “Sure, I’ll join you. I could use a break myself.”

As they make their way to the elevator, Ford adds quietly, almost shyly, “I’m glad we’re working on this together. We haven’t done a project like this since the Stan O’ War.”

Stanley nudges his brother with an answering quiet grin of his own. The sappy dork. “Me too, Pointdexter. Me too.”

(The persistent nagging feeling that something is missing follows Stanley all the way up their elevator ride like an ill omen. Stanley shivers.)

“Hey Ford.” Stanley says once they’ve settled in for their nightly chats in Ford’s parlour. A pot of mint tea sits on the low coffee table in front of them and its warm, spicy scent fills the small, cozy room. “You said the murderbot is the second project we worked on together. Did we ever finish our first project?”

Ford pauses, and something like apprehension flits through his eyes. “No, Stanley, we never finished
the Stan O’ War.”

“Huh. That’s a shame. Why’s that?”

“Well, we didn’t get to the finishing touches because of the fight.”

“The fight?” It takes a few seconds before it clicks. “Oh, you mean the one where we went our separate ways afterwards?”

(Once upon a time, Ford had explained to Stanley why they parted ways: “We had a fight shortly before high school ended. There was an incident that exacerbated everything.” His brother had looked away at that point and cleared his throat. “I… got mad, but Pops got even angrier. He took matters into his own hand, and well, you ended up striking out on your own. I went to college. We lost contact for a while.”)

(It doesn’t take a genius to figure out that Stan had gotten kicked out of his home for screwing up. Just what did he do to warrant said kicking out, well, he’d rather not know.)

(He was happy with leaving some memories buried under the sands of time.)

“That’s the one,” Ford hums in agreement. A longer pause fills the room this time. “Stanley,” Ford starts with more hesitation, “I’ve been meaning to ask. Do you want to hear about what happened in detail?”

Stanley chuckles nervously. “Eh, I think what you told me is enough.”

Unlike Ford, he’s not a glutton for punishment.

He dreams of an abandoned beach under a desolate sky of grey-blue. A set of old swings sits on the sand yards away from the churning ocean water, its metal frame twisted, bent and rusted, ravaged by age and the elements. One of the two wooden seats is broken in half with a part of it lost to decay while the other piece hangs perilously from the frame by fraying, rotting rope. The other seat is intact but the wood is warped and stained dark from dirt and mildew. The swings sway quietly in the wind off-tandem, one always lagging behind the other.

He wakes up in the morning, eyes wet and with a heavy heart. From his bed, he takes a deep breath and exhales. He repeats this a few times.

“Everything is going to be okay,” he says out loud to the seven little holes in the wooden beam above his head. The Big Dipper mark stares back at him.

They don’t.

In fact, after three mini flashbacks — At least you’ll have one son here in New Jersey forever. I guess you better come visit me on the other side of the country. This is all your fault, ya dumb machine! — Stanley is ready to concede that things are getting worse.

The only saving grace is that those flashbacks weren’t anything of substance, each of them darting through his mind before dissipating into the nether. They aren’t strong enough to knock him out, but they do give Stanley a pounding, excruciating migraine that has him curling into his bed with his covers thrown over his head and the blinds to his room drawn tightly shut to plunge everything into
sighing, soothed darkness.

He jolts awake when he feels something warm on his forehead. “Hmm. Ford?”

“Hey, sorry for waking you up. I wanted to see how you’re doing,” a blurry Ford-shaped creature whispers back. Stanley’s mind helpfully reminds him that he isn’t wearing his glasses.

“Surviving,” he croaks out, squinting up at the blob that’s probably his brother. “What time is it?”

”Noon. I haven’t heard from you all morning so I thought I’d come up and check on you. I miss seeing you at the lab.”


He moves to get up, but is gently pushed back down by Ford. “Don’t worry about it, you need your rest. From the looks of it, it’s pretty bad, huh?”

A fresh, throbbing pain floods through his head. Stanley squeezes his eyes shut and grunts.

“Is there anything I can do to help? I can bring you some chamomile.”

Another grunt.

“Alright, I’ll be right back.”

He manages to crack open his eyes and catch the sight of his brother’s retreating back and –

_They were sitting by the swings on the beach. It was a calm evening, the clear sky above them bleached a mix of orange and yellow from the setting sun. From their seats, they have a perfect view of the gentle lapping waves of the ocean as they slosh lazily against the golden sands of the shore._

_Stan was younger then, barely at the cusp of manhood at seventeen years old but excited to see both his and his brother’s future opening up before them, at the possibilities of taking the world by storm as the dynamic duo._

_After all, it was them against the world. It has always been that way. No stupid college from across the country was going to change that._

_“Hey. Joke’s on them if they think you wanna go to some stuffy college on the other side of the country,” Stan said. “Once we get the Stan O’ War complete, it’s gonna be beaches, babes, and international treasure hunting for us.”_

_There was no way his brother would give up their dream, not when they worked so hard on it._

_His brother sighed and looked wistfully at the school pamphlet in his hand. Stan hated that pamphlet already. “Look, Stan, I can't pass up a chance like this. This school has cutting edge programs and multi-dimensional paradigm theory.”_

_He hasn’t seen Ford’s eyes glow like that since they first discovered the remains of the ship as children. Hasn’t seen Ford look that genuinely excited about anything in a long while in fact. Instead, he has gotten used to Ford looking like he was…_

_Like he was…_

_Bored. Resigned. Tired even._

There was no way Ford would leave Stanley behind.

Right?

Ford gave a good-natured laugh. “Ah, well, if the college board isn't impressed with my experiment tomorrow, then okay, I'll do the treasure-hunting thing.”

“And if they are?”

Ford punched him lightly on the shoulder. “Well then, I guess you better come visit me on the other side of the country.” With a last little chuckle, Ford got up, brushed the sand off his pants, and walked away.

Stan made sure to keep smiling until his brother’s retreating back was out of sight even when his cheeks hurt.

Stanley slams back to the present as awareness floods his senses. He gulps in a few breaths, and takes in the darkness of his room, the weight of his blankets over his body, and the lumpy feel of his worn mattress against his back.

“Shit,” he utters with feeling.

Chapter End Notes

When I started this fic, I thought it'd be a short 4-parter.

Clearly, I was wrong. So wrong. Hoo boy.

With that said, the end is really looming closer and closer, and I'm looking forward to wrapping things up. Thank you everyone who's been so patient with me over the past year. You guys are real gems. Your reviews are the only things that kept me from throwing my hands up in the air and giving up on this fic on numerous occasions, because goddamn, Cellular Memory has not been easy to write. Many, many thanks once again.

As always, kudoses are much appreciated and comments are loved. <3
Chapter 7

XV. Stan Pines

He crawls out of the bed and shuffles to the kitchen the next day in the late afternoon, not because he’s feeling better, but because his brother’s hovering is starting to drive him a little crazy. He doesn’t miss the growing frown on Ford’s face as he takes in what is undoubtedly a pitiful, disheveled sight of Stanley Pines with his slumped posture, his pale, gaunt face and dark, heavy bags under his half-shut eyes.

“Stanley, I’m worried about you. Your headaches aren’t getting better,” Ford says, pushing a cup of herbal tea towards Stanley along with the firm order of ‘No caffeine.’

Stanley grunts and cradles the hot mug. His cold, stiff fingers eagerly lap up the warmth bleeding through the ceramic. He’s barely keeping himself upright with the power of his stubborn refusal to humiliate himself further in front of his brother, but even that’s dwindling fast. “Yeah, tell me about it. Not much I can do except ride it out, I suppose.”

“Are you sure? Maybe you can tell me some of what you’re remembering. I might be able to identify the memory.”

Stanley scoffs into his cup. “Pfft, and risk triggering a full-blown flashback? Yeah, no thanks. I’m not a fan of the pain backlash I get from those things.”

Apparently, that is the wrong thing to say because Ford’s frown only deepens. “I don’t like seeing you hurt,” he says gruffly, and it’s a such tell-tale sign that Ford is getting truly upset that Stanley feels his heart drop all the way down his throat. “I hate seeing it especially since none of this would’ve have happened if it weren’t for me.”

“Hey, hey now, none of that.” Stanley reaches over and places a comforting hand on his brother’s arm. “Mind wiping me was my idea, remember? This is not your fault. I signed up for it. Oh, stop that,” he says when his brother’s expression crumbles even further, and he’s practically radiating woe and misery now. “Look, how about we give it some time and try to wait it out? It’s gotta get better at some point.”

Ford doesn’t look like he’s convinced, not that Stanley blames the man. “Okay, if you think so, Lee,” he mumbles grudgingly.

“I’ll be fine.” Stanley pats Ford’s arm. “I’ve bounced back from worse.”

(Frankly, Stanley doesn’t need Ford’s help in identifying the memory when he already has a pretty strong inkling on what it’s about. He’s also more than happy to duck and dodge that memory to buy himself as much time as possible to live as Stanley.)

(It’s a stupid and futile move, but then again, Stanley never claims himself to be a very smart man.)

(He forgets that Ford is hardly the type to let things go through.)
“Stanley, I’ve come up with something that can help with the pain!”

Stanley looks up from his oatmeal to his brother waltzing into the kitchen, practically jubilant. Stanley, on the other hand, has been nursing his low-key migraine all morning and has spent the last fifteen minutes staring groggily into his untouched bowl that has since cooled into a sad, congealed mess.

He very much feels like a sad, congealed mess. He probably looks like one too.

“Wha?” he slurs out and winces as his head throbs in warning.

He doesn’t miss the way Ford’s eyes flit to his oatmeal and at the way he presses his lips together in a hard line at seeing the breakfast untouched. “I’ve been working on this project since those pain backlashes first appeared, and I think I finally made something that can stop your migraines,” Ford explains, calmer this time. “Are you well enough to drop by the lab now?”

Unlike most of Ford’s invention that tends to look appropriately sci-fi and alien, this one looks more like a bizarre medieval torture device. A metal upside-down, rusting colander with a thick, dark cable protruding from its dome sits on the seat of a worn, plush armchair. As Stanley edges closer to the chair, he can make out more wires, thin, brightly coloured ones, sticking out of the back of helmet and intertwining with the main black cable. He traces the wires and the cable with his eyes from where they trail along the floor all the way to a massive switchboard in which they are plugged.

Stanley swallows. This thing is not ominous looking at all.

“Uh, what exactly am I looking at here?”

“This was a machine I used to bioelectrically encrypt thoughts.” Ford gestures to the helmet. “It, er, broke, so I decided to repurpose it into a machine that induces brainwave entrainment instead.”

“Still not sure what any of that means.” Stanley says, squinting at the helmet and the chair. There doesn’t seem to be any metal cuffs attached to the arms of that chair, although Stanley wouldn’t put it past his brother to have installed hidden ones like a supervillain. “But just to confirm, it’s not a torture device and it’s not fueled by some crazy dark magic, right?”

Ford gives him a dirty look. “It’s a machine that changes your brain-wave state to block out pain.” He rolls his eyes at Stanley’s skeptical silence and he adds with a huff, “With science, Stanley. It changes your brain-wave state with science. Mainly using electromagnetic pulses. No dark magic here.” He pauses. “I will need you to remove anything electronic on your body before we turn this thing on though.”

As Stanley warily does just that, Ford stalks to the computer next to the switchboard and types up a string of gibberish as far as Stanley can tell. “This project has been a work in progress for a while now, so I’m glad that I finally got to a working end product. It’s not perfect, but it should do the trick. I hope.” He turns around and beckons Stanley to the chair. “Why don’t you take a seat? I’m almost ready with the set-up.”

Stanley gingerly picks up the helmet and lowers himself down the surprisingly soft chair, shifting around to make himself comfortable. He holds himself still when Ford takes the helmet out of his hands and pulls it over his head.

“How much pain are you feeling from your migraines at the moment?” Ford asks as he adjusts the fit of the helmet.

“Enough that looking at food makes me go a little green.” Stanley glances up at the helmet and gives
it a gentle nudge with his finger. From the corner of his eyes, he sees his brother moving away to fiddle some more with the switchboard. “So, do I have to do anything or can I just sit here and wait?”

“Just sit here and wait,” comes Ford’s answer from somewhere to his right along with the sound of a switch being flicked on. “You should hear a low hum in a bit. That’s perfectly normal. I’m going to leave this on for ten minutes exactly.”

Stanley chuckles nervously. “Uh, what happens if it goes over ten minutes?”

“Oh, we’re looking at a few minor side effects. Nerve damage, maybe an aneurysm. You may or may not lose feeling to half of your body. You’ll be fine though,” Ford answers disturbingly nonchalantly as if the things he rattled on are not debilitating physical impairment. Stanley is about to protest, or ask which half, when he hears the first note of a low humming sound.

Like magic, a wave of blissful calm washes over him in that instant.

It continues to rise like a crescendo, swelling up and up to fill every crevasse of his being with that same blue calm until Stanley feels himself practically submerged in it as if his whole body is wading in warm water. Slowly, the lingering painful throbbing that clings to his head muffles to a dull murmur, then quieter and quieter still until it’s washed away entirely by the sound of his heart beat, the roar of his blood rushing through his veins and the whooshing of air entering and leaving his lungs.

Stanley’s eyes slip shut. He feels the clenched muscles in his shoulders and back loosen with every new breath he takes. His rigid posture gives and he sinks in the chair in a boneless heap with the plush cushioning of his chair molding itself to his body.

“How are you feeling?” he hears Ford ask as if underwater. “Any pain at all?”

He gives a pleased hum. Everything is so quiet. Frankly, he can’t remember the last time where he can’t feel his head pounding in tune with his heartbeat, and he doesn’t realize just how evasive the pain is until it’s suddenly…gone, leaving behind a massive void in his mind.

“I’m going to take that as a no,” Ford chuckles. “I’ll leave you alone until the time is up.”

All too soon, the humming quiets before stopping entirely, and the magic tidal wave of calm recedes further and further until dissipating completely from his mind. One by one, his senses sharpen – the soft padding that’s cushioning his body, the slightly dusty and musky scent of the lab air, the damp cold against his exposed skin. He blinks his eyes open and Ford swims into view.

“How are you feeling?”

Stanley waits and listens.

The painful throbbing in his head does not return.

“Huh.”

Ford smiles and lifts the helmet up. “Hopefully, this will stop your headaches for good.”

It doesn’t. By nightfall, the familiar dull throbbing sensation returns.

“Damn. I suppose it’s wishful thinking for the machine to work on its first go. Looks like it’s back to the drawing board,” Ford mutters as he presses a warm compress against Stanley’s forehead. “Don’t
worry, Stanley. I'll get it to work better.”

It takes Ford two days to get to the next upgrade, and although the effects of the machine last longer than a full day, it fails to meet Ford’s demanding expectations. Neither do the third, fourth and fifth iterations of the machine for that matter.

“It’s just not good enough,” Ford grumbles for the umpteenth time that month into his Journal #4, his pen scribbling frantically on the page. They’ve tested version six of the machine a week ago and the pain is just returning to Stanley, but it comes like a sledgehammer to the head that sent Stanley’s knees buckling.

“Maybe if I rewire it so that the pulses can concentrate more on the cortex, or I can give part C-27 a bit more juice, that may do the trick. C-28 and 29 could probably use more tweaking as well.”

From his seat beside Ford and with his hot compress pressed firmly against his forehead, Stanley watches his brother scrawl out another set of equations on what little blank space he has left on the page. When Ford continues to mutter incoherently under his breath, he grimaces.

“Moses Ford, you’re starting to sound like a full-fledged mad scientist. Look, the machine works fine as is. Don’t you have that metal egg project to finish?”

Ford pauses in his writing, frustration marring his features. “The machine does not work fine, not when its pain-relieving effects only lasts for a crummy week. The robo-assistant can wait until I get this to work the way it’s supposed to.”

Stanley pulls the compress away from his head so that he can better aim an exasperated look at Ford, who had resumed writing. “C’mon Poincexter, you’re being way too hard on yourself. That machine is a damn near miracle worker as is.” When his brother refuses to look up, he gives up and replaces the compress back on his forehead with closed eyes. “So what if the effects only last a week? Just keep re-zapping me whenever the pain flares up again. Eventually, the pain will fade away on its own.”

The scratch of the pen stops. “But what if it doesn’t?”

Stanley snorts. “Aw c’mon, you can’t honestly believe that. Like I said, we just gotta wait it out.”

“We tried waiting for it to go away and it hasn’t.”

The odd tightness in Ford’s voice has Stanley opening his eyes and lowering his compress again. Ford is staring into his journal with an unusually blank expression, but the knuckle-white grip he has on his pen gives away his worry.

“Eh, the migraine is a bit more stubborn this time. Big deal!” Stan says with deliberate lightness. Anything to get Ford to relax a little. “It’s probably on its way out already. Nothing to it at all. I wouldn’t worry so much about it.”

The loud snap has Stanley jumping a little. The pen in Ford’s grip is broken in half with deep cracks running down the plastic casing. Dark splotches of ink splatter across his tense fingers and his knuckles, dripping a few random drops on to the yellowing page of Journal #4 next to the tiny shards of broken plastic that landed from the pen. Ford ignores all of it though; he’s too busy pinning Stanley with a fierce glare.

“It’s nothing to it?” Ford snaps and Stanley winces at his raised voice. “For Heaven’s sake, Stanley! Stop trying to downplay this!”
A flare of irritation sparks through Stanley. Wow, he was just trying to get Ford out of his spiralling negative thoughts. No need to get all snippy on him. “Geeze, Ford. Calm down. I’m just trying to be positive.”

“You’re being in denial!” Ford drops the pen into the book and slams it shut, not at all caring that he’s trapping the broken pen casing between the pages or that he’s smearing ink all over the journal. “I don’t understand why you’re not taking this more seriously or why you’re pretending that everything is okay because it isn’t! Far from it! This isn’t like all those past migraines you’ve had in the past. You’ve been experiencing pain for a while now and the machine is the only thing stopping it!”

“It’s still just a headache! It’s not like I’m dying or something!” Stanley resolutely refuses to think about the truth of that statement and plows on, “Why are you blowing this out of proportion?”

“I’m not! You just refuse to accept reality!” Ford runs a frustrated hand through his hair. The petty, vindictive part of Stanley is disappointed to see that it’s with his clean hand. “What if the pain doesn’t go away any time soon? What if, what if,” Ford’s scowl grows as he struggles for words. “What if the pain doesn’t go away in the next month? In two months? By the time we set sail?”

Stanley feels his stomach drop but he growls back, “That won’t happen. And if it does, then we’ll deal with it when we get there.”

“That’s crazy!” Ford splutters. “We’re planning to go out in the middle of the sea where we won’t have access to medical aid except from whatever little tech and meds we can bring on the boat! We can’t deal with it then! We don’t have that sort of luxury!”

Stanley crosses his arms. “Oh, come on! You’re saying that we won’t have supplies to handle a friggin’ headache? We have stuff that can fix broken bones! We’ve planned for worse injuries!” He shakes his head in frustration. “Look, why are we even worried about these hypotheticals? All of this sounds like wild baseless conjectures.”

“Somebody has to worry!” Ford argues. “Since you’re not going to, then it might as well be me, and you can bet your ass that I’m not going to let us go out in the open seas until I know that you’re 100% better!”

“And you call me crazy?” Stanley cries. “We’re not just going to walk away from all the planning we’ve done! We spent forever on it!” And a small fortune.

He can see Ford, young and bright-eyed and so very hopeful, walking away from him that faithful day on the beach, the setting sun casting a long shadow behind him. He can hear a familiar set of thoughts play through his mind: There was no way his brother would give up their dream, not when they worked so hard on it. There was no way Ford –

“Yes, we are,” Ford says with steel. “Until we have this pain issue under control. We’re stopping our sailing plans.” Some of Stanley’s shocked disbelief must have shown on his face, because Ford’s eyes soften. “Stanley, I don’t want to cancel our plans, and we won’t have to if this machine works. But I need you to start taking this seriously. I need you to be honest with how you’re physically feeling.” His tone turns imploring. “Please.”

Stanley can only nod tersely.

Ford works himself to a fervor reserved for a man possessed. For the next week, Stanley barely sees any signs of his brother outside of his lab aside for the wee hours of the morning, when Ford would
crawl out of his lair to groggily down coffee by the pot. If it weren’t for the meals he brings to Ford, he doubts his brother would’ve remembered to eat.

But progress is slow going, and with each failure, Ford becomes more frustrated and more engrossed in his work.

“I know the design works in theory,” he rants to Stanley one afternoon by way of greeting when Stanley drops by for a visit to bring him a fresh stack of Stancakes as brain food. Ford is looking a little rough for wear; his clothes are rumpled in a way that suggests many nights spent asleep slumped over the desk, his five o’clock shadow has grown out to become a respectable beard, and his eyes beneath his cracked glasses are bloodshot red. There’s also a certain manic energy to his being that makes Stanley more than a little worried.

“Maybe you should take a break,” Stanley suggests. “When was the last time you’ve showered?”

Ford ignores him and waves at the white board in front of him filled with lines of algebra. “See here? This equation models the way in which pain is being transmitted in your neurons, and this here,” he points to a separate line of squiggle filled with more Greek letters than Stanley cares to see, “is the mathematic model that describes how the electromagnetic pulses travel through different types of media to reach the targeted neurons, accounting for the amount of energy required and lost –”

“Oh, Ford. I think we need to step away from the white board.” Stanley brings an arm around his brother’s shoulder and not so gently guides him towards the elevator. “You can come back to this after you’ve cleaned and rested.”

“Wait, wait, but what about –”

“After you’ve cleaned and rested,” Stanley repeats forcefully. He glances back at the board and ignores the heavy pang of guilt that settles low in his stomach.

(Stanley doesn’t have the courage to remind Ford that there is an easier solution to all of this, and that’s by forcing him to remember the full memory that’s been plaguing him. It would’ve been akin to ripping the Band-Aid off quickly – a first bout of initial pain from the backlash followed by relief. Hell, even the pain wouldn’t be an issue with the machine at hand.)

(He doesn’t know why Ford didn’t bring up this solution. Then again, Ford tends to have horrible tunnel vision whenever he gets elbows deep into a project, so it wouldn’t surprise Stanley that his brother lost sight of the simpler option. One of these days, Stanley really needs to sit down with Ford and have a talk about that.)

(Just…not now. Not immediately. Not when there’s a chance that his brother’s solution to permanently eliminate his head pain can work, and if it does, then Stanley can take as long as he needs to recover his memories. It’d be the perfect solution.)

(Stanley Pines is quickly learning that he’s more of a coward than the other him. He’s not proud of it.)

The guilt continues to grow and fester with each passing day and with every fresh glimpse of his brother, exhausted yet still so determined to succeed.

Stanley tries to help. Honest to God, he does. He ups the number of daily visits to the basement to keep a better eye on his brother, monitors Ford’s meals and caffeine consumption to a level of obsessiveness that would scare even Ford, makes sure to ‘gently’ remind Ford to shower and sleep like a normal human being, and keeps the rest of the house running without a hitch.
(And if doing all of that has the added effect of keeping his mind distracted from how bad he feels, then that’s a bonus.)

It’s not like Ford makes his job easy for him either.

“Stanley, I’m not tired! Let me go!” Ford cries out during one of Stanley’s gentle reminders. After his suggestion to rest was ignored for a solid fifteen minutes straight, Stanley took it upon himself to bodily remove Ford from his lab bench by slinging him over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes and carrying him out of the room. “I swear, if you don’t let me go this instance, you will be in a world of pain!”

“Oy, Brainiac! Wouldn’t that defeat the purpose of what you’re trying to do here?” Stanley tightens his grip on his flailing brother as he heads upstairs. “Besides, the fact that I was able to even touch you without being karate chopped to death only shows how out of it you are. You clearly need to get some sleep.”

“I don’t karate chop people. I would’ve tossed you over my shoulders instead,” Ford mumbles sullenly but he stops fighting, slumping limply like a rag doll.

“I’m sure you would’ve.” Stanley pats his brother on the side and ignores Ford’s low growls of outrage.

The vending machine swings to the side with a soft whooshing sound. Stanley stalks through the opening and heads towards the couches in the living room. He can dump Ford’s heavy ass on them.

“You don’t have to do this you know.”

“Damn straight I don’t. You have two legs. You can walk.”

He can practically hear his brother’s eye roll. “I meant the constant hovering. I know you’ve been hypervigilant, Stanley. It’s hard to ignore someone barging into my lab every two hours for the past week. Even I’m not that oblivious. I appreciate the help but I don’t need a babysitter.”

Stanley sets Ford down on the couch and takes a seat beside him. “I’m not trying to babysit you. I’m trying to keep track of when you’ll kick the bucket so that I can collect that sweet, sweet life insurance money,” he says blithely as he brushes himself off. Some of the dirt from Ford’s filthy boots managed to get on his sweater, or at least he hopes it’s dirt. “Seriously though, not that I’m not flattered, but why don’t you dial your efforts down a notch or two?” Or five, or ten.

Ford takes off his glasses and rubs his eyes, the heavy lines under his eyes more prominent against his sallow skin. “It’s the least I can do,” he grunts out, “after everything I’ve caused.” Bill Cipher’s name goes unsaid. “I know you said you’ve forgiven me but I haven’t forgiven myself, and I want to make things right by making sure you’ve recovered. I have to.”

A sharp pang of guilt stabs at Stanley’s gut and that’s the cue for Stanley to make his escape. “Yeah, well it’ll be useless if you do end up keeling over. Or if you get yourself so sick that you can’t go on that sailing trip.” He gets up with groan, his joints popping from his movement. Hell, he’s really getting old. “Anyway, you think you can manage upstairs on your own? I don’t think I can lug you up another flight of stairs. My body can’t take that kind of abuse twice in a day.”

He’s about to leave when he feels Ford’s hand tug on his sleeve. “I’m not going to keel over, and if for whatever reason, we can’t set sail, well, I’ll be fine with it.”

Stanley finds that incredibly hard to believe.
“Alright, I’ll be disappointed,” Ford corrects. “But I’ll make peace with it. There are still plenty of things I can do here at Gravity Falls, so I’ll manage just fine. What’s important is that you agreed to go with me in the first place, and for that, I have to thank you for the trust you’ve placed in me.”

Ford’s sweet words do nothing to stop Stanley from feeling another pang of guilt. This time, it is accompanied with the faint familiar, sinister whispers of – *always holding your brother back – all you do is lie and cheat and ride on your brother’s coattails – Stanford is going places* –

He’ll make peace with it, he says. He’ll manage just fine, he says.

That is so many shades of not okay.

Stanley pulls away from Ford’s grip. Thick bitterness coats the back of his tongue like molasses while his head is starting to throb with pain once again. “You shouldn’t have to ‘make peace with it’ or ‘manage just fine’ because of my issues!” Nobody should, let alone his brother. “You should be out there,” he gestures to the window, “travelling and researching, and, and doing incredible things with that big brain of yours!” Instead of being trapped in some Podunk town, honor-bound to help Stanley through his memory issues that Stanley himself is too much of a coward to face.

It’s not as if Ford hasn’t spent decades separated from Stan to do his own amazing research before and after the Portal Incident. Compared to what he’s doing now, it must feel like such a massive downgrade. Hell, if Stanley was in Ford’s position, he’d certainly feel like he’s getting the raw end of the deal by settling for a life of monotony after the wonderful years of liberating freedom.

Which begs the question, “Why on Earth are you not sick and tired of me holding you back? Why haven’t you left me yet?”

Stanley only realizes he blurted that out when he sees Ford’s eyes widen for a fraction of a second before turning ice cold, his face hardening. “This again?” he growls, “I told you before and I’ll tell you again. You aren’t holding me back.”

“No, what you’re saying is bullshit,” Stanley spits out. “My stupid head and memory issues are literally stopping us from our plans and is keeping you in Gravity Falls. That’s the definition of holding back.”

“No, what you’re saying is bullshit,” Ford counters hotly, and Stanley knows he must have struck a nerve for Ford to be cursing while sober. “Your memory issues aren’t forcing me to be in Gravity Falls. I am *choosing* to stay here with you out of my own volition. I am *choosing* to spend time with you because you matter more to me, so you can get that ridiculous thought out of your thick skull right now, Stan Pines!”

But that’s the issue. Ford should never have to choose between his brother and his dreams. Also, Ford may be satisfied with his decision to stay by Stanley right now, but who’s to say that he won’t later resent Stanley?

_Are you kidding me?_ comes a distant thought and another short burst of sharp pain that Stanley ignores, _Why would I want to do anything with the person who sabotaged my entire future?_

Most importantly, Stanley just isn’t worth Ford’s sacrifices no matter what Ford says. Just like how Stan Pines wasn’t worth it with his cheating, lying, coattail-riding ways, despite the good he’s done –

Oh.

Stanley feels his stomach churn violently.

Cheating, lying, and riding on his brother’s coattails. That’s exactly what he’s been doing by
deliberately keeping his mouth shut rather than telling Ford how they could fix his problems. He’s taken up Stan Pines’ selfishness and attitude to always look out for number one when he keeps letting his brother run himself ragged for the off-chance that his problem may go away. He’s taken up Stan Pines’ cowardice when he watches Ford run himself into the ground while he sits back and cowers behind his doubts and fears, as if those matter more than his brother’s mental and physical well-being.

God, he’s a disgrace.

“Aren’t you sick and tired of making the same mistakes?” a fresh voice in his head asks.

He is. He’s sick and tired of repeating Stan Pines’ mistakes especially when he knows he’s better than this. He shouldn’t succumb to Stan Pines’ less favourable characteristics while knowing that they have done nothing but brought Stan Pines trouble in his colourful past. He shouldn’t but at the same time, at the same time.

He wants to spend more time with Ford as Stanley. He doesn’t want to disappear. He doesn’t want to be forgotten. He just wants a little more time. Just a little more time to joke and talk and build things with his brother, to go on reckless adventures and punch a few more mythical creatures in the face, to fight side by side as a team.

He just wants a little more time before he has to say goodbye.

“Stanley?”

“What do you think happens when I remember everything?” he hears himself ask in a shaky voice. The million dollar question is finally out on the table.

Ford frowns, no doubt confused about the sudden line of question. “What do you mean?”

Stanley lowers himself back down on to the couch. He licks his dry lips. “I mean, what do you think…will happen to me?”

Will Stanley cease to exist and become someone else entirely?

Ford stares at him for a bit, clearly trying to understand what was unspoken. For a second, Stanley is almost convinced that Ford has heard his thoughts with how intense his gaze is. Finally, he looks away with a soft, inquisitive hum.

“Well,” he starts and rubs his hand on his chin. “I think you’ll rediscover some of the interests you’ve had and opinion you’ve held in the past. The new memories may cause you to relive the stronger feelings you’ve had, things like pride, happiness, sadness, shame.” He cringes and adds in a small voice, “You may or may not like me as much as you do now.”

“Aw, Ford.”

“But ultimately, you’re still going to be Stanley.”

He smiles at Stanley’s flummoxed expression. “The important things that defined you haven’t gone away with the memory loss, they haven’t changed when you start getting your memories back, and I doubt that will change when all your memories are restored.”

“How are you so sure?” Stanley asks in a hush.

“I remember what you’re like as a child,” Ford answers, his tone warm and fond, all good things that
Stanley isn’t sure he deserves right now. “I can definitively say that you have been, and always will be, the same savvy, big-hearted, unfailingly loyal, opportunistic pain-in-the-ass I’ve known all my life.” His smile widens. “And let me tell you what an absolute privilege that is and has been.”

“Oy, enough with the sap already,” Stanley protests weakly and he will deny it to his dying breath that his eyes are watering a little.

“Not to mention, your other characteristics that have stubbornly clung on to your person. Things like how you’re stupidly brave to the point of recklessness,” Ford ticks off the point on his finger, “or how you’re surprisingly crafty and clever with all things related to money, you’re alarmingly blunt at times with hilarious results, and don’t get me started on how you can get disturbingly creative. I don’t think I will ever understand or want to understand how you’ve come up with Sascrotch, of all things.”

“Alright, alright, stop. I get it, I get it.” Stanley waves dismissively, biting the inside of cheeks to stop the massive grin from spreading across his face. He turns away briefly to discretely wipe his eyes. “So nothing changes? That’s your bright answer, smart ass?”

“Nothing changes that matter,” Ford confirms with a punch to Stanley’s shoulder. “Memory or no, you’re my brother. Always are, always will be.”

“So, you’re that certain, huh?”

“Mm-hmm.” Ford leans back against the sofa and lets his head tilt back to rest against the seat. His eyes are opened at half-mast and his hands are on his stomach, his fingers interlaced. A picture of sleepy relaxation.

“But what happens if I become – ”

“Not possible.”

Stanley frowns. “I didn’t even finish my sentence.”

“You’re asking about all the hypothetical ways you will somehow transform into someone horrible with your memories restored, or maybe into someone unrecognizable from who you currently are. My answer stands – not possible. Whether you like it or not, Stanley Pines, at your core, you have a heart of gold which will remain untouched,” he cracks a smile, “or at the very least, a heart of passable gold substitute.”

Stanley chuckles and takes a page out of his brother’s book by making himself more comfortable on the couch. His brother is humming a little tune under his breath and for all intent and purpose, he looks completely peaceful and unguarded in the same way he once was as a growing boy, playing on the beaches of New Jersey.

Who would’ve thought Poindexter would grow up to become such a sappy old man?

Stanley decides to leave him alone for now. He has lot to think about.

(The decision comes down to be a simple one at the end of the day: he’ll bite the bullet and place his faith in his brother. After all, what’s the point of living if he can’t even trust his own twin?)

(He also figures that maybe, it’s high time for him to stop making the same mistakes over and over again. There are some things that are worth facing your fears for. Ford’s well-being will always be one of them.)
“Hey, Ford. You remember how you offered to tell me about what happened when we were younger, about that fight that split us apart?” A deep breath. Here goes nothing. “Do you mind telling me what happened in detail?”

Everything’s going to be okay.

The perpetual motion machine was a thing of pure brilliance. That was clear to everyone even to someone as scientifically-inept as Stan. There was no doubt in his mind that Ford would impress the college committee.

“Well then, I guess you better come visit me on the other side of the country,” Ford had say as his parting words, but Stan doubted that his presence would be welcomed. Ford may initially be happy with his twin visiting, but with every passing year surrounded by those who share his passion, his brilliance, Ford would only continue to rise, inevitably drifting further and further away until Stanley can no longer reach him. Meanwhile, Stanley would be left to stagnate in a dying town with his dying dreams, growing greyer and wearier and emptier with time, dreaming about all that could have been and all that was lost.

He wouldn’t make it without Ford. He wasn’t about to delude himself into thinking that he could either.

Stan shrugged off his dark thoughts and looked up. Somehow, his feet had taken him back to school and into the classroom where they were displaying the science fair exhibits. Determined, he stalked along the rows and rows of projects until he was standing in front of Ford’s.

It was all this machine’s fault. Because of this stupid machine, he was going to lose his brother forever. Because of this stupid machine, he would have to kiss his dreams of sailing around the world goodbye, the one dream that had kept his spirits up when things got tough at school and at home.

“This is all your fault, ya dumb machine!”

He didn’t even realize he had punched the table on which Ford’s machine was sitting until the machine rattled violently and a metal panel from it fell to the floor with a small clang.

Stan stared at it in stunned silence.

Oh no. Oh no, oh no, oh no. Of all the dumb things he had done, what the hell did he have to go and do that for?!

He can fix this. The machine was still moving, so no harm no foul, right?


He picked up the tarp under the table and gently put it back on the display. Then, he got the hell out of dodge.

He thought that had been the end of it until Ford stormed into the living room the next evening.

“Hey, what’s the word, Sixer?” He took a look at Ford, and his words stilled.

Ford looked furious in a way that he had never seen before, not even when Crampelter had insulted Ford’s nerd crush on Tesla, and Ford had ended up punching the bully so hard that his nose broke.
“Can you explain what this was doing next to my broken project?!” Ford snarled and thrust the bag of Toffee Peanuts towards Stanley.

Stan felt his blood run cold.

Broken. He had broken Ford’s project. But not on purpose! It was an accident. Ford would understand, right?

“Ho-okay,” he heard himself stammer, “I might have accidentally been horsing around –”

“This was no accident, Stan!” Ford pointed at Stan with blazing eyes. “You did this! You did this because you couldn't handle me going to college on my own!”

The accusation stung something fierce in Stan’s heart. Sure, he hated the idea that his brother was leaving without him but he would never actively sabotage Ford’s chances to get into his dream school. He could never do that to Ford.

“Look, this was a mistake!” He backed up a little and tried to calm his twin’s rage with a weak smile. “Although if you think about it, maybe there's a silver lining. Huh? Treasure hunting?”

Ford’s glare turned deadly. “Are you kidding me?” he spat out, “Why would I want to do anything with the person who sabotaged my entire future?!”

Stan felt himself shoved into the couch, but all he could register was the numb disbelief that his twin honestly thought he would actively sabotage him.

He thought I did it, he thought I did it, he thought I did it –

The front of his shirt was grabbed and he was violently yanked upwards. It was enough to jerk him out of his thoughts. “You did what, you knucklehead?” his father, oh God his father, screamed into his face.

Distantly, he heard his mother asking what was wrong, but he didn’t have time to worry about that. He had to convince Ford that he would never in a million years – “Wait, no, I can explain! It was a mistake!” he screamed.

He didn’t stop shouting, not when his father roughly shoved him against the wall with the order to ‘March!’, not when he was frogmarched out of the living room and into his and Ford’s shared bedroom where his father haphazardly grabbed random items into a duffle bag, not when he was subsequently forced down the stairs, through the front doors and was roughly thrown out on his ass.

Nobody believed him.

“You ignoramus! Your brother was gonna be our ticket out of this dump! All you ever do is lie and cheat and ride on your brother’s coattails. Well this time you cost our family potential millions! And until you make us a fortune, you aren’t welcome in this household!”

He caught the duffle bag that was thrown at him by pure instinct. “What?! Stanford,” he looked up and saw his brother peering down at him from their bedroom window, ‘tell him he's bein' crazy!’

But Ford only spared him a passing glance before looking at the West Coast Tech pamphlet in his hand with utter heartbreak.

Then, his brother drew the curtains over the window.
“Stanford?” he pleaded, “Don’t leave me hanging’ High six?”

His father slammed the door.

Nobody believed him. Ford did not believe him. His own twin thought he’d be cruel enough to do something like that.

He felt something in his chest break. “Fine! I can make it on my own! I don’t need you, I don’t need anyone!” He was raving like a lunatic at this point but he didn’t care. He will show them. Those bastards will regret the day they tossed Stan Pines out like unwanted garbage. “I’ll make millions and you’ll rue the day you turned your back on me!”

Oh, so that’s how all this started.

Something clicks into place like a final piece of puzzle, and he lets out a sigh of relief. Finally, for the first time since the mind wipe, he feels like he could breathe again.

He opens his mind’s eye and stares at the completed tapestry of his memories, at the pieces that make up the whole, the good, the bad, and the ugly. They each glow bright and beautiful, shimmering and shining like the inside of a clam shell.

At its center lies a framed photograph of his family – his niece and nephew, Ford, his employees, even the damned pig and goat. Everyone is beaming up at him through the unbroken glass.

He reaches for it and cradles the picture in his rough hands. He smiles.

And he feels completely at peace.

His first thought as he drifts to consciousness is how warm and light he feels, almost like he’s floating in a warm bath.

He opens his eyes to the welcoming sight of the Dipper mark in the wooden beam above his head. The mattress beneath him is a little lumpy, but he’s feeling far too comfortable and relaxed to care given how snugly he’s been bundled up in his comforter. The air around him smells faintly of pine needles and sandalwood.

He breathes it in, and runs through his thoughts.

His name is Stanley Pines. He’s currently in Gravity Falls, Oregon, in his home of over thirty years that also serves as a tourist trap, which is his main source of income. Recently, he left it in charge of his long-term employee who also happens to be the closest thing he has to a son. He has a nephew and a niece whom he adores to pieces and for whom he had punched too many creatures, mythical or otherwise, in the faces. He also employed a spunky teenager who reminded him too much of himself when he was young.

“Stanley, are you awake? How are you feeling?”

He turns his head and sees a man staring back at him, nervous and worried.

Oh, and he’s a recovered amnesiac who saved the town from an interdimensional Space Demon and had spent a good nine months slowly collecting the memories he lost, most of the time, unwillingly.
The person staring back at him is the original owner of the house and a continuing source of pain in his backside, the same person who went through hell to win his forgiveness back for his past wrongs, who stuck by him and cared for him when he was at his most vulnerable, who refused to give up on him when he was more than happy to hermit his days away at home.

He’s also the same person who, unknowingly, convinced him that facing his fears was a good idea.

He isn’t wrong.

“Hey Sixer,” Stan Pines greets with a soft chuckle, “you owe me a boat trip around the world. When can we leave?”

The smile that blossoms on his twin brother’s face is a sight to behold. “Anytime,” he breathes out, “anytime you want, Lee.”

XVI. After Credits

He drove aimlessly through his watering, stinging eyes, his mind still reeling at the fact that he had just been tossed out by his family for nothing more than a stupid mistake. A mistake that he wasn’t even give a chance to explain.

“Stupid family,” he sniffed and wiped away his tears with his hand. His palms were still stinging from how they scraped against the asphalt when his father had unceremoniously shoved him out the door, but he did his best to ignore it. “Stupid brother.”

He’ll show them. He’ll show them how wrong they were to look down on him. He was going to make millions and when he does, he’ll rub it in their big fat faces.

Maybe then, they’d listen. Maybe then, they’d believe him.

He pulled to a stop when he saw the familiar park by the beach. Might as well do his thinking by the swings. It wasn’t like he was getting any sleep that night anyway.

The sound of the crashing waves grew louder with every step he took in the sand. It was a nice night; the stars were out and shining, and the air was cool but not too cold to freeze someone like him, who was out in a flimsy cotton tee and a pair of thin jeans. Still, he wrapped his arms around himself as he slowly trudged forward until he could see the set of swings in front of him.

Only, the swings were occupied by a familiar figure.

“Mom?” he cried out in surprise and scrubbed the tears off his face with the back of his arms.

“What are you doing out here?”

His mother whipped around and jumped up. “Stanley!”

He has never seen his mother move so fast, and before he could blink, his mother had wrapped him in a tight, desperate hug.

“Stanley, my poor baby,” his mother’s distressed cries were muffled against his chest. Stanley barely held himself together from breaking down into sobs but tightened his hold around his mother instead. “My poor, sweet Stanley.”

“Ma,” he choked out, “I didn’t mean it! It was an accident! I would never sabotage Ford’s project. You believe me, right?”
“Oh, my little bubbe.” His mother pulled away from him, her hands still gripping his forearms in a
death grip as if she was afraid to let go. Even in the dim moonlight, Stan could make out his
mother’s heartbroken expression, and it made his heart twist unpleasantly. “I believe you. I know
my Stan. You may get angry and frustrated, but you would never do something that cruel.”

The relief that crashed into him was palpable.

“Nobody believes me except you, Ma,” he said hoarsely. “I don’t understand. Why won’t they
believe me?”

His mother scowled and reached up to smooth down his flyaway hair with gentle, reassuring
strokes. “That’s because Pines’ men are stubborn and pigheaded,” she muttered. “I will talk to
them and get this sorted out once everyone has calmed down.”

“I don’t think that will work.” Sudden tears pricked his eyes and he blinked them away. “Pop and
Ford probably hate me now, and Pop will never let me back until I make that fortune. You know
how he gets when he’s made up his mind.”

His mother shook her head, “They don’t hate you, though you may be right about your father. But
where will you go? Where will you stay?”

“Aww, don’t worry about me, Ma!” he plastered on a wobbly smile. “I’ll stay on the beach in the
boat. I’m tough! I can take anything Pop throws at me. The old man won’t know what hit him.”

His mother did not look pleased with the answer, but she nodded anyway. “Alright, I’ll bring you
proper supplies so you won’t freeze to death. I’ll also bring you some more money. I know where
your father’s stash is.”

She pulled him down for another fierce bear hug. Stanley could feel her thin arms wrap around his
middle and fingers run through his hair. Slowly, he relaxed into the hold and buried his nose against
her neck, soaking in the warmth of her body and the comforting scent of vanilla soap and baby
powder.

This time, he didn’t bother to stop his tears from falling.

“Oh, Stanley,” his mother said soothingly over his sobs. “You’re strong and capable and
resourceful. You’ll do just fine on your own. I believe in you. Everything’s going to be okay, you
see?”

“Everything’s going to be okay,” she promised as she gently rocked him in her arms. “Everything’s
going to be okay.”

The End

Chapter End Notes

AN: Oh man, I can't believe this thing is done. I have no words to describe how
amazing this feels. Cellular Memory has been a journey, and at times, it has been
incredibly challenging to write, mainly from the unrelenting writer's block that would
get me every now and then. (I have also typed and scrapped over 40 pages of scenes
and dialogues from the original story. Never before has any of my fanfics been edited down this thoroughly, to say the least.)

But here we are.

A million thanks to the readers and reviewers. You guys are amazing for sticking by this story to its very end. I know I've said this before, but your reviews are amazing sources of motivation that have gotten me over my writing slumps on numerous occasions, so thanks to everyone who's commented whether it'd be on AO3, FFnet, or tumblr. I do read everything, so rest assured, nobody goes unnoticed. ;)

With that said, please do let me know what you guys think and as always, thanks for reading.

Credit goes to Gravity Falls wiki for their immensely useful transcripts. I've probably gone through the transcript for "A Tale of Two Stans" over fifty odd times already. Also, credit goes to the YouTube video "Is Gravity Falls Really That Great? - Absolutely" for describing Stanley as "a con man with a heart of passable gold substitute", which has got to be the most beautifully hilarious description used for this character ever.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!