There's a Bad Moon on the Rise

by The_Lionheart

Summary
Hope you got your things together.
Hope you are quite prepared to die.
Looks like we're in for nasty weather.
One eye is taken for an eye.

Well, don't go around tonight.
Well, it's bound to take your life.
There's a bad moon on the rise.

-Creedence Clearwater Revival, "Bad Moon Rising"
Aquarius

Aunt Ripley's still sleeping on Stan's easy chair when Dipper wakes up, a faded, flowery blanket tucked messily around her waist. Dipper's not surprised to see her still asleep, or to see Mabel with her measuring tape, taking notes on how much yarn she's going to need for a sweater as Waddles watches from his comfortable spot lying on Ripley's feet.

"Oh, good, you're awake," Mabel says, carefully measuring the distance between Ripley's shoulders. "Come help me with this, I don't want to wake her up."

"I don't know if you should be doing this while she's sleeping, Mabel," Dipper says cautiously, frowning a little. "Kind of think getting measured is the kind of thing she'd want to be awake for."

"I think you're misunderstanding the point of a Surprise Sweater," she replies seriously, handing him one end of her measuring tape. "Hold this over her shoulder, please."

Dipper sighs and takes the end of the tape, walking over to hold it just over Ripley's shoulder. Her face looks worse than it did last night- there are still dark smudges under her eyes and even though she's not bleeding anymore, there's a lot of inflamed redness where she "got scratched by twigs," and her chapped lips are as pale as the huge old scar on the left side of her forehead that reaches from her hairline to her cheekbone. Her glasses usually cover up the newer, pinker scar that crosses her face; she looks weirdly naked without them. It's harder to believe Aunt Ripley has been swordfighting across all kinds of dimensions with the Author of the Journals when she looks like this, but Dipper can't even imagine where she would have gotten all these scars otherwise.

Mabel jots down a few numbers and rolls the measuring tape up until she's next to her brother again. "Thanks, Dipper. Now I gotta wake Grunkle Stan up so we can figure out how to get a bunch of yarn in secret. Come on, Waddles, Operation Secret Stitches is on!" Dipper watches her run to the stairs to go to Stan's room, and when he glances back down Aunt Ripley's watching him with a weird little smile.

"Let her think it's a surprise, pumpkin," she whispers, sitting upright with a small groan. "Ugh, my everything. No wonder Stan's so achey, this chair is not meant for sleeping in."

Dipper stares at her, picking absently at his fingernails, and her smile fades a little. She sighs, standing up. "Give me a chance to use the bathroom and we'll see about some of those answers I promised, okay?"

"Okay," he says, sitting down on the Tyrannosaurus skull. He's been practicing most of the morning anyway, but by the time she comes back from the bathroom, he feels like he's ready for what he wants to say. He has a list- questions about Stan, about Stan's brother, about Gravity Falls, about the chupacabra, about the forest, about the ghosts, about the gnomes, about everything in the Journal. She blinks owlishly at him, wiping water from her face with the sleeve of Stan's robe before sitting down on the edge of the armchair and giving him her full attention.

"Aunt Ripley, why- why didn't you tell us from the beginning?" he asks, completely forgetting what he really wanted to say. She sighs, looking embarrassed.

"It honestly didn't occur to me that I would run into anybody, Dipper. After all the time I've spent searching, I just... Gravity Falls was the last place Ford lived, and I didn't think I would have found a home or family here."
"His name's Ford?" Dipper asks, and Ripley nods.

"Stanford Pines. Technically, Professor Stanford Pines, but that's more like a joke between me and him."

"But that's Grunkle Stan's name," Dipper points out. Ripley winces, shrugging.

"No... see, it's Stanley and Stanford. Stanley's Grunkle Stan. Stanford's Grunkle Ford... I guess," Ripley adds, frowning.

"But why is Grunkle Stan telling everybody that he's Stanford Pines, then?" Dipper asks, nervously running his hands through his hair.

"Well- I can explain but I don't really like it, even if I understand it," Ripley tells him, patting her knee. "Come on, it has to be more comfortable up here than on a literal T-rex." He eyes her lap, which does look slightly more comfortable than the skull-table, so he sits. She puts a hand on his back, warm and flat. "So Stanford Pines, science whiz and weirdness aficionado extraordinaire, moved here in '75, right? February '82 he gets... sent through a portal to another dimension. The portal collapses, Stanley's still here and he knows he has to get Ford back home but he also knows that if Stanford Pines is "missing" then the bank repossesses his house, his land, and the only portal that exists here on this Earth. I don't know exactly what happened, but Stan made it so "Stanley Pines" went away, so that only "Stanford Pines," the one with the house, remained. He starts the Mystery Shack, which I don't know that story either, but he starts the Shack and that's how he does everything- keeps the house from being taken away, keeps the portal safe, buys the parts and tools he needs, all to bring Ford back. And- a-and don't worry, Dipper, we're almost there. Why, I wouldn't be surprised if your uncle's here again before your birthday."

"That's... that's great and all, Aunt Ripley, but... But... didn't our family know the difference?" Dipper asks softly, looking down. "What about their mom and dad? What about Grandpa Shermie? Didn't... didn't Grunkle Stan have anybody who would notice? Didn't he want to still... be himself?"

"I don't know, baby," Ripley says softly. "I don't know what happened between now and thirty years ago for the Pineses. You'll have to ask Grunkle Stan about it. Now... look, love makes people do things. Love and guilt. If you didn't see Mabel for a long time, and then the first time you saw her she got... taken away like that... I think you would feel a certain kinda way. You're a lot like both of your uncles in that regard, baby- you love your family a lot. So love and guilt together, they both make people do things. Maybe it's not always the best thing, but it'll be the only thing that makes sense in the moment, even if it's wrong. And when it's for someone you love, it's... sometimes very hard to tell if the thing you're doing is wrong or not."

Dipper thinks about Grunkle Stan- thinks about missing Mabel for longer than she's been alive- and shivers a little.

"The hug train is always in the station, Dipper," Ripley says carefully. Dipper shakes his head, adjusting his pine-tree hat.

"So how did you meet... Ford?" Dipper asks slowly, trying the name out.

"Oh, well, that's... that's also a weird story." Ripley sighs, parting her hair to show him the scar on her forehead. "See this? I don't remember most of my life before I got... sent through a different portal. I got taken, point of fact. And most of what I am or can do is from after that. So imagine me, right? Nineteen years old, I start traveling the multiverse. This... this starts in 1994, so I got taken eighteen years ago. I end up... kind of all over the place, but eventually I end up being... a space gladiator. So if you ever wonder how I learned how to sword-fight and where I got a bunch of my
scars, that's why. And after ten years of that, so- I'm twenty-nine there, it's the year 2004 your time- I
meet Ford. Ford had been traveling in the portal dimensions for five years at that point. So for him it
was 1987...."

"And he was only... thirty-seven," Dipper finishes. "Because he and Stan were born in 1950." Ripley
nods, beaming.

"Now, Ford and I are married and run off traveling the multiverse, looking for home, looking for you
guys, even though we don't know you exist yet we know we're looking for our family." Ripley lifts
her pendant out of her shirt, and it's weird not to have the large, smooth stone against her bare skin
but it's important to show her nephew. "Your uncle gave me this on our fourth anniversary. It's not
doing anything right now, but when we're in the same place, I can feel his heart beating, and he can
feel mine. It's like an Earthling star sapphire if Earth gems did cool stuff," she adds, and he holds the
stone in his hands, running his fingers against the muted white starburst in the polished gem. "Not to
get all sappy and gross, but we... we were each others' guiding stars."

"But then you were separated," Dipper says, and she sighs.

"It's not a nice story, so I'm gonna spare you the details. But we got separated- the last thing he said
to me is that he'll find me here, in our home dimension. I spent three years looking for him and
looking for the path home... but..."

"But was it three years for him?" Dipper asks, and Ripley gives him a sad smile.

"I don't know, honey. Maybe yes. Maybe less time, in which case he's gonna come out of the portal
looking, well... looking like he might be your parents' age. Or it might be more time... a lot more
time. He might be matched to Stan's age, or he might be... older. Or... too old to be alive. I'm sorry
for the lying, Dipper, but... Stan really didn't want to get your hopes up, only to disappoint you if... if
the worst happened. It's not an excuse for lying, but can you please forgive us for this?"

"I... I guess, yeah," Dipper says, and he lets Ripley hug him tightly.

"Thanks, honey." She gives him a smile, shooing him off of her lap so she can stand. "Fun fact,
Dippin' Dots: the Author of the Journals? He couldn't pick a favorite movie between Star Wars,
Tommy, and Young Frankenstein. It was a three-way tie." Well, he also loves some of the worst,
scariest horror movies, but Ripley is absolutely not telling this kid that Texas Chainsaw Massacre
even exists.

"I've seen Star Wars," Dipper says slowly, and she gives him a shocked look.

"You ain't seen Young Frankenstein? But that's Ford! That's absolutely Ford! STAN!" Ripley
barrels into Stan just as he barrels in through the door, looking harried with his fez tilted to one side,
Mabel right behind him. "Stan!"

"What? What happened?" Stan asks, breathing hard, and Ripley cups her hands on his face.

"The kids ain't seen Young Frankenstein, Stan. They need to see Gene Wilder being Ford. Don't you
have the VHS tape around here somewhere?"

Stan blinks at her, pulling her hands down. "You sounded like you were having an emergency!"

"This is a family cultural emergency, Stan," Ripley says stubbornly. "And they ain't seen Tommy
either, but I can take it or leave it, it's not really... for kids."

"We gotta go get your new glasses," Stan says, pushing her off of him. "We don't have time to watch
a movie here, come on. Kids, get ready to go as soon as we're done eating breakfast, I'll call Soos and Wendy to watch you while we hit the eye doctor." Dipper passes by- he hears Stan whisper to Ripley, "You're tellin' them stuff about Ford now?" and hears her make a noise of assent- but he can't catch anything else they say by the time he's halfway up the stairs.

The Author of the Journals hadn't written anything about movies. Maybe he wrote about it in Journal 1 or Journal 2, but if he had written about himself in the other volumes, then why had he felt the need to write himself a biography page in this one? Dipper takes a minute, after he pulls on his sneakers, and peeks at the Journal, his fingertips running over the self-portrait the Author- Ford Pines, he corrects to himself, Stanford, Grunkle Ford- and the rough, angry lines he'd drawn over his own face thirty years ago, crossing himself out. It's hard to imagine this man doing something pointless and fun, like watching a movie.

Dipper frowns, flips through a few pages. The Author likes jelly beans, he knows. The Author crosses himself out in pictures. The Author crosses out mentions of his brother Stan. The Author was alone for a long, long time before his friend F came, and when F left he ended up.... well, it looks bad, whatever it is. And F- his friend, maybe his only friend- ended up being Old Man McGucket.

**MY MUSE WAS A MONSTER. I WAS A PUPPET.**

*In Gravity Falls there is no one you can trust. TRUST NO ONE.*

Dipper lays his hand flat over the golden, six-fingered hand on the cover of the Journal, thinking about writing down *Perhaps Mabel can yet prove her worth to me,* and wonders about the things Aunt Ripley didn't say.

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It only took a few minutes this morning for Aunt Ripley to tell everything to Dipper, and most of what she had to say, Dipper passed on to Mabel while they got ready for the day. Dipper has more questions- he can really tell Mabel has a lot of questions, too- but Aunt Ripley and Stan keep steering the breakfast conversation away from anything that started to sound like they want to ask more about this mysterious new Grunkle or Ripley's past or Stan's past. Ripley accidentally mentions that she hasn't had breakfast cereal in years and ends up monologuing over what she thinks the little marshmallows are made of instead of saying what it was she did eat for breakfast. Dipper's definitely innocent-sounding question about Ripley's earlier offer to teach the twins swordfighting ends up derailed as Ripley and Stan get into an argument over whether a pirate would win against a knight in a deathmatch. Even Mabel's declaration that she'll put together a 500-song playlist of the most important music Aunt Ripley's missed over the past eighteen years ends up turning into a discussion about Johnny Cash. Stan, apparently, has a lot of feelings about it, and Aunt Ripley seems to mostly agree. Dipper makes a mental note to find out who Johnny Cash is.

If Dipper didn't know better, he might even think that his aunt and uncle really were innocently palling around instead of trying to avoid the conversation until the kids are all out of the house. It... bugs him, all day, even though he does have fun with Wendy playing Fight Fighters (up until that idiot Robbie shows up...) and later while he and Mabel are racing against one another in Sugar Rush. Mabel's a little... quieter than usual, and Dipper figures (rightly) letting her win a few races might cheer her up.

By the time Soos brings Dipper, Mabel, and Wendy back to the Shack in his truck, Stan and Ripley are back from the mall- Ripley wearing a new pair of those cat-looking Fifties glasses, both of them standing next to Stan's old record player with a couple of vinyl records in their hands.

"Hey," Aunt Ripley says, gently placing a record on the player. "You guys have fun at the arcade?"
"Yeah, we found a candy racing game from like 1999! It's super cool!" Mabel announces proudly. "I beat Dipper like six times!"

"Sounds about right," Stan says, and Ripley lightly smacks his arm. "Ow, what was that for?"

"General crotchedy old-mannedness," Ripley says sternly. "Hey kids, we wanted to run an idea by you guys, see how you feel."

"I mean, we're still gonna do it, but your Aunt wants to know about your feelings for some reason," Stan adds, and Ripley smacks him again in the same spot. "Cut that out!"

"You cut it out!" Ripley huffs, turning towards them. "Anyway, guys, due to... recent events, uh, Stan and I discussed it, and we thought, that, uh, if it's not gonna bug you too much, what if I was around, like, permanently, you know, since I-"

"She's sayin' she's gonna move in so she's not stayin' in a hotel anymore," Stan interrupts.

"Ew, dudes," Wendy says, and Ripley and Stan both turn Mabel-sweater pink.

"Oh, but where's Aunt Ripley going to sleep?" Mabel asks, glancing over at the Laz-E-Boy that Aunt Ripley's slept in the couple of times she's spent the night.

"Oh, uh, we could- we could turn the formerly wax dummies storage room over into a bedroom, right?" Ripley asks, elbowing Stan. "Move some stuff around, stick a mattress in there."

"It does have a window," Stan says after a moment, as if that's really the main requirement for someone sleeping in a room.

"I could knit you some curtains for it!" Mabel says brightly. Dipper feels like everybody's missing the point- him included- but that he's the only person who knows they're missing something.

"Well, there you have it, perfect solution," Ripley says happily. "You kids want to listen to records with me and Stan?"

Stan presses a button, and a gravelly man's voice comes from the speakers, "And I heard, as it were, the voice of thunder, one of the four beasts saying-"

"You know what, I got places to be," Wendy says hurriedly.

"Yeah, Soos and I have a thing," Mabel says, grabbing Soos by the hand. "Come on, I need you to help me get something out of the trunk."

"Dipper! Gonna stick around with two oldies listenin' to Johnny Cash?" Ripley asks hopefully. The guitar's started playing, and it sounds... interesting, honestly, but-

"You could always help Soos with the heavy lifting to clear out that room for Ripley," Stan points out. "Since you're not doin' anything."

"Yeah, let me just see what Soos is up to," Dipper says quickly, relieved to not have to stay in a room alone with them for now.

He hears Ripley ask, sounding shy, "Well- I guess the kids don't know about the good country stuff, huh. Say, you want to show me a few moves, Stan?"

"This album ain't really for dancing," Stan grumbles, but when Dipper glances over his shoulder at them he's got a hand on Aunt Ripley's waist, the other holding her hand a little higher. Waddles has
apparently decided that the chair is a good place to sit and watch as Stan gently leads her from side to side. "You just gotta make sure not ta step on me."

Dipper feels like... maybe Stan wanted a little privacy for this. He heads the way Mabel and Soos went- turns out, while Aunt Ripley was getting her eye exam Grunkle Stan went and bought a lot of green and blue yarn. Soos must have already gone downstairs to start setting up the storage room so Ripley can move in, because it's just Mabel, sitting on the windowseat with the big, triangular window behind her glowing gold in the late afternoon sunlight, with a pile of yarn in her lap and a pair of knitting needles moving in her hands. Mabel catches him staring, and shrugs.

"I think Aunt Ripley's going to appreciate Sweater Town," she says. He thinks about it- sort of agrees, to be honest. Dipper sits down next to Mabel, because he can tell something's bugging her, and pulls out the Journal to read. It's more than half an hour before she glances over at him. "Hey, Dipdop?"

"Yeah?" he asks distractedly, chewing his pencap as he gazes at the page about Category 10 ghosts.

"Do you think Stan's... happy?"

"Grunkle Stan?" Dipper thinks about it. He hasn't heard the adults talking or anything, but from up here he can hear the same gravelly voice from the record player, singing "won't you please say hello to the folks that I know, tell'em it won't be long?" "He seems pretty happy to me, even when he was fighting with Aunt Ripley it was kinda... normal sounding? Why, do you think something's wrong with him?"

"Nah, I was just thinking about something." Mabel sighs, and Dipper puts the book down, giving her his full attention. "It must be weird to not see his twin all those years, and then instead of his brother it's Aunt Ripley, right?"

"Pretty weird, but she did say they think Great-Uncle Ford'll be home sooner than later, so he's probably just glad," Dipper reasons. Mabel grins, flashing braces.

"I love you, dumdum," she says. He elbows her a little, and she gives him a poke. "You have ink on your mouth."

"Augh, now you tell me?"

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Dinner is... pretty normal, with the addition of Aunt Ripley. (She does shoot a pretty stern look at him and Mabel and informs them that she would have gladly killed in exchange for the chance to eat broccoli when she and Grunkle Ford were starving in the Everybody Doesn't Have Enough Food To Eat Dimension, but then she makes a couple of pointed gestures to him and Mabel and pours a liberal amount of salt on her broccoli before discreetly sliding the salt shaker over to them. At least with that much salt the broccoli just tastes like salt and not like broccoli.)

They watch a movie- some weird eighties cartoon movie about boys that Mabel picks, and when it turns out Ripley doesn't really know how to do braids Mabel jumps at the chance to braid her hair. (And Grunkle Stan, despite muttering that he's not good at the girly stuff, gives Mabel a French braid that's only a little lopsided, and Ripley doesn't know what to do with Dipper's hair so she just rests her chin on top of his head while they watch the movie.)

Dipper doesn't really mean to eavesdrop- not like last night, when he and Mabel were worried about Stan and Ripley fighting- but as he's getting ready for bed he hears Aunt Ripley corner Stan.
"Stan," a soft shuffling noise, they're both wearing slippers and it's probably been years since the wood floors were waxed. "Are you waiting until Ford gets here to talk to them about... all of it?"

"What did he tell you?"

"Not everything. Not always on purpose." A heavy creaking noise, Stan's response too hushed to hear over the sound of the floorboards before Ripley speaks again. "I know what you guys fought about, but I don't believe you did it on purpose- Stan, if I thought you had a malicious bone in your body I'd break it. Come on, man."

A soft laugh, both of their voices mingling.

"Well, good luck telling him that," Stan says. "He was still mad at me twelve years later. I feel like I oughtta be puttin' money on him comin' home and deckin' me first thing."

"I wish he would," Aunt Ripley all but growls. "He has a lot to apologize for. To both of us."

"Ugh, he'll never," Stan scoffs. "Not to me, anyway, I don't know about you- I mean, having to fight through all that shit, getting tortured by a chaos demon, pushin' you off a building-"

"And breaking both my knees, Stan, I can't emphasize enough what a dick move that was," Ripley cuts in. "Look, maybe we won't get apologies, but at least... you know, at least he'll be happy to see us. Both of us."

"You think?" Stan asks doubtfully. "It's... it's basically my fault that he-"

"No, pumpkin. It really isn't." They're quiet for a few more seconds.

"I guess we technically don't have to wait til late to work on the portal, do we?" she asks with a yawn.

"No, probably not, but... if it's all the same to you, maybe it would be better to make sure the kids are totally asleep before we start. Just in case," Stan says, his voice getting closer. Dipper sneaks back to his room as quietly as he can, throwing on pajamas that have laid on the floor since he took them off this morning. The pig grunts softly at him from the foot of Mabel's bed.

"Have fun brushing your teeth?" Mabel asks sleepily. "You were in there for ever."

"Sorry," Dipper whispers, climbing into bed. "Go to sleep, Mabel." She makes a sleepy humming noise and rolls over in bed; Dipper wonders what twins could fight about that was so bad that Stan isn't sure his brother will be happy to see him, and he can't think of anything but the question weighs on him all the same.

By morning everything feels a little lighter- Stan shuts down the Mystery Shack for the day, since Wendy's not in town, and after a late breakfast- and another rant from Aunt Ripley about cereal, this time because she's got some kind of grudge against the Trix rabbit, much to Soos's horror- the five of them settle in to play poker, despite the fact that Stan and Ripley seem content to stay in their pajamas. Soos and Stan, at least, know how to play poker, and it's relatively easy for Dipper and Mabel to pick up the basics. Ripley keeps staring unhappily at her cards and asking Stan if her hand's any good or not, and subsequently Stan keeps winning chips off of her.

"Are the A’s good or are they bad?" Ripley asks doubtfully, showing Stan her cards.

Stan's response is cut off by the sound of- suddenly, very loud, sort of terrible- guitar music just outside the kitchen window.
"Dood," Soos says seriously. "I think I'm picking up a radio station inside my head."

"Try blinking to see if you can change the channel," Mabel suggests.

"Please do," Ripley says, frowning. Soos blinks and the only thing that changes is that now someone's wailing—literally, wailing—Wendy's name along with the music now.

"Ugh, sounds like Robbie," Dipper says, glaring at the window. Just once he'd like Robbie to not ruin something.

"Robbie? Is he that jerky twerp I see making googoo eyes at Wendy all the time?" Stan asks, making a sour face.

"He's Wendy's boyfriend, Dipper told us that literally two days ago," Ripley reminds him, nudging his side. "What's he doing now?"

"I dunno," Soos says, peeking out the window. "He called me "Big Dude" once. I mean, I know I'm a big dude, but it kinda hurt."

"What a punkahh, punk butt." Stan elbows Ripley's side over the almost-swear, and she pulls a weird face. "I'm trying, man."

"You want me to sic Waddles on him?" Mabel asks seriously. Dipper honestly can't stand another minute of listening to that jerk play badly and yell Wendy's name.

"I'll handle it," he says, standing up to a chorus of impressed (?) oh's from his family.

"Haha, conflict," Stan remarks, so possibly at least one person isn't impressed. Dipper sighs. Not like Stan would have been impressed anyway.

Robbie is still yell-singing for Wendy by the time Dipper makes it outside. He crosses his arms, leaning against the wall in a way that hopefully looks cool and like he doesn't care at all.

"You do realize she isn't here right now, right?" he asks in his best condescending tone. He knows it's his best because he's practiced.

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Possibly, Dipper is willing to admit later, possibly this would never have escalated if Dipper could keep his mouth shut. Of course, that's definitely not going to help him now. His family had been... less than helpful, although everybody meant well.

("Just bonk him over the head! It's nature's snooze button!" Stan had said, and Aunt Ripley had shushed him and told him not to encourage brain damage or violence.

"Yeah," Mabel had agreed, "you boys are stupid. Why can't you learn to hate each other in secret? Like girls do!"

"Sure, listen to your sister," Stan had scoffed, "maybe you can share dresses later, too! Haha, BOOM!" And then Aunt Ripley slugged Grunkle Stan in the arm, hard, and told Dipper that the way of nonviolence is a valid choice and that thugs like this Robbie kid only responded to one thing.

"What's that?" Dipper had asked hopefully.

"Psychological torment," Aunt Ripley had replied, holding up a fist. "Remember, you're not just defending yourself this once, you're defending yourself forever. Make that Robert Smith wannabe
question his own existence and suffer."

Dipper had no idea who Robert Smith was, but he didn't think he could make Robbie question his own existence.)

So sue him, he's hiding out at the arcade with Soos when he finds the combo to unleash ultimate power. He really kind of figured it'd be a cheat for unlimited lives in the game or something, but whoever wrote the message on the side of the console was literal-minded.

Apparently.

It's really hard to get Rumble back to the Shack without anyone noticing- it would have been helpful to have Soos drive, but Dipper just can't seem to kind him- and Dipper's about to get Rumble inside when they both hear a loud voice cry out from behind the house.

"HYAAAH!"

"Challenger sighted!" Rumble bellows at the top of his lungs.

"Rumble, focus," Dipper tries to tell him, but the game sprite is already running around back to start the fight. Dipper chases him down just as he gets into the first pose of his resting animation, while Aunt Ripley just sort of stares, a broom in her hands like a sword.

"What is this thing?" Ripley asks slowly.

"You!! Are a henchman of the Illumi-Broominati!!" Rumble says. Or asks. Dipper isn't entirely sure. Rumble raises his fists with a power-up yell, lowering them only when his entire body is surrounded by pixelated flames.

"Rumble, no, that's not a bad guy, that's my aunt!" Dipper says, darting over to her side. "Aunt Ripley, put it down, he must think you're challenging him."

"What? It's a broom," Ripley says quietly, dropping the broom and putting her hands up with a fake smile plastered onto her face. "I'm not a bad guy, I'm just an old woman."

"Dipper! Is this old woman really your aunt!?!?!?" Rumble shouts excitedly.

"Screw you, shiny man," Ripley says, still smiling.

"YES. Yes, she's my Aunt Ripley. Aunt Ripley, this is Rumble McSkirmish, we're just here to get him some... snacks."

"Power-ups!" Rumble roars, double-jumping up and punching the sky.

"Honeybear, what the fudge is this thing?" Ripley asks pleasantly.

"This is Rumble, he's from the video game Fight Fighters," Dipper explains. She stares down at him with a blank look for several seconds, before looking back at Rumble, who is punching several trees at the edge of the yard. "I accidentally summoned him from the arcade and now we're friends?"

"I cannot see a way for this to end well," she declares, frowning. "Ya'll wanted snacks?"

"Yes please," Dipper says, sighing with relief.

"Stay on the porch away from that thing until I get back," Ripley says quietly, ducking into the kitchen. She's back in about a minute, looking doubtfully at a bag of hard pretzels. "So... Dipper, I
suppose you've got to feed it because it already expects food, but honey, don't... don't bring this thing back, okay? Just... don't."

"It's alright, Aunt Ripley," Dipper says quickly, bringing the bag over to Rumble. "Hey Rumble, can you eat pretzels?"

"Place the bag! On the ground!" Rumble says. Dipper puts it down, and Rumble sort of crouches next to it and it just disappears, reappearing as a pixel drawing in an inventory box over Rumble's head. Dipper glances back at the porch, where Aunt Ripley is still scowling at Rumble.

"I'm getting something out of my room, Dipper, don't go anywhere until I get back," she says, pointing aggressively at Rumble before heading inside.

"Now I must defeat the world's greatest fight-fighters!" Rumble announces. "Take me to the Soviet Union!"

"That's gonna be tough... for a number of reasons," Dipper admits, not sure if there is even a point in going through the details why. "But I do know a fighter here in Gravity Falls."

"Maximum Power?" Rumble asks hopefully.

Dipper pulls out the poster for Robbie's stupid band, handing it over. "His name is Robbie V. and he's kind of like my arch enemy."

"Did he kill your father?" Rumble asks, his non-eyepatch eye huge.

"Well, he's... dating the girl I like and he posts a really annoying amount of status updates?"

"And then he killed your father!" Rumble cries out, looking deeply offended.

"Uh, sure," Dipper says quickly, figuring Rumble's programming must not let him think of too many things at once. "Anyway, I was hoping you could, you know, scare him off for me so I don't have to fight the guy?"

Rumble laughs and starts throwing punches, kicks, and fireballs. Dipper takes this as a good sign.

"So... you'll protect me from Robbie?" he asks, just to confirm.

"Challenge accepted! Press start!"

Dipper's not sure if he's seen anything weirder than this apparently-interactive video game bodyguard, but he shrugs and slaps his hand against the start button. He can't really think of a way this can go wrong as they start walking back towards the downtown area.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Everything that could possibly have gone wrong has gone wrong. Dipper feels like every bone in his body is broken- although he's pretty sure most of them aren't, since he's walking and upright.

And, even if he didn't get to throw a punch at him, he still... kind of feels like he won that fight with Robbie, even if he did have to make a deal with the slimeball in order to prevent Wendy from ditching both of them.

Dipper starts heading toward Soos's truck when the Ripleymobile drives up, pulling up sharply to park haphazardly next to the park. Aunt Ripley jumps out, carrying a big metal flashlight, for some reason.
"Dipper!" she cries out, running over and crouching in front of him. "Oh lawd, Dip, you look like you got hit by a truck. What happened? Was it that video demon? I'll kill that stupid-

"No, no, don't worry, Aunt Ripley," Dipper says quickly, grinning. "It's over, he's been unsummoned, and I won't make that mistake again, I promise."

"Oh," Ripley says, squeezing his shoulder. "What about your friend's boyfriend? Did he do... any of this? Because I won't kill him. Nobody ever died of losing a finger."

"Noooope," Dipper says, blinking several times. "He didn't touch me, I swear. We've come to an understanding, we're not gonna fight anymore."

"Oh," Ripley says, perking up. "The way of nonviolence worked out, then, huh?"

"I guess so, sort of? Ow," he adds in a tiny voice as she scoops him up into a hug.

"Come on, Wise Man Pines. Let's see if we can make Stan cook us up some Italian food, I'm cravin' pasta," she says firmly, letting him go so he can walk on his own. "Let's go say hi to Soos before he heads back to his Abuelita, huh?" She sticks her hand out, and- after checking to make sure Wendy's not looking- Dipper takes it.

"So where is Stan, anyway?" Dipper asks, once Soos has done his bit to congratulate Dipper for going and facing his problems.

"That's... a good question, I ain't seen'im or your sister for hours," Ripley admits. "See, this why people do them pocket-phones now, it's real useful for dinner plans."

"I guess."

(By the time they finally figure out where Stan and Mabel went and then coax Mabel off the watertower, everyone's feeling pretty hungry. They have a pretty good time exchanging stories about their day as Aunt Ripley drives them home, although she does complain a little that all she did today was goof around and feed pretzels to a monster. She does, however, go quiet for a few minutes before announcing to the car at large that an hour of the kids' mornings belong to her now, because there's no reason anybody named Pines ought to have been scared of that weasel shrimp Robbie.)

The sun is setting as Ripley walks upstairs, one hand on Dipper's shoulder, the other wrapped around Mabel's hand.

"So it sounds like you both learned some kinda abstract lessons today, huh?" she asks jokingly. "Oof, these stairs are heck on my rickety knees-

"Well, I learned that ladders are more dangerous than guns, and that Grunkle Stan owns ten- ow, Aunt Ripley!"

Aunt Ripley doesn't say anything, just shoves both of them behind her, staring at the window.

"Get Stan," she says softly. "Go. Right now."

"What is it? Is something outside?" Mabel asks, peering around Ripley as she rubs her sore hand. Dipper pulls an arm around Mabel, narrowing his eyes- but- no, there's nothing out the window, just the forest and the setting sun, turning everything gold, including Ripley's face and the lenses of her glasses. Waddles noses at her ankle and she jumps, looking down at him like she's not sure what a pig is or what it's doing touching her.
"Get Stan," Ripley repeats slowly. Dipper grabs Mabel and pulls her along- Stan's not far, just in his room- and neither of them is sure what to tell him other than that Aunt Ripley's having a problem and she said to come get him. They trail along behind him as he approaches Ripley, who hasn't moved from her spot.

Dipper can hear her whispering to herself, *no no no he can't be here he can't be here*, and wonders who she means.

"You doin' alright there, baby-cow?" Stan asks awkwardly, putting his hand on her back between her shoulders, and Ripley's entire body shivers but she still doesn't take her eyes off the window.


"Eh, what, like a triangle? It's... it's always been a triangle," Stan tells her slowly. "You've been up here before, you didn't notice?"

"It's yellow, Stan," Ripley says, sounding... scared. "It's a yellow- it's got an eye. Stan, is this- is this normal?"

"Um, just when... just when the sun sets, if it's not too cloudy," Stan says, standing next to her now and gently taking her shoulder. "You havin'... some kind of episode or something?"

"No. No, I-" Ripley turns to Stan, grabbing his shirt. "Stan, please, *please*. You're sure. You're sure this isn't... it's not new, it's not something that just happened, it's- you've seen this before, it's not weird, it's not sudden?"

"It's always been like that, since I moved in," he tells her, taking hold of her hands. "It's just the sunset hittin' the window. Watch, in a few minutes it won't be yellow anymore either, see?"

She exhales all at once, like she was holding it in, and Dipper can see her shaking from here.

"Aunt Ripley?" Mabel asks softly. "You want to have a sleepover with us tonight?"

Ripley blinks at her, then gives both of them a small smile. "You know what, that might make me feel better, yes. That's a great idea, sweetheart."

"Yeah, I'm going to stay in my room where there's an actual bed, thanks," Grunkle Stan comments, letting go of Aunt Ripley's hands.

(Dipper wakes up in the middle of the night when Grunkle Stan opens the bedroom door and sits next to Aunt Ripley, who's still sitting up in the middle of the room staring at the window between his and Mabel's beds. *You gotta sleep*, Stan tells her. *Nah, I snore*, she replies, but she doesn't smile and she doesn't stop staring at the window, her knuckles white as she grips that metal flashlight again. Dipper closes his eyes again and he's asleep, and he dreams of Aunt Ripley with her face and eyes gold in the light of the setting sun, and an unfamiliar voice laughing all around him.)

(He does not remember this dream when he wakes up.)
Pisces

Chapter Notes

Please forgive my terrible Spanish. I don't know how to type proper punctuation or accent markers, and I also just legitimately failed to pick up the language as a kid, lol. Please imagine Ripley speaking Spanish in the absolutely worst, Southerner-est accent that causes poor Stan to suffer. She's basically using her translator implant as Google Translate. Fitting, because I had to use Google Translate. Just use that if you want to know what they're saying, it's not much. Same with the Latin*.

*Actually the- maybe the straight translation of "flocci non facio" is... you know what it's fine. I barely passed Latin. Nobody cares. They use "aintafraidus no ghostus" in this show. It's fine.

Turns out Aunt Ripley wasn't kidding about mornings. The first thing Mabel's aware of is Waddles walking around on the bed. The second thing is of an adult finger poking her shoulder, as if the person doesn't know how to wake people up.

"Come on, princess. I know you're awake because your breathing changed," Aunt Ripley says cheerfully.

"That's kind of weird, Aunt Ripley," Mabel yawns, rubbing her eyes. "How come you're waking me up first?"

"So you can have the bathroom first," Ripley says, blinking. "Right?"

"Good point," Mabel says cheerfully, bouncing up out of bed and planting a smooch on her auntie's cheek.

"D'aw, Mabes," Ripley laughs, waving her out of the room. Ripley tells them to dress up in shorts and t-shirts and sneakers, and makes a point (thank you Aunt Ripley!) of telling Dipper to please put on different shorts and t-shirt than what he plans on wearing the rest of the day, because they'll be getting sweaty.

"Alright, kidlets," she says, once they're all lined up in the backyard. "Your Grunkle tells me you've all taken kickboxing lessons, and Soos showed me a video of what that is. Very nice. There's... pads and helmets and stuff, so your Grunkle said I can't do anything with hitting each other until we get some of that safety stuff, but I'm very impressed with both of you. Also, Soos said stickers are good for positive reinforcement, so here." She hands them both small, circular, neon orange stickers.

Mabel looks at hers- $10 in black sharpie in Soos's handwriting- and sticks it happily onto her front. This is already going well.

"Aunt Ripley, are these leftover price tags?" Dipper asks sleepily, sticking his onto his shirt.

"Leftover implies they were unwanted! No, these are the only stickers I could find on short notice. I'm assuming you guys know where I can buy some later." She clears her throat. "Okay, guys, we're going to limber up a bit, and then we're going to spend today learning one of my favorite parts of
"Breaking holds?" Dipper repeats. He still seems kind of sleepy for some reason.

"And fighting dirty in general," Ripley adds. "Actually, that's probably my more-favorite part of combat, but you kids are little and can't brute-force your way through some situations the way I can. You're probably, like, tons more likely to get snatched up by somebody who's enormously bigger than you."

Mabel nods sagely at Dipper, who just looks worried. "That's true. Although I think I noticed that I'm a little taller than Dipper here, so it's not as dangerous for me-"

"I mean, both of you, you're like, you're wee ones," Ripley clarifies, waving an arm as she does a couple of stretches. "You're snack-sized. Some regular-size adult like me or Soos or Stan could make off with you with relatively little-"

"UM," Dipper interrupts. Mabel giggles.

"-and I mean thank God Dan Corduroy ain't evil or we'd have a serious flippin' problem-"

"Aunt Ripley, you were going to teach us some moves?" Dipper asks, before frowning. "What? I'm not shorter than you, Mabel, we're the same height."

"Aunt Ripley, can you check for us?" Mabel asks, and Ripley shrugs and nods.

"Back to back, kids, and then we have work to do." Mabel stands up straight and Ripley lays her hand flat against the top of her head, moving her palm back and forth (and messing up Mabel's ponytail, but sometimes sacrifices must be made) and then Mabel feels her do the same for Dipper, the side of her palm gently hitting Mabel's head. "Yup, looks like Mabel's a lil taller. Less than an inch, though, so there is that. Anyway, back to-"

"Yes!" Mabel whoops.

"Wh-what? But-" Dipper starts, and Mabel points at him.

"You know what this means, don'tcha Dip? I'm going to keep growing taller- and taller- and stronger- and better."

"Look, we're less than an inch apart, I probably haven't hit my growth spurt yet-"

"Yeah, but I hit mine first, that means I have more growing to do!"

"Hey, you two, roll it back," Ripley says, coughing. "Wow, I'm gonna... find a way to send Hyde a giftbasket for puttin' up with this from me."

She claps her hands, making a pretty loud noise.

"Aunt Ripley, can I request a do-over?" Dipper asks.

"Aunt Ripley, can I request that you refer to me as the Alpha Twin?" Mabel adds.

"No to both! Guys, height doesn't matter when you're as short as the two of you are," she says firmly. "Anyway, all humans are shorter than most aliens. Why, my first combat instructor Devaaki had a saying- glrr'ackna mai'alterran !angb'iri."

"What language was that?" Dipper asks, after a minute.
"Did you just click at us?" Mabel asks. Aunt Ripley stares at them, blinking, then grins sheepishly.

"Sorry, I forgot you guys don't have translator implants. Uh, basically- "To a human, all ankles are at biting height." My combat instructor was pretty rude," she adds reflectively. "Anyway, that's maybe not the point. Your height difference don't matter in the heat of battle! I've fought aliens way taller'n me, and you two, presumably for many many years at least, are going to be fighting a lot of humans way taller'n you."

"Who are we going to be fighting? My money's on Pacifica and her stupid friends," Mabel announces.

"Wait, are we really going to be fighting people? What happened to the way of nonviolence?" Dipper asks, squinting suspiciously at her.

"Nonviolence is optional, but we're going to become death machines!" Mabel cheers, mostly because she figures- correctly- that Aunt Ripley's face is going to do something hilarious.

"What? No. Nobody's- no. You're not fighting anybody," Ripley says, blinking. Her face does something hilarious, and Mabel snickers. "I mean, not on- not on purpose. You're just- this is just in case training. I'm not training you guys to become death machines until you're done with high school at the earliest."

"And then we'll be death machines in college?" Dipper asks, glancing slyly in Mabel's direction; he's finally caught on to the hilarious faces Aunt Ripley makes.

"No! Well- yes, probably, but- no," Ripley says, turning pink. "Toe touches! Everybody touch your toes, we're gonna do toe-touches!"

They spend twenty minutes doing different stretches and jumping jacks and pushups- which, Aunt Ripley doesn't understand what they mean when they ask if they can do them girl style. ("There's only one kind of pushup," she says, giving them a weird look. "Pushups aren't gendered. Is this new? Is this a new thing? I only know how to to the old kind, so that's what we're doing. Come on, guys, down- floor- push!" Most of that twenty minutes is spent on pushups, come to think of it.)

They spend another twenty minutes with Aunt Ripley picking them up in her arms and talking them through what to do to make her drop them- first individually, then both of them together. (Mabel ends that part when Ripley says that if someone's grabbed them up like this they need to do anything to survive, so she kicks back with her heels into Aunt Ripley's midsection. To be fair, Aunt Ripley does drop them both immediately. On the downside, Aunt Ripley spends a whole minute curled up on the ground looking like she's gonna puke. "So proud of you two," she wheezes, and puts another price sticker on each of their foreheads.)

The rest of their time Ripley doesn't do hands-on stuff with them, instead showing them simple, easy-to-remember moves safely away from their fists and feet. ("Remember, kids, kidneys are squishy and tender. You hit somebody's kidney hard enough, they pee blood for days," she says, pointing at spots low on her back. "This is one of them things you're only doing if it's life and death. Please do not practice on me or your Grunkle. We're old and likely to die.")

They're just heading inside when a van drives up and a man in a suit with a sizeable camera crew steps out, accompanied by two ladies holding one of those giant novelty checks. "Excuse us, is this the residence of Stanford F. Pines?" the man asks.

"Who's asking?" Mabel asks, perking up. "Are you guys filming? Is this the news? Are we on the news now? HI MOM!"
"Get inside, you sweaty messes," Ripley says tiredly, opening the screen door and staring hard at the man in the suit before tilting her head in the doorway. "Ay, Stan, there's teevee people walkin' up the yard lookin' for ya."

"What'd they want?" Stan calls from inside.

"Uh, no lo se," she replies, frowning. "Tu hablas, right Stan?"

"Si, pero su espanol es muy malo," Stan replies. Mabel watches in fascination- they're both speaking Spanish, she can tell, but Stan sounds practically like a natural and Aunt Ripley sounds like she's reading it off notecards. Dipper is silently mouthing along, frowning as he works out what they've said so far- Mabel will have to ask him what they're saying later.

"Well, there's a nice man and some cameras and looks like a big check with your name on it, an' esto es algun tipo de trampa," she says, stumbling over the last part.

"Oy, let's take a look." Stan comes through in his undershirt and shorts, ruffling Mabel's hair as he passes by. "Morning, pumpkin. Morning, Dipper."

"Morning, Grunkle Stan," they say in tandem, and Mabel laughs and shoves Dipper a little. Stan peers out the door, and the man flashes a big, toothy smile.

"Mister Pines, I'm from the Winninghouse Coupon Savers contest, and you are our BIG WINNER!"

"Oh gosh, Stan," Ripley says flatly, as if it's not a good thing to win a ton of money.

"Hey, my one and only dream- which is to possess money- has come true!" Stan says, puffing out his chest.

"We're rich! I'm gonna get a butler!" Dipper says, elbowing Mabel.

"I'm gonna buy a talking horse!" she cries out, bouncing.

"Can't believe neither of you wants to take me to Disney World," Aunt Ripley says drily, hiding a smile behind her hand. By now Mabel's sure everyone else can see the powder-blue pants and kid-sized snakeskin boots dancing impatiently behind the check, but if everybody else is going to be playing this game she's all for a round of Pineses Screwing With Gideon.

"Just sign here for the money," the man says, putting a clipboard and a pen in front of Stan's face.

"Don't mind if I do," he says cheerfully, before passing the clipboard back. Literally no one is surprised when Gideon bursts through the check, snatching up the clipboard and doing a little dance.

"Hah! Stanford Pines, you old fool, you just signed the Mystery Shack over to me!" the glittery white-haired boy crows.

"Yikes," Aunt Ripley says mildly.

"Yeah, I wouldn't be so sure about that," Grunkle Stan says, grinning. Gideon whips the clipboard around; Mabel can hear him reading along to himself.

"I the undersigned hereby do sign the deed to the Mystery Shack over to Gideon Charles Gleeful signed... Suck a lemon little man!?"

Aunt Ripley completely loses it.
(She laughs until there are standing tears in her eyes, but Mabel sticks around and watches, after Gideon's done throwing his little tantrum and storms out, and Aunt Ripley's no longer laughing as she stops the man in the suit with a gentle hand to his shoulder and bends down to look Gideon in the eyes. "I don't want there to be any ambiguity about this, little wizard," she hears Aunt Ripley say. "If you ever try to do anything like that ever again, or anything like what you did to Dipper and Mabel a couple weeks back, mark my words- there is nothing in this world with the power to stop me from showing you, in great and painfully explicit detail, why they call me Gua'zateph in the bone-scattered caves of dark and distant Quarlish'ah. Do we have an understanding, boy?"

Gideon looks... maybe a little scared, his eyes wide and his pale face even paler. Mabel waits until Gideon's gone before tugging on Aunt Ripley's sleeve. "Why do they call you Gwazateff in the bone caves?"

Aunt Ripley's face splits in a huge grin as she takes a knee, pulling Mabel closer. "Because in the Quarlishian language, Gua'zateph means Blondie."

Mabel kind of loves Aunt Ripley a lot.)

By the time everybody's changed out of their pajamas/sweaty workout clothing Dipper's started scribbling in one of his many notebooks and staring hard at a page in Journal 3- which, to be totally honest, is something he does a lot anyway- but he's got that anxious-paranoid face on that he gets sometimes. When he's still at it after they eat and Stan and Soos open up the Mystery Shack for the day, Mabel knows she's going to have to take drastic action. (She asks Aunt Ripley, who is search-and-peck typing into Soos's laptop, if there's anything planned for today that might cheer Dipper up. "Dunno, baby. How do you spell uranium? Oh, never mind, I got it. Why don't you just talk to him, see if he wants to play or watch a show or something?")

Mabel huffs, throwing herself onto the chair next to Dipper.

"Mwop. What's up, Dipper? You're wearing your overthinking-things face."

"What? Oh, sorry," he mutters, scootching to the side so she can get comfortable. "I was just thinking about something Aunt Ripley said earlier."

"What, about me being taller?" Mabel asks, perking up.

"No! No, I mean- about us being so short basically anybody could beat us up in a fight," Dipper says, biting down on his pen.

"I don't think she meant it that way," Mabel says, patting his arm. "Plus, you saw how we did this morning, right? Even if someone does start trouble, you're safe as long as ALPHA TWIN is there to protect you!"

The expression on his face is a little... not what she wanted to see, but she's not sure why that didn't work.

"Look at this, Mabel," he says, and she leans over. "According to this, there are height-altering crystals somewhere in the forest. If we can figure out where they are and how they work, we could use them to get tall enough that we don't have to worry about everybody who's possibly out there trying to kidnap us."

"You don't think Mom and Dad are going to notice that we got three feet taller over a three month period?" Mabel asks, peering at one of the pages. "Hey, look, it says here Grunkle Ford found a vampire skull next to the crystals, but then doesn't give, like, any information about the vampire skull
or about where he found the crystals. Priorities, Grunkle Ford!"

"You don't think the magic crystals are more interesting than the dead vampire skull?" Dipper asks, after a moment.

"Why not have both is all I'm sayin'!" Mabel replies cheerfully. "Anyway, you know Aunt Ripley and Grunkle Stan are real serious about us not going into the forest anymore."

"Mabel, look," Dipper says, pinching the bridge of his nose- even though he doesn't have glasses like Grunkle Stan, who is also the only person they've ever seen do that. "I'm just going to take a look- I think this symbol here is a map, and it's got to be close to the enchanted part of the forest. And if I don't find it, then, we'll just, I dunno, get Aunt Ripley to go looking, she keeps ignoring the rules about not going into the forest anyway. And if I do find it, I'll bring some back."

"That does sound like a pretty good idea," Mabel admits, already thinking about what she'd do with a bunch of apparently unique magic crystals- mostly, magic crystal jewelry.

"So can you keep Aunt Ripley and Grunkle Stan distracted for me?" Dipper asks hopefully, giving her the Puppy Eye Stare that he knows always works. "Just for fifteen, twenty minutes?"

"Oh, fine, but you better come out of there with enough of those crystals to bedazzle everything I own," Mabel says, grinning.

"You got it, Mabes!" They high five before Dipper tucks Journal 3 into his vest pocket and heads out the door. Humming the Mission Impossible song to herself, Mabel starts darting around the Shack, on the lookout for one of the adults. Soos- doing something under the kitchen sink. Stan- giving a tour, about to wrap it up by the looks of it. Aunt Ripley-

... Mabel scratches her head as she tries to figure out where Aunt Ripley went- last she'd seen her, she'd been sitting on her bed in the Formerly Wax Storage bedroom with Soos's laptop searching for... uranium?

Probably something to worry about later, but right now she-

Mabel collides with Ripley as the adult makes her way out of the bathroom, looking startled.

"Shoot, Mabel, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to run you over," she says, steadying Mabel with one hand. "You okay, sweetie?"

"Yeah, I was just, uh, I was just looking for you actually!" Mabel says, perking up. "Hey, you know, Dipper thought your blue journal was related to his Spooky Journal, did you know that? That's pretty crazy, right?"

"Not at all, honey, Ford made my journal as a present," Aunt Ripley says brightly, holding up a finger. "Wait just a moment, I'll go grab it." She ducks into her room and back out just as quickly, looking hopefully around. "Hey, where's Dipper? There's some cool stuff he might like in here, too."

"No!" Mabel says quickly, holding up her hands. "I mean- no, Dipper's- he's- he's pooping."

"...oh, um."

"But I would love to look at your secret diary!" Mabel says brightly. Aunt Ripley does a good job recovering; it's just too bad Mabel doesn't have any stickers for her.
"Well- uh- you know, you don't have to be a wizard to use magic and curses and spells and stuff?" Ripley asks, flipping through her journal. "I didn't usually end up using magic because, well, you don't normally get a chance to just sit down in the middle of a situation and go looking for a spell you might or might not have when a sword to the face works just as well, but-"

The doorbell rings, and Aunt Ripley sighs.

"I'll get it!" she yells towards the Museum part of the Shack.

"Okay!" Stan calls back.

Aunt Ripley seems just as surprised as Mabel when she opens the door and it's Gideon standing there, holding a large glass jar full of bugs in one hand and an aluminum baseball bat in the other.

"Oh, you're back," she says mildly, a hand on her hip. "Did you eat a good breakfast, sunshine?"

"Well- yes, actually, thank you for asking," Gideon says, flustered, before he seems to remember what he's doing here. "Now's not the time for pleasantries! Where's Stanford Pines?"

"That's a loaded question and not one I'm prepared to answer," Aunt Ripley says, shooting Mabel a tiny grin. "What's that you got there, Gideon?"

"This is a jar of one thousand cursed Egyptian termites," Gideon says proudly, holding it up. "And unless Stanford Pines signs the-"

Aunt Ripley takes the jar, beaming.

"Well, it's a little unorthodox as an apology gift, Gideon, but I accept on behalf of this household. Very well done gathering up all these termites so quick."

Gideon starts spluttering, his mayonnaise-white face turning a weird purple-red in the middle. "No! That is not an apology gift, that is a threat-"

"Aw, don't be hard on yourself, sugar, you did what you can. Here, let me just make this slightly less dangerous to have around our nice wooden house, hm?" Aunt Ripley tucks the jar under her arm, flipping through the pages of her journal and pretending not to notice as Gideon tries to jump high enough to take the jar back. "Oh, here it is. Want to see something cool, Mabel?"

"I'm already seeing something cool!" Mabel cries, and Ripley chuckles and makes a smooch noise at her. "Show me what you got, Aunt Ripley!"

Grinning, Aunt Ripley puts the glass against her mouth and begins chanting.

"Faciam hoc innocens, faciam hoc desirabilis, flocci non facio, flocci non facio, flocci non facio!"

The buzzing in the jar dies down to nothing and the faint glow fades away as all the bugs inside go still.

"What did you do," Gideon breathes out.

"Aunt Ripley, did you kill the cursed termites?" Mabel asks, shocked.

"What? Of course not, baby, bugs can't help if they've been cursed," Ripley says, blinking. "Nah, sugar, they're just sleeping because it's daytime. I turned them into fireflies."

"You what?!" Gideon practically squeals like Waddles when he's this upset.
"Ooh!" Mabel grins down at the jar full of sleepy fireflies as Aunt Ripley passes it off to her. "Thanks, Aunt Ripley!"

"No problem, muffin. Thanks again, Gideon, was there anything else you wanted?"

"You mark my words, woman, I will have my vengeance on the Pines family, including you, you, you harpy!"

"Well bless your sainted little heart," Ripley says, the words rolling out of her mouth in a syrupy tone that makes Gideon bristle.

"What did you just say to me!?"

"Have a nice day, ya'll," Ripley says pleasantly, shutting the door in his face.

"Aunt Ripley," Mabel says seriously, arms clutched around the jar of fireflies. "You're seriously the greatest."

"Nah, you and Dipper are the greatest. I'm like, tied for second with your Grunkles," she says smugly. "Want to go watch a show before I head out? I'm just running real quick to the store to shop for dinner tonight."

(They watch an episode of Ducktective before Ripley gets up and says she ought to head out. They run into Dipper as he comes in, and Aunt Ripley stops him with a small frown and asks if he was in the outhouse that entire time. Dipper starts sweating a lot as Aunt Ripley takes several minutes to explain just why we eat a certain amount of fiber every day. Mabel is going to treasure this day forever and ever and ever.)

It starts with Dipper making a face- that stupid "I know something you don't know" face. He makes it a lot. It starts with Dipper taking big steps around the room and throwing his shoulders back and swaggering around the room like Grunkle Stan with a busful of tourists. It starts with Dipper showing her a small handful of crystals, *I couldn't get more they're stuck in the rocks we need some proper tools*, and not-so-subtly comparing Mabel's height against the bookshelf and then checking himself against the same spot.

It takes a lot of prodding- well, literal prodding in his ribcage where he's ticklish as well as Mabel's Unmatched Verbal Sparring- before Dipper confesses and shows her the flashlight and how it works to make things bigger and smaller.

Possibly if Mabel didn't think it was stupid of Dipper to use the magic crystal size-changer flashlight (they need a better name for that, Mabel's on the case) to make himself taller, she wouldn't have chased Dipper around the house and out into the yard trying to snatch it from him. Possibly they never would have goofed around making different body parts and objects bigger and smaller, and would not have been fighting over who got to use the flashlight next. Possibly that means that Dipper wouldn't have tripped over a log and dropped the flashlight at the edge of Grunkle Stan's backyard where the grass suddenly becomes forest, and possibly that would mean that Mabel wouldn't have said anything about what the flashlight could do where Gideon, still sulking about his failed plot from earlier, could hear.

_Possibly_, the whole day would have gone different if Mabel didn't feel a strong sisterly need to call Dipper out on his stupid-butt stink-headedness.

Possibly.

As it is... well. As it is nobody can or should blame Mabel for Gideon realizing the Changelight
(no... that's not going to work) could do some interesting things, or for using it on them.

Being shoved into Gideon's pocket is... pretty awful, though, and a hushed, terrified conversation with Dipper about how they're going to get out of this situation is cut short when they hear the little creep stomp onto the porch and bang his sweaty little fist on Grunkle Stan's kitchen door.

Dipper grabs Mabel's shoulders, giving her a small smile. (HAH.)

"Remember what Aunt Ripley said today about fighting somebody a lot bigger than we are?"

"To a human, all ankles are at biting height?" Mabel asks, grinning. Dipper thinks about it, then pulls out the Swiss Army knife he carries, still a little dirty from when he used it earlier to cut the crystals out of the rock formation where he found them.

"Something like that."

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Ten minutes- and several bruises, a confused and hatless shrunken-then-relargified Soos, and no small amount of disgust at the sweaty folds of Gideon that she and Dipper had to navigate- later, Mabel and Dipper are their normal sizes again, and Gideon's sucking on his thumb where Dipper jabbed it with the knife when it was teeny-weeny sized. Mabel isn't sure why there are a bunch of tall, freestanding mirrors arranged around the party room where they all ended up, but she has fun making Important Faces at her reflection while Gideon mutters about taking the Shack away from them and Stan.

"Give it up, man," Dipper says, shoving the flashlight into his pocket. "You literally had us an inch tall and you still couldn't win."

"-against the power of the MYSTERY TWINS!" Mabel finishes, pumping her fist in the air.

"Doods, if someone could just, like, give me a quick recap or-" Soos tries to say, running a hand through his short hair.

"Knock knock, it's me," Aunt Ripley says cheerfully, stepping through the door with a bag of groceries in each hand. She looks at the kids and Soos, then squints over their shoulders at the lineup of mirrors. She looks down at them again, and Mabel shrugs and points at Gideon.

"He tried to shrink us so he could force Grunkle Stan into giving him the deed to the Mystery Shack," she explains, and Dipper nods, crossing his arms.

"Doods, he did shrink us, I was enveloped, in the linty embrace of his pockets," Soos says seriously.

"Wow," Aunt Ripley says, looking over at Gideon. "Okay, kiddies, playtime's over. Soos, honey, would you be so kind as to put these groceries away for me? It's macaroni and cheese and, uh, turns out Shake'n'Bake is still a thing so the chicken needs puttin' away."

"Sure thing, Mrs. Pines!" Soos says, standing up.

"Soos, honey, you don't have to call me that," Ripley tells him, passing the bags over.

"You're married to Stanford?" Gideon gasps, and Mabel can tell that Aunt Ripley is really, really struggling not to make one of her Aunt Ripley faces.

"Gideon, child, I have a question for you," she says, clearing her throat. "Because... if you really did
take over ownership of the Mystery Shack, you... well, I presume you know you would have to pay the mortgage, right? Like, you would have to pay money every month and it would be you paying it instead of Stan."

"That's- that's not really the point, lady, I-"

"So my question bein' why do you want the Mystery Shack so bad that you're willin' to commit all these terrible crimes AND pay all kinds of money to the bank for it?"

"That's for me to know and for you to find out," Gideon says, sticking his thumb back in his mouth even though it stopped bleeding forever ago.

"Buttercup, you're eight years old, I'm just gonna lay it down flat that the closest you have to a grand, ultimate plan is something that literally anybody over the age of fifteen could foil with a minimum of effort," Ripley sighs. "But sure, if you really think a little boy, even a... even one as clever and conniving as you are, you... you little rascal..."

She crouches down, her grin wide. "I wondered where you got those cursed termites and magical amulets from, ya fluffnugget."

"Mabel, Dipper, get your Aunt out of my face before I git my Daddy to sue her," Gideon says dismissively.

"It was hidden in the elementary school," Ripley says quietly. Something in Gideon's face changes- his mouth opens and his eyes widen, but behind that Mabel almost thinks she sees Gideon's future self, a paranoid, selfish adult who still thinks it's okay to threaten people into doing what he wants.

"Aunt Ripley, what are you talking about?" Dipper asks.

"Oh, our little buddy Gideon here is probably evaluatin' his life choices," Ripley says, still grinning. "Lil Gideon here thought he was special, I bet. Figured he was probably pretty smart to find the hiding spot- let me guess. The symbol carved into the stair rails to the library basement, then the map to the door in the nurse's office-"

"-behind the framed paintin' of George Washington with six fingers," Gideon says quietly, his tone weirdly calculating. "How do you know this?"

"Yeah, how do you know that?" Dipper asks, before adding in a low tone, "and, what is it you know?"

"Gideon's got the second Journal," Aunt Ripley says, and Gideon takes a step back from her. "So here's what's going to happen, you baby-powder-smellin' felon-"

"Good rhyme," Mabel whispers, and Aunt Ripley shoots her a thumb's up.

"-you and I got a few things to straighten out, buddy. We got a whole lot to talk about."

"I ain't talkin' to you, lady, and there's nothin' you can do to make me-"

Aunt Ripley's hand hovers over Gideon's hair, just-barely touching it.

"That's an awful nice bouffant you got here, Giddy-up, it'd be a shame if somethin' happened to it-"

"Alright! Alright, I'll talk!" Gideon wails. "Just leave my hair out of this!"

"Good boy." Aunt Ripley stands, her hands pressed against her lower back. "Boy, I can't wait for
everybody to hit puberty and get taller." Mabel exchanges a look with Dipper, and she can tell he's just as tempted as she is to use this perfect opportunity to whip out the size-changing-crystal-flasher (...still not a good name) and either make everyone taller or make Aunt Ripley a little shorter. "Now, I expect to hear an explanation for all these mirrors around here when I get back."

"What? You just got here, where are you going?" Dipper asks, and Aunt Ripley looks down at him-in the mirrors around them Mabel can see the slightly confused smile on her face.

"Well, the sun's going down, Gideon here needs a ride home, doesn't he?" And she turns to look at Gideon, who has the grace to not say anything rude.

"I'll just call my Daddy for a pickup," Gideon says, taking out his phone. Aunt Ripley gives him a forced, too-wide smile at that.

"That's good. That's good. Now Gideon, let's go wait on the porch until your father's here, and you an' me can have us a little chat about what exactly you think you're doin'," she says, and if it wasn't for the face she was making Mabel would think she was being her normal lovey-dovey-Auntie self.

Dipper waits until they're outside before whispering to Mabel. "Do you ever just feel really glad that Aunt Ripley's on our side?"

"Haha, yeah," Mabel agrees. "Come on, let's find Stan so he can start cooking dinner."

(Mabel peeks out the window a few times at them. Ripley spends a lot of time talking to Gideon, their voices too quiet for her to hear, and when Bud Gleeful pulls up in the family car and steps out to open the door for Gideon, Mabel sees Aunt Ripley's expression as it turns into something hard and disgusted and angry, before she takes a deep breath and makes an almost-normal smile for Gideon as she stops to say one last thing to him. She sees Aunt Ripley push Bud Gleeful against the car and say something; whatever she says, it makes Bud look sweaty and scared, and he drives away like there's something chasing behind him.)

(For a second, she thinks she sees Gideon look out the back window at Aunt Ripley, too, making the same kind of face. On Gideon it looks like hate. Mabel wonders why Aunt Ripley would hate Bud Gleeful.)

It doesn't take long at all to finish her Ripley Sweater, after dinner. Mabel waits to give it to Aunt Ripley in private, poking her head in her bedroom door. Aunt Ripley is on the phone, but she motions Mabel to sit on the bed while she's waiting.

"I'm in a hurry, Sanchez," she says, leaning heavily on the wooden chest of drawers Grunkle Stan and Soos carried in off the back of Soos's truck bed. Mabel's guessing it came from a garage sale or some other side-of-the-road situation. "It's gonna have to be soon, the solstice is tomorrow."

"Okay, buddy, archaic superstitions aside, I do live in one of the few places where that element of human belief shapes physics like that," Ripley says with a sigh. She points at the cell phone in her hand and rolls her eyes. "Of course I don't want the Federation to come here, as far as I know I'm still on the wanted posters as an accessory to whatever crime they're pinning on Ford nowadays. No! No, Sanchez, I would never. Look, I know it wasn't you you, but you did save my life a year ago, and even if you didn't, I'd have been lost on this planet if it wasn't for you."
Whoever it is, he sounds interesting, Mabel decides.

"How illegal we talkin'?" Aunt Ripley stifles a yawn with her free hand. "No, no, I'm awake, I just... oh, well, that's not so bad. Well, I mean, I'm not going to be happy about it if we're caught, but I can get out of an Earth prison. Jeez, I thought for a minute there you were talking about a serious prison. Hah! No, buddy, that's you. That's just you. Haha, okay. Thanks, man, I mean it."

She hums, making a hand gesture that Mabel's sure makes more sense in context. "Nah, I got a local engineer. Well, I will, soon. Hey, you probably know him, Fiddleford Mac-" Ripley holds the phone away from her ear as the person starts yelling, and she grimaces for a few seconds before she puts the phone back to her ear.

She pauses, as if thinking. "Well... you know what, Ford'll want to see you, and I'm of the belief you'll like Stan, too- what do you mean, of course there's two of' em, they're identical twins. What? No... no. NO OH MY GOD, RICK, YOU DID NOT." She's laughing while yelling, and seems to be equally amused and horrified. Mabel clutches the Mabel-sweater a little tighter. "Oh wow, you are going to have so much apologizing to do. No, man, only Ford has six, that's why they called him Sixer. Wait, and you never- you never actually- oh gross, gross, gross, that's enough detail, I don't need to know that about Stan. Oh my god, you're a nasty old man."

Aunt Ripley covers her face, looking away from Mabel. Mabel doesn't know what Aunt Ripley means by her friend being a nasty old man, but she's seen Grunkle Stan before his morning coffee, when he's still sweaty and smelly and scruffy from the night before, and she's got a pretty good idea.

"You gotta stop with the grossness, Sanchez, you know I can't react with kids present- okay well, what you do with your grandchildren is beyond human comprehension, Sanchez. Listen, I've got someone way more important than you waiting to talk with me. Yes, it's Mabel. Absolutely, man, don't even question it. Haha, yeah. Give my love to Summer and Morty. Well, then don't, you stupid old bastard! Haha, bye."

Ripley hangs up, then claps her hands over her mouth. "Oh! Mabel, no, okay, I didn't say any swears just now. That... was... I was being a bad example, don't be like me, Mabel, save yourself!" Aunt Ripley flops dramatically onto the bed, and Mabel laughs.

"Don't worry, Aunt Ripley, your secret's safe with me." Mabel pats her hand consolingly, and Aunt Ripley sits up, pointing at the sweater in Mabel's arms.

"That for me, pumpkin?"

"Okay, Aunt Ripley, prepare to have your mind blown," Mabel whispers, before jumping up and unfurling the sweater like a flag. "VOILA!"

"Oh, wow, princess, you made me this?" Ripley catches it mid-flutter, her smile huge and open. She experimentally puts her forearm inside the oversized hood, and runs her fingers over and over the big blue heart set in the middle of a mint-green chest, the white starburst pattern in the middle of the blue heart. Ripley looks like she's going to cry. "Dipper told you about my, um, about my necklace?"

"Yeah, I may have been asking if there was something special that you might want on your sweater," Mabel admits, and Aunt Ripley swoops her into her arms and very quietly bawls into Mabel's hair. Mabel's still getting used to being the recipient of what is clearly a Mabel-level hug, but luckily she's in the perfect position to get a lot of practice.

"I love it," she whispers, so quiet Mabel's not sure she's supposed to hear her. "I love you, I love it I
"The hood's for when you need to go to Sweater Town," Mabel says softly, and maybe she is sniffling a little bit but who cares. "So maybe the next time you feel sad or scared or like everything's too big, you just... bwoop. Put it up over your head and it's Sweater Town Time."

"I'm extremely glad for Sweater Town Time," Ripley says, finally letting go of Mabel and sitting back, the sweater in her lap. She carefully pulls the necklace out the collar of her shirt, dropping the big, smooth stone in Mabel's waiting hands. "Take a look at this, baby. You made the star exactly perfect, see? God, I love this sweater, Mabel. This is so good. And you're super talented, by the way, did anybody mention that yet today? Because you are so talented."

Mabel runs her fingers over the starburst in the surface of the glossy star sapphire as Aunt Ripley starts peeling off her Edgy On Purpose hoodie so she can put the sweater on. When Mabel looks again Aunt Ripley is wearing the sweater with the hood up, hugging herself with the extra-long sleeves pulled past her hands.

"Mabel, this is the best thing I have ever worn on my body," she says seriously, but her eyes are still glittery and wet over the grin she can't keep off of her face. "C'mere, you."

It's another Mabel-level mega-hug and a smooch on the side of her forehead. Mabel happily responds in kind.

(The jar full of fireflies is brilliant green and gold, glowing on the sidetable between her bed and Dipper's. It's not enough to read by, but tonight Dipper just smiles at it and wishes Mabel goodnight. The soft lights dance across the ceiling, and when Mabel finally sleeps she dreams of being in a mountaintop castle surrounded by clouds, and the starry sky above is dotted with three moons, and the stars above are very familiar and don't make any of the pictures Dipper likes to point out to her, and here, she knows, she is safe.)

(When she wakes she only knows that she had such a good dream and wishes she remembers it, and from what she sees of Dipper's face when Aunt Ripley wakes them up for morning practice she thinks he had the same dream.)
Another day, another random pain.

Today it's where a kidney should be, if only he had lived a cleaner lifestyle and made better friends.

He gets up with a groan, and figures he should just be glad it's not his knee today. He gets up and starts getting dressed, throwing on a dirty shirt because he isn't sure when he did laundry last. The house is dark and cold and silent, and instead of putting on the heater he shrugs into the same dirty trenchcoat he's worn every day since the first signs of winter started to appear.

He is desperately, sorely tempted to just climb back into bed, but his brother's coming today. It doesn't matter how tired he is. His brother's coming back today.

He curls his fingers around a crossbow and waits, and it dawns on him, very slowly, that his hands feel... strange. He doesn't dare take his finger off the trigger and he doesn't dare take his eyes off the door, but it feels... it feels like his hands are wrong. His hands have the wrong number of fingers. It's almost enough to make him look, but there's a banging on the door and before he can react, it swings open, letting flurries of snow into the living room.

His brother- dirty, haggard, wearing a red jacket that can't possibly be suitable for the snow outside and a knit cap jammed down over filthy, shoulder-length hair- stands in the doorway, a bag slung over one shoulder.

"Nice place you got here," his brother sneers.

"You came," he says, and he can hear that his voice is cracking with emotion, tears streaming freely down his face. "You really came. I-I thought maybe-"

"Yeah, yeah, get it over with. You know you only wanted me because you didn't have any other suckers to do your dirty work. What's the job?" his brother asks harshly, and his heart leaps into his throat. He feels... guilty. Ashamed. Small. It's true, isn't it? It's always been true. He doesn't care about his brother, he just wants him to do a job. His brother is worthless, but this could be the only thing he does in this lifetime that's worth anything at all and he-

"Focus, Hungry Fish," his brother snaps. "You called me here for a reason. You need to destroy the portal you built. Take me down to the portal now, and we'll see how far along you are."

Something in him freezes. Destroy it? No, he- he's spent thirty years trying to fix it, he can't destroy it. Or... wait, no, this is... it's before the portal broke, isn't it? He- wait- he- the eyes, he was supposed to check his eyes, the eyes could show if it was his brother or if it was- if it's him or-

He lowers the crossbow and takes the penlight out of his pocket. "Let me check your eyes."

His brother looks up, and there's no need for the flashlight, because his eyes are slitted and catlike, glowing gold in the dark house like the setting sun against Ripley's glasses like the gold in his brother's dreams like the gold in his dreams like-

"Almost got you, didn't I?"
It's not Stanley standing in front of him anymore- or, rather, it is, the Stanley who "died" at thirty-two years old, the corpse he imagined he'd have turned into when he shoved the human bones he stole from a medical school the next state over into a pair of his dirty, ripped jeans and a shirt he used to love, when he doused the remains wearing his clothing in gasoline and buckled it into the car rented under his own true name, when he lit the match and slammed the door and left the car to roast in the rough gravel of an abandoned quarry. It's not quite the corpse of the man described by the small blurb in the paper- foul play suspected, no witnesses, no suspects at this time- because the real thing hadn't left enough of a body to stick into a casket. The thing in front of him has only one eye now, the other a gaping hole crusted over with blackened fluid, a manic too-wide grin showing way too many of Stanley's rotted, missing teeth.

"Get out," he says, quiet and tired of this same old game. "Just get the fuck ou-"

-he wakes up, legs tangled in the cord of his electric blanket. It's been... hell, it's been years since he had one of those fucked up dreams.

(They used to come so, so often. They used to be every night. They used to be his brother with gold eyes, the windows of the house wrenching themselves out of the walls and chasing him through the woods, the distant baying of hounds as he runs through the Colombian jungle. They used to be his father. It was only after he killed "Stanley" that they started to be Stanley, it was only after he took over Ford's life that he started to be Stanford.)

Stan takes a deep breath. Another day, another random pain. This time it is his knee, and he runs a hand over the faded scar low on his back, one of the many souvenirs he has of his time owing money to the wrong people. At least he's not Ford, though, at least he never owed anything to a demon (or whatever it is that used to hunt Ford and Ripley and has apparently been fucking with Stan ever since he moved in.) At least he never sold a part of himself to a demon.

Not yet, anyway. The thought doesn't necessarily feel like one of his, but that's just one more fucked up thing he's had to get used to, living here.

"Great," he mutters to himself. "Losin' your mind." He sticks his feet into his slippers and winces when he stands, even with the help of a cane. It's gonna be one of those mornings.

Ripley's hunched over a bowl of cereal in the kitchen by the time he gets in there, a vacant expression on her face as she shovels store-brand cinnamon cereal into her mouth. It takes a minute for her to notice him, and she jerks a thumb toward the loudly burbling coffee maker once she does.

"S'brewin'." She pauses the spoon before it hits her mouth, frowning. "Mabel-Juice is in the fridge."

"No thanks, I'm not ready to die just yet," he mutters, grabbing a bowl and a spoon. "You're up early."

"Bad dream," Ripley says, looking down at her bowl. "Figured I'd get a start on the day."

"I mean, early for you, it's only six."

"Mm." Ripley takes off her glasses and puts them on the table, scrubbing at her eyes with the heel of her palm. "I thought about what you said last night. I know your idea is probably a lot safer, but I just... I really want to give McGucket a chance."

"Do you really think that guy'd be safe to have around the kids?" Stan asks, and Ripley makes a sour face at him.
Any less safe than having their Monster Aunt in the same house? I dunno, Pines. I can promise to snap his neck like a twig if he does something to hurt them. I'll be watchin' him, I just don't wanna assume the worst of a person." The coffee maker's gurgling dies off, and a little red light blinks once at them.

"Don't say anything that'll make it seem premeditated," Stan grunts, getting up to grab a couple of coffee mugs. He's not a hundred percent sure if Ripley's had enough coffee in her life to know how she likes to take it, but if she's anything like Stan it'll have Mabel-levels of sugar and creamer in it.

"Wanna hear what my dream was about?" Ripley asks, frowning.

"Nope," Stan replies, setting a steaming mug in front of her.

"Well, did you have any dreams last night?" she asks, fiddling with her spoon.

"Nope," Stan replies, sitting back down.

Ripley huffs a little, before taking a sip of her coffee. She hums appreciatively at the taste, so Stan must have gotten it right. "Thanks for the coffee."

"Yep. Did you get the newspaper yet?" he asks. Ripley groans in response, sagging her arms and leaning her head all the way back, exposing her throat, which is one of the few bits of her he's seen that doesn't actually have any scars on it. "I take it that's a no, huh?"

"I'll get it, I'll get it. Just let me... un-discombobulate mahself," she mumbles, standing up in bits and pieces like a marionette whose puppeteer is new at this.

"I can't believe you're not a morning person," Stan remarks, sipping at his mug.

"Morning! Morning person! Stan, the sun's not even up yet, it's night time, okay, it's- morning person, my ass, I'm a morning person alright, when it is in fact the morning," she gripes, putting her hair up in a loose ponytail. "Can I borrow your slippers?"

"Ugh," he sighs, kicking them over. He has no idea why she walks around barefoot in the house. She comes over, gives him a coffee-smelling smooch on the cheek like she has every morning since she moved in, and shuffles outside, still grumbling about the fact that it doesn't count as morning if sunrise hasn't happened yet.

Stan catches himself smiling into his coffee. Well, what about it? It's nice having people around. It's... been really nice having family around, waking up and having someone to talk to, having people who are happy to see him, even if it's only been a few minutes or hours since they saw him. Getting Mabel Hugs on the regular. Teaching the kids stuff. Watching Dipper pick up his non-shitty habits. Before this summer Stan didn't even know this was something he wanted or could have.

"Ay, Stan, whatcha smilin' at?" Ripley asks from the doorway, the paper in hand.

"I ain't smilin', I'm gassy," Stan snaps, and she snorts, taking off his slippers and sliding them over to him with her toes.

"Okay, Gassy, well, follow-up question. What's Summerween?" she asks, reading the unfamiliar word off the front pages.

This time Stan really does smile, a huge grin that feels like it's capable of lifting him out of his chair.

"Oh boy, yer in for a treat."
"...really, Stan, punning this early? Shame on you. Shame."

(After the kids are done with their hour of Ripley Time and everyone's dressed, Stan drives everyone down to the Summerween store. He pretends it's because he needs gallons of fake blood and stage makeup for the Shack, which... technically is true. The kids adore the Summerween store as much as Soos does, but Ripley seems kind of down as they walk through the aisles, her hands full of fake "flickering" LED candles. She lies and tells him it's nothing when he asks her what's wrong, and when the kids excitedly ask her what she wants to dress up as she shrugs and waves a hand, *a witch or a bee or something, I dunno*. Stan asks her again, in private, and she shakes her head and tells him that she's been chased down and almost killed by a lot of stuff, and some of the decorations in the store look like some of that stuff. She refuses to say anything else about it. Stan makes a mental note to take out his copy of Young Frankenstein so they can watch it together later, them and the kids.)

Ripley pulls him to the side while the kids are carving Jack'o'melons, her tone low.

"I'm going to go see if I can get Ford's old friend to come here," she tells him. "Look, just... just to look, to see if he thinks he might be able to help. If we can get him to help us, we don't even need to steal the journal from Gideon."

"We're not leaving my brother's journal with that little gremlin," Stan says sharply, and she gives him a weary look.

"I know that, honey-wasp, but I don't want to waste time trying to get intel on that child's house and whatever his weird little lair situation might be, not when we know where McGucket is. I got a good hookup on a fuel source, if we can just make this portal home in on Ford we... Stan, this might be over. *Over over.*"

He grips her arm, feeling a little lightheaded, and she gives him a smile.

"Well, fine, let's try the hillbilly, and if that doesn't work we'll just make that snowcone goblin-child hand it over," he says, and she grins.

"Exactly." She moves to go and he snags her before she can head out.

"You should be wearing a costume. Some of the locals get weird about anybody who doesn't have the... spirit of the holiday," he explains uncomfortably. "And I've never seen it, but Soos swears there's some sort of Summerween ghost monster who goes around punishing people who don't get into the holiday."

Ripley's mouth quirks into a slight grin, and she pulls a rabbit-eared headband out of her backpack and sticks it on. "There, I'm a Playboy Bunny with my clothes on."

"Also, you know. Be home by nine," he mumbles. She blinks at him, nodding. "And if you end up... if anything happens like the other night, when, you know? Just call me. You're charged up, right?"

"Ninety-four percent, Stan. I'll call in for the heroic Pines Family Rescue the second anything starts to feel bad. Promise." She takes his hand and squeezes it tightly before leaving.

"Great," he says quietly, looking around to make sure nobody witnessed that. As the kids' little friends start coming over and getting ready to go trick-or-treating, Stan starts to settle in for a nice night of scaring the crap out of small children and giving out that gross discount candy he specifically buys to stop himself from wanting to eat it before any kids show up.

He gets the first call just after he sees the kids leave as a group, rushing over to the phone with a bottle of fake blood in one hand. "Yeah?"
"It's me," Ripley says. She doesn't sound distressed. "I'm just calling because I'm at the dump and I hate it."

"...okay."

"And I found his, um, his cabin, but there's nobody here. Looks like a possum's under the bed."

There's a knock at the door. Stan growls softly.

"Stan? You there, buddy?"

"Ripley, I gotta answer the door. Just wait it out til he gets back."

"Fine. Love ya."

"Yeah, sure, bye." He hustles over to the door, but the kids have already given up and reached the end of his driveway by the time he's got it open.

Stan sighs and shuts the door. Surely the next group of kids will be terrified shitless of his "possessed old man melting into blood" routine. He dabs a little "corpse bruise" purple under his eyes, just to make it perfect. He spends a few minutes puttering around the porch, making sure the battery-operated candles Ripley insisted on using in the Jack'o'melons are all still working, making sure the faces are all in the perfect position to stare eerily at any kids coming up the driveway.

It occurs to him that Stanford used to love Halloween. Maybe he'll love Summerwee- NOPE. Nope. Not going to think about that right now.

Stan moves to stand grimly next to the door. He's going to have fun. He's going to enjoy this and he's going to like it.

He takes a deep breath--

-the phone rings. Stan exhales, heading over to pick it up.

"Is this an emergency?"

"Uh, no," Ripley says sheepishly. "I have good news and bad news, though."

"Bad news first," Stan says, resigned.
"Well, I may have accidentally knocked McGucket unconscious when I turned around real fast and it so happened his face was at elbow height. So... he's got a pretty nasty shiner right now... and this may have become a kidnapping."

"Did you purposefully accidentally elbow McGucket in the face?" Stan asks wearily.

"No, accidentally-actually. I was looking at one of his inventions when he came in and I turned around and, uh, he's apparently significantly shorter than I imagined him to be," Ripley admits.

"Okay... okay." Stan breathes out, closing his eyes. "Alright. What's the good news?"

"I found McGucket," Ripley says in a tiny voice. "Yaaaay."

"For fuck's sake... okay, just... bring him here, I guess?" Before she can respond, there's a knocking at the door.

"Oh, gotta go, talk to you later," Stan says quickly, tossing the phone onto the receiver and running to the door. Two little kids dressed as a soldier and a mummy, looking younger than Gideon. *Perfect.*

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

After not one but two(!) rounds of some of Stan's best horror-movie material fall flat, Stan manages to cobble together a pretty good chestburster rig, furious at himself for somehow failing to scare two small children. He's in the process of attaching it to his body when the phone rings, yet again.

"Stan, is Soos trick-or-treating with the kids?" Ripley asks before Stan has a chance to say anything.

"As far as I know, yeah. Why?" Stan asks, wondering absently how he's going to coax Waddles to get inside.

"Oh, nothing, I thought I just saw him driving, but-" There's a sudden clatter, and a scratchy fumbling noise that Stan has to wait out for almost a minute. "Uh, I- I dropped the phone, sorry, I... I think I just saw something weird."

"How weird?" Stan asks, blinking. "I mean, weird by normal standards, weird by Gravity Falls standards, or weird by you standards?"

"Weird by me standards, I think I just saw a giant... black octopus lookin' thing running across some rooftops..."

"Well, where was it going? It's probably that Summerween monster ghost Soos was talking about," Stan says, trying to project calmness. "Look, you're still wearing your costume, right? You're safe."

"Shouldn't I go see where it's going?" Ripley asks slowly. "Just, you know. Make sure it's not monster-ghost-killin' anybody."

"Is that something you can do with McGucket?" Stan asks, and Ripley sighs.

"Nah. Okay, I'll come home with McGucket, drop'im off, then I'll go look for that monster thing and hopefully he ain't eaten anybody by the time I found him."

"Okay. See you soon."

Stan just has enough time to wrangle Waddles into his false stomach when the same two kids show up again, demanding candy like there aren't a couple hundred other houses giving it out for free tonight. Waddles bursts out at exactly the right time, piggy-screaming like a champ before plopping
out and toddling off to nibble on one of the kids' jack'o'melons. The kids from before as exactly as unimpressed as they were with the "melting face" bit. Then- adding injury to insult!- they scare the crap out of him with some sort of screaming lady surprise video on one of their phones.

Fucking kids today. Unbelievable.

Stan's got most of his costume off when he hears the front door open and shut.

"That you?" he calls out.

"Yah," Ripley calls back. He throws on a robe and comes downstairs, frowning a little when he sees that Ripley's got an apparently-unconscious McGucket slung over one shoulder.

"Please tell me people didn't see you carrying him around like a sack of potatoes," he says, and she gives him a sheepish look.

"People... didn't..." She coughs. "I dunno, man. Where can we put this poor guy so he doesn't wake up all freaked out?"

"I... can think of... a place," Stan says slowly, frowning.

"Does that face mean you're happy or does that face mean you're sad?" Ripley asks cautiously, hoisting the hillbilly onto her other shoulder.

"It's... it's just Ford's old room," Stan says, and he doesn't know what to do with the crushing relief in his chest when she understands, her expression softening.

"D'you want to use mine for this?" she asks, and he shakes his head firmly.

"Nah, nah, that's your space, if things get messy in that room nobody'll have to sleep in there," he says, and she gives him a small, uncertain smile.

"If you're sure, pumpkin."

"I'm sure," he decides, gesturing her towards the unused old study where he slept the first few weeks he lived here. It takes some work- he doesn't remember it being this hard to push this bookcase over the door, but that was a solid twenty-five years back now and uh, well, bodies change. McGucket's finally- slowly, in stages- starting to wake up by the time they get the door open, enough so that Ripley is mostly just helping him walk over the horrible shag carpet to take a seat on the couch.

Stan steps back as Ripley takes a knee to be eye-level with the old man, even though he can hear her creaky joints from over here. There's a sharp gasp, and McGucket lurches back against the couch cushions, his fingers clutching anxiously at his beard as he looks around the room. Stan wonders if- if this guy was friends with Ford, then- then maybe it looks... almost the same. Maybe McGucket remembers.

"Hi there," Ripley says, making eye contact. "I'm sorry I clipped you with my elbow back there, I was hoping I could talk with you. My name's Ripley Savage. D'you remember your name?"

"F-Fiddleford," the old man says, although- although Stan supposes if this is Ford's college buddy he can't be that much older than he is, he's just always been old, ever since Stan really started getting to know the people in town. He looks around, fear plain on his face. "Fiddleford McGucket."

"Good," Ripley says, offering her hand to take. The hillbilly looks at it, untrusting. "I've been looking for Fiddleford McGucket. I'm glad to have finally found you. Do you remember my friend
Stanley?" She points over at Stan. The hillbilly nods slowly.

"I don't remember you, Mysterious Blonde Rabbit Lady," he admits, and Ripley nods, realizes what he just said, and whips the bunny ears off with a distinctly reddish cast to her features as she speaks again.

"That's right. You've never met me before, so you wouldn't remember me, but we have mutual friends."

"Like- Stanley," Fiddleford says, glancing uncertainly at Stan. Ripley gives Stan a hopeful look, and he feels his heart sink. No. Nooo. He's not here for this Old Yeller, sob story, sad-sack doe-eyed there-but-for-the-grace-of-god-go-i bullshit. This is not the Stan Pines Home for Wayward Weirdos. He's going to get Ford back. He's going to take care of the kids. And everything else- everything else is...

Stan's hand strays to the pair of Ford's glasses that were all he had of his brother, after he was pushed into the portal, and he picks them up with a sigh.

"Yeah, like me." Damn it all to hell. And Ripley's beaming at him like she's hit the jackpot, ugh.

"Fiddleford, you know... we also know some other people in common. I'm friends with your son, Tate," Ripley says gently. Fiddleford's eyes light up.

"That's my boy! That's my lil Tater-tot!" he says, sitting up a little straighter. Ripley nods, still smiling.

"I'm also friends with your old friend Stanford. You remember Stanford?"

The old's man eye twitches, and he starts tugging anxiously on his beard.

"You remember Stanford Pines, Fiddleford?"

"It's the end, it's the end of all things, it's the end," he whispers, and Ripley blinks. Stan's stomach is clenching, and he has a terrible feeling.

"Come on," she says, taking his hand in hers. "Come on, man. Didn't you leave anything? Didn't anything stay?"

"N-no, I-I can't recall a thing, I- I-" Fiddleford's shaking like a leaf. Stan comes over, putting a hand on Ripley's shoulder.

"We ain't in some kinda rush," he says, and Ripley's face falls.

"No. Come on, Fiddleford. He was your best friend. You have to remember. Don't you remember? You guys went to college together, you were at Backupsmore. You remember college, right, so you gotta remember Ford, you were roommates, you lived together, you were best friends-" She reaches for his hand again and he flinches back, eyes wide.

"I can't, I can't recall, I don't know," he says quickly, his words running together.

"Ripley," Stan says, sighing. "Come on. We can think of something later. Right now we... right now, we..." He trails off, shrugging helplessly. "Give the guy a shower and a change of clothes, I guess feed him something."

Ripley looks up at him, and he's not sure what about that statement brought tears to her eyes, but she
nods and gives Fiddleford the weakest smile Stan's ever seen.

"That's right, buddy. Hey, Fiddleford, it's okay you can't remember right now, okay? Your friends are my friends, and that makes you an' me friends."

"I don't have any friends," Fiddleford says doubtfully, and Stan sighs, clapping a hand on his shoulder.

"Well, you got some now, you poor bastard. Come on."

(They realize at some point that it's all well and good to offer the man a shower but the state he's in, he's... going to need help. They play Rochambeau to figure out who gets cooking duty and who gets bathtime. Ripley wins, and the naked relief that floods her face tells Stan that he was justified throwing Rock out there twice in a row. She bustles off to the kitchen start making something easy. She must be feeling worse than she's letting on, though, because Stan later finds out that those two little kids came back and broke into the house, and she's not really telling the whole story but Ripley ended up burying Stan's second-best de-boner in the doorframe a foot over those kid's heads, and they apparently left behind their enormous sacks of Summerween candy in their escape.)

(Stan, for his part, keeps his eyes averted most of the time anyway, just handing stuff over the shower curtain and making sure the water's a reasonable temperature. He doesn't really take a good look at McGucket until the man's stepping out the shower with a towel around his waist, looking like a drowned rat. He's... he's not even that short, but every part of him hunches over the too-visible cage of his ribs. He blinks owlishly at Stan, and Stan clears his throat and hands him another towel for his face or beard or whatever, and he asks Stan to show him his hand and Stan does, and he nods slowly, his gaze distant.

"You're... identical, 'cept he had six," he mumbles, and Stan makes gruff noises at him. No point in getting Ripley's hopes up until McGucket remembers more, though.)

The kids and Soos (and Wendy, who they must have picked up on the way home) return- exhausted, sweating the makeup off their costumes, smelling faintly like burnt sugar- in time to see Ripley setting out some kind of casserole made mostly out of rice, Veg-All, a can of soup from the back of Stan's pantry, and cheese. She must have enough time to explain to them what's going on, because none of them act surprised when Stan walks McGucket out, his wiry frame swimming in a pair of Stan's pants and a moth-eaten sweater that Ford left behind when... before.

"I-Is this a party? Is Ernie gonna make it?" Fiddleford asks nervously.

"Ohoho, boy, doods. I can't wait for story-time," Soos chuckles, taking a seat next to Fiddleford. "We have had the wildest night, am I right Old Dood?"

If he were a different person Stan might have kissed Soos for that, for making the old coot feel even just a little bit more comfortable, for taking the strain off Ripley and the kids.

Ripley, however, is that person, and she puts a smooch on the top of Soos's head as she passes by.

"D'ah-haw, Mrs. Pines," he says, blushing.

Stan waits until they're done eating before he produces a DVD copy of Young Frankenstein- it's entirely worth the money he spent on that and the weird little disc player to see Ripley's eyes light up for the first time today. The kids and Soos don't get all the jokes, although Dipper seems to be watching carefully for cues on when to laugh, but Ripley just about literally dies laughing with every other line.
(Stan still doesn't want to get her hopes up, but once in a while he sees McGucket crack a genuine grin— not confused, not sheepish, just honest-to-god laughing at Gene Wilder, usually when he's doing something that reminds Stan of Ford so much it's not funny. When Ripley and McGucket both simultaneously do a little dance and yell "PUTTIN' ON THE RITZ!" right as Frankenstein's Monster does, the kids start cackling like it's the best thing they've ever seen as they gorge themselves on the candy those punkass kids left behind.)

(This really is the best thing Stan's ever seen— the kids, Soos and Wendy, Ripley, even that weird, sad old man, everyone together in a group that he's a part of, everyone laughing at something that's objectively funny. Stan makes a mental note to go to the store at the mall and see if he can get a copy of Sherlock Holmes Jr., because the sound of Dipper and Mabel laughing is the best thing he's ever heard, and even Filbrick Pines could laugh at Buster Keaton.)

The kids are next to impossible to put to bed, but once they're up there Stan grabs a couple of spare blankets— nice to know all his doomsday prepping is paying off for a non-doomsday reason— and sets up a bed on the couch in the room that used to be Ford's.

Fiddleford looks lost, standing in the room in his too-big clothing at the edge of the awful shag rug. Stan really, really hopes that rug isn't a sign of how awful Ford's taste in anything is— home decor, colors, patterns, ANYTHING.

It occurs to Stan that he's not sure what's going to happen once they have Ford back. Is Ford going to want to move into Ripley's room? Is he going to want to shuffle Fiddleford out of this room and put him up somewhere else? (But where? Stan asks, and can't answer.) Or— or is that— is it even going to— no, no, no. No point in thinking about that until Ford's home.

"You ready to get some shut-eye, old-timer?" Stan asks, aiming for jovial.

"...the rug," Fiddleford says, frowning. "It's lookin' at me funny."

"That's because it's the ugliest rug known to man," Stan says, forcing himself to be cheerful.

"There's... something wrong with it," the old man replies softly. "I don't like it."

"Well, you must be feelin' pretty lucid if you hate this thing," Stan says, hands on his hips.

"No, I— I remember," Fiddleford says, taking a tiny step back. For just a few seconds, the flicker of hope Stan's been fighting against flares up in the center of his chest. "This rug is cursed, it makes ya feel things, see things, it makes ya turn into a different person, it—"

Stan sighs, massaging the bridge of his nose under his glasses. It was too much to expect that a night in the house he'd once lived in would jog the old weirdo's memory.

"Why don't I get that thing out of here so you don't have to live with it?" Stan asks, crouching down to roll it up. "You shouldn't have to look at somethin' this ugly all night long."

Ripley comes in just as Stan finishes rolling it up, wearing her slippers— for once— and a set of pajamas covered in little space ships that Stan strongly suspects was originally going to be a gift for Ford before she decided to start wearing them.

"Oh, you're gettin' rid of the rug?" she asks, sounding— of all things— disappointed to see it go. Stan grunts.

"It was givin' me the evil eye," McGucket explains. Ripley nods slowly.
"Oh, okay. Well... can I have it for my room then?" she asks shyly, and Stan nods, leaning the rug in her direction.

"S'all yours, Savage."

"Awesome! I'm gonna put it in my room, don't go nowhere."

Stan glances over at Fiddleford and shrugs. At least being mystified by the idea of anyone wanting that terrible rug is something they have in common.

"I know you haven't... lived with people in a long time," Stan says, as if he hasn't spent the entire last three decades living alone. "But we got a pretty good thing goin' here. She thinks we need to help you, and she's got the kids convinced."

"The kids?" Fiddleford echoes, then brightens up. "Hey, my Tate'll be comin' to stay with me soon, the twins're about his age now!"

Stan sighs heavily. "Yeah, about that. You know Tate's thirty-three. McGucket. You're what, sixty-four years old? He's grown. Remember? He works up at the lake."

"He... he does, doesn't he?" Fiddleford's smile fades as he sits down, tugging fitfully on his beard. "So he does. My my, how... how time does get away."

"...yikes," Stan says, viscerally uncomfortable with where this is going. "Welp, I'm headin' to bed. Don't sneak out of the house, the bathroom's right next to you, and if you so much as look funny at either of the kids, there won't be a body left to find. You got me, buddy?"

"Uh- I think so?" Fiddleford looks deeply alarmed, but that's like... one of two basic expressions he has, so who knows if any of that sank in. "Stan, I- I know I ain't much of anything anymore but I... I hope you know I wouldn't do nothin' to hurt nobody, 'specially any kids."

"Well, I guess we'll find out," Stan says, instead of mentioning the fact that people got sent to the hospital last time McGucket went on a tear building giant robots in lieu of dealing with emotional issues, and that some of them were kids. If Fiddleford doesn't know that already he isn't in a place where he can handle that info just yet, and Ripley'll probably skin him alive if he makes whatever's wrong with McGucket worse. "Goodnight, pal."

"G'night," Fiddleford echoes. Ripley pokes her head in just in time to bump into Stan, and they do an awkward little dance to move around one another so she can go into the Was Ford's Now Fidds' room.

"Hey, Fiddleford, just lettin' you know I'm only down the hall, okay? If you get scared or anything."

"What's to be scared of?" Stan asks.

"Yeah, wha's to be scared'a?" Fiddleford asks, eyes huge. Ripley seems taken aback by the question.

"Oh, I dunno, it's scary to sleep in a new place sometimes? I mean, if you're not gonna be scared then have at it, I was only mentioning it."

"Oh. Good night, Stanley. Good night, Mysterious Blond Rabbit Woman."

Ripley opens her mouth but apparently chooses not to say anything for now. She waits until she and Stan are in the kitchen before letting out a deep, bone-tired sigh.
"Do you think this'll help?" she asks softly.

"Guess it can't hurt too bad to try," Stan admits. "I get the feelin' neither of is gonna be too comfortable sleepin' for a while... You know, I still have half a pint of moose tracks, if you want any?"

"Ooh, shit, Stan, you don't gotta ask," Ripley says, immediately bouncing over to the silverware drawer to grab spoons. They're almost to the bottom of the carton before Stan thinks about something Ripley said earlier.

"You want to tell me what your dream was about?" he asks, and she licks her spoon, squinting at the ceiling for a moment.

"I honestly can't remember," she says after a moment. "Probably something from when I was on the run." She's not lying, so he lets it be for now, and doesn't say anything about the fact that she keeps using the tip of her spoon to draw something in the melted chocolate in the middle of his kitchen table.

Hard to say what it is, but it looks like she doesn't know that she's drawing it, and if he has to guess he'd think... maybe an eyeball with teeth?

Stan silently grabs a paper towel and wipes the table off, and she gives him a sheepish smile.

"Aw, sorry I'm makin' a mess, pumpkin."

"Don't worry about it," he says, throwing the paper towel at the garbage can and missing spectacularly. Eh, that's what the goat's for, probably.

When Stan finally does get to sleep, he doesn't dream- or, if he does, he doesn't remember.

(He does wake up earlier than normal, something feeling off in his house, an instinctual feeling of wrongness that he couldn't begin to describe. He checks every room, just to be sure, but everybody's asleep but him. He's up in the attic when he notices the moon is shining particularly bright through that window that spooked Ripley so bad the other night. He notices- and why for only the first time in thirty years?- that the moon lines up pretty with the bit that does, yes, look like an eye in the middle of the triangle. He notices that when it does this it looks a lot like the spectre from the bad old dreams he used to have, when the windows of the house used to spin around and chase him until he collapsed. He notices that he's seen that shape- triangle with an eye in it- before in his brother's Journal, scribbled into margins and doodled in Ford's drawings. That it's kind of all over the house. That it really... feels like something he really, really wishes wasn't in the house where he sleeps, the house where the kids he love cares about are sleeping.)

(He understands now why Ripley couldn't sleep without guarding the kids, the other night. When clouds outside pass across the moon, it looks like the eye is winking at him. It makes him feel angry, threatened, trapped.)

(He tries to go back to bed and lies awake for a couple of hours instead.)

Chapter End Notes

As of this update I've written over 100K words of Gravity Falls fanfiction in an 8 week
period! I'm like... weirdly proud but also somewhat unsettled, ROFL. I can't believe I
didn't use all that juice to write, like, the next Harry Potter-esque magnum opus. OH
WELL LOL.
Ripley makes the call early, between her hour of Ripley Time with the kids and breakfast. Tate's not... demonstrably happy, at least not over the phone, but Ripley's pretty sure she doesn't imagine the relief in his voice when he realizes his father's staying indoors with meals on the regular. He agrees to bring over what she's asking for and adamantly refuses to meet Fiddleford just yet; she's not sure if she understands it but she's not surprised, either.

She doesn't know why she's doing this anymore- if it's simply because Fiddleford's a person and people don't have to live the way he's been, if it's because he's a genius and they need him, if it's because Tate's her friend and Tate needs him. She hopes Stan doesn't ask, because she's not sure if she'd be satisfied with her own answer, and she's so, so relieved that Stan- the man he is now, the boy he'd been when he'd been kicked out- simply isn't the type to put Fiddleford back in the dump.

Maybe this is something she needs help with. She's... pretty sure this is something she needs help with. She makes a mental note to get ahold of Multi-Bear and see if she can request a favor of him for Fiddleford's sake.

Breakfast is tense- not outwardly, because between the two of them Stan and Ripley manage to run a conversation pretty well as far as keeping it in safe territory- and the kids and Fiddleford pick at their breakfasts, even though Ripley remembers all those times she was real hungry (she won't say starving, starving would have meant eating out of the cans she took from the Cannibal Dimension) and she would have inhaled any meal put in front of her after those spells. As it is she ends up uncomfortably full off eggs and toast and coffee, even though she honestly can't remember actually eating anything or what anything tastes like.

Stan, bless him, starts cracking the whip and puts the kids to work around the gift shop and the museum- it is an enormous relief to not have to worry about juggling the twins and Fiddleford right now. She waits to talk to him once Stan's wrangled everyone else out of their hair.

"Hey, Fiddleford," she says, and he flinches, his right foot tapping out a steady beat against the wood floor.

"I don't remember yer friend, I'm sorry," he says, and he flinches, his right foot tapping out a steady beat against the wood floor.

"Nah, don't worry about it. He's not here, anyway. Nah, I wanted to know if you were interested in doin' some chores around the house with me today, since the kids and Stan are pretty busy," she says, motioning him to the room where he's staying. "We haven't had a chance yet to finish gettin' this room cleaned up, so I was gonna sweep and mop up, maybe dust all that stuff on the walls, since, I dunno, it looks like it hasn't been moved since before I was even born." Which might be the case, if Ford built his house right when he got here. Hmm. She'll have to ask him.

They look around the room, and Ripley sighs. "You know what, let me grab a couple things. Garbage bag for shit we ain't keepin', a box for shit we might want, maybe a bottle of... Pledge or Pinesol or some shit, I dunno. We gotta do the job anyway but it looks pretty intimidatin' from here."

"Maybe I could build us a clean-bot to do the job," Fiddleford says brightly. Ripley pauses, thinking.

"Nah," she decides. "I appreciate the thought, but that leaves me with nothin' to do all day. Besides,
what I hear is you tend to go big with the robots, and this is a job for our tiny precision tools." She waggles her fingers at him. "Just sit tight for a moment, buddy. I'll be back with the stuff." She grabs a few things from the kitchen, and Soos even lends her his spare work gloves and a carpenter's hammer and screwdriver- just in case, dood- and a couple of "rad" bandannas.

Ripley puts everything in the middle of the room and holds out the bandannas to Fiddleford. "You want skulls wearing party hats or electric blue with purple sneakers?" she asks. He takes blue with sneakers and she shrugs, using party skulls to cover her mouth and nose before peeling off her hoodie so that she's down to the comfy highlighter-orange tank top that she likes because it has a tiny zippered pocket that she doesn't use for anything but could, conceivably, use in the future.

"Alright, Fiddleford, let's start before we chicken out and make Soos do it, huh?"

"A-and what do you want me to do?" he asks, and she gives him a once-over, tapping her chin through the bandanna.

"You want to sweep while I'm taking down the boards off this window?" she asks, handing the broom over. "Ain't no wrong way to sweep a floor, just make sure to get any cobwebs you can reach coz spiders are the worst."

"If you say so," he says doubtfully, and she twirls the hammer experimentally.

"No worries, Fiddleford, just do your best." She leaves him to do his thing while she uses the claw to pull the nails out until she can pull the boards loose and toss them down onto the couch. It's not too hard to do- Stan must've boarded this window over in a hurry. Once they're all free of the window she whistles, using her hand to try to wipe away some of the grime. "Look at that, Fiddleford! What a pretty stain-glass window, huh?"

She glances over at him, and he's just staring, the colored light playing across his face and beard, gold and purple and orange and red.

"S'nice," he says, and she grins.

"Do you have a favorite color, Fiddleford?" she asks, and he looks startled to be asked.

"I-I don't rightly know," he says, after a minute. Ripley picks up the nails and the boards, beaming.

"Hey, I bet Mabel's got markers in like, every single color, she can help you pick your favorite."

"Actually, the human eye c'n perceive close to ten million individual colors!" Fiddleford says, before cackling wildly. "So the odds of her havin' every single color are hornswogglin'ly high!"

"Whoa, that's... way more than I thought there were!" Ripley laughs, picking up a garbage bag and heading over to the side table. "Well, I tell you what, she's got a real big collection of markers, so odds're probably pretty high you'll find your favorite anyway!"

"Ya don't say!"

Ripley nods, even as she starts eyeballing the dusty bottles of booze Ford left behind. She picks up a super fancy crystal decanter and pulls off the stopper, wondering if it'll smell like the good stuff. It does not. It smells like dust and cleaning fluid. She puts it into the box of things they're definitely saving, along with the ice bucket, jigger, and cocktail shaker.

"Yep! My favorite color's blue, although that light green that looks like it tastes minty comes up a close second." She goes to the wall and opens a door she expects to be a closet and is surprised to
find a bathroom- a toilet and a sink, anyway, no shower or tub. "Hey, look what I found! That's gonna be dead useful for when ya gotta pee in the middle of the night, huh?"

"Not to mention emergency hedgehog-scrubbin'!" he says, bouncing over to look in there. "What a high-class establishment!"

"Yeah, but we're gonna have to clean up in here. Thank god there's no standing water in here, maybe we'll get Soos to check the plumbing out after we make it a little more habitable, huh?"

It's not a bad way to spend the morning. Between the two of them, Ripley's pretty sure nobody's going to die of dust inhalation, and Soos was kind enough to bring a shop-vac in for them to use. McGucket mostly uses it to vacuum the dust out of the couch cushions and sucks up the spiderwebs he couldn't get with his broom while she tries her best to figure out what, if anything, of Ford's old belongings he might still want after over thirty years away. The Pink Floyd glass prism thing goes in the keep pile, along with a big fancy-looking trophy for academic excellence back in college, but Ripley and Fiddleford are both stumped by the enormous stacks of paperwork that all seem to be old academic papers.

"The Study of Thermodynamics As They Relate To Anomalous Botanical Growth on Slow-Moving Mammals," Fiddleford reads off one, sounding dazed. "Can't rightly say why anyone would want this."

"Right? But, ugh. Maybe it's important emotionally?" Ripley sighs, picking up a stapled stack of papers titled "Affliction and Echolalia: Identifying Neural Networking." The staple has rusted over into a loose collection of red iron flakes and the papers are yellowed with age and eaten at the edges by roaches and rats. "You know what, Fiddleford, it's been thirty-five, forty years since these were written. I'm gonna go out on a limb here and say maybe science has moved forward."

"Sounds good to me! Timber!" Fiddleford crows, sweeping an entire stack into the garbage. If Ford wanted any of this saved, Ripley figures, he wouldn't have let it sit in a messy stack for six years before getting inhaled by his own stupid artificial portal.

Stan knocks on the open door, looking fantastic in his Mr. Mystery suit.

"Hey, uh, I was gonna make sandwiches," he says, avoiding looking directly at either of them. And that's it, nothing else is said. Ripley glances over at Fiddleford, who's giving her the same lost look he had on before they started working.

"...so are you tellin' us to clean up so we're not dusty at the lunch table, pumpkin?" Ripley asks, and Stan grumbles something that might be a yes and puts on his fake eyepatch, storming away because he doesn't know yet that he apparently gets grumpy and gruff whenever he's trying to avoid having feelings about Ford. Ripley supposes it must have been a weird decision for Stan to close this room off, maybe even hoping it would be a lot more temporary than it turned out. She's already made the executive decision not to ask why Stan didn't open this room up before now.

She lends her hoodie to Fiddleford, since he doesn't really have a shirt to change into just yet, and Stan snags her on her way to her room.

"McGucket's here," he says, and she nods slowly, looking towards the room they just left. Stan blows his breath out in a single, frustrated sigh. "Ranger McGucket's here. With the stuff you asked him for?"

"Ohhh, gotcha. Thanks, honey." She really ought to go talk to Tate, but Stan's being all closed-off and shifty-eyed, so she waits for a moment before asking, "Somethin' on your mind?"
"You're not getting rid of anything... important, right?" he asks quietly, and she nods firmly.

"If I'm getting rid of something it's because it's been nibbled-on and got grossness on it. I kept his bartending stuff, his Pink Floyd thing, his trophies... pictures of a lady who I don't know who she is-"

"I have no idea either, I think the one in the circle frame is Marie Curie," Stan mutters, and Ripley... nods, because of course.

"And if he comes back and wants the rug back I've got that in my room. And you've got his clothes. And he's... he's going to be happy, Stan, because things don't make people happy."

"Things make me happy," Stan says sullenly, and Ripley reaches over and squeezes his shoulder.

"Well, if he comes back and he's mad that we threw out forty year old homework, you have my full permission to say you told me so and do it in such a way he knows I'm the one who did it, and then film the fight we have later so you can edit explosion noises into it."

"That's fair," Stan mutters, patting her arm. "Alright, go talk to the kid while I distract the old one with food."

Ripley makes the executive decision not to point out that the "kid" is almost her age and the "old one" is only two years older than Stan is.

Tate has a couple of folders in one hand and an old suitcase in the other, lurking in the parking lot between his mud-spattered Parks and Rec pickup truck and the Ripleymobile. His face is inscrutable as ever.

"I put his old glasses and his license in there with his stuff," he says, nodding toward the suitcase.
"The ID's expired, but they're pretty... lax over at the DMV here."

"Thank you," Ripley says, opening the first folder. "Is this... recent?"

"As of nine years ago," he mutters. "I mean, the... Tourette's and GAD, he always had, but I guess they noticed he wasn't balding normally."

"Okay," Ripley says, nibbling her lower lip. Tate gingerly touches her shoulder.

"Look. Nobody expects you to fix him. You know that, right? You're not a professional. Just... the fact that you're keeping him as safe as you can... it means a lot."

"He seems okay today," Ripley says cautiously, flipping a page in the folder and trying not to outwardly acknowledge what, to a guy like Tate, must be an overblown, heartfelt confession. "We were cleaning out a room together where he'll be sleeping. He wasn't... he doesn't seem too scared. He hasn't eaten a whole lot, though."

"He's probably not used to eating as often as you're trying to do. Just give it time, having a routine used to help some, and keeping things low-stress used to help." Tate hesitates, then adds, "Just let me know if you need anything. If you can't handle something, I don't want you to take it personally. I can't always come quick but..." He trails off, looking at the forest. He takes off his cap and runs a hand through his dark, sweaty hair- with his eyes showing he really does look like the drawings of his dad Ford drew in his Journals. He pulls the hat back down, and sighs.

"I'll always come," he decides, and pats Ripley's arm again. She's about to say something, when they both hear it- a loud crash from inside, the squealing of the pig, and a lot of banging.
"Also, he might not be safe to have around pets until he knows food isn't going to be scarce anytime soon," Tate adds.

"Yeah, I'm... just now realizing that. Thank you, Tate, I'll call you."

He gives her a small salute and gets in his truck, although she's aware that it takes him a long time before he actually starts up the engine and drives off.

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It takes a while to calm Fiddleford, Mabel, and Waddles down- well, no, Ripley wouldn't call the frozen silence Fiddleford went into when she grabbed him by the waist "calm," but he stopped adding to the noise and confusion and didn't struggle to eat the pig anymore.

He's still huddled on the couch where she left him when she carries his suitcase in.

"Well, good news is, these kids are notoriously hard to traumatize," Ripley tells him, smiling. "So hey, no hard feelings, right Fiddleford?"

"Yer..." He looks up, blinking. "Yer not gonna throw me outta here? I tried to mastimacate on that lil girl's pork friend."

"Mastiwhat."

"Masti... cate. Masticate. I kin see how that word might sound kinda terrib-ible b-but it m-means chewin' on," he explains nervously. "Please don't get angrified at me."

"I'm not angry, buddy, I was just momentarily confused." Ripley waves a hand. "Look, we can't have you chewin' on the family pets, but Waddles wasn't hurt any and the kids know you didn't mean anything by it. You'll want to apologize to Mabel later coz that's her piggy, but nobody's mad at you, okay?"

"Okay."

"Same goes for Gompers, he's the goat. No trying to eat the family goat, either. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Okay. Good. Let's get you unpacked, huh? We got some of your stuff sent over- clothes that actually fit you, your medical records in case you need a doctor or anything, oh! Your glasses! See if your prescription's the same, Fiddleford!" She cleans the lenses with her shirt before passing the glasses over. He gingerly puts them on, blinking several times as he looks around the room before focusing on Ripley.

"Well I got too much smog in the noggin' fer tellin' if this is exactly right, but apparently I'm practically blind as a bat without these! Hyahaha!"

"Ah, well, good, buddy! I lost my glasses for like a day and a half and I had a headache the whole time," Ripley says brightly, giving him a thumb's up. He hesitates, then gives her a thumb's up.

"I-I... I still can't remember yer friend, y'know-" he starts, looking worried. Ripley shrugs.

"Look, Fiddleford, that's alright. You're a nice fella and you're real smart, and you remember Tate. That's the main thing."

"Tate," Fiddleford repeats, looking down. "My boy, h-he's embarrassed to be seen with his old man."
I-If I could remember who I used to be, maybe he-

"Hey," Ripley says gently, sitting down on the couch next to him. "Before you finish that sentence, just... listen. You don't need to remember anything you forgot in order to be the best you."

"That ain't true, look at me!" he snaps, arching away from her.

"Look at me, man!" Ripley sighs, putting her hands on her knees. "Look at me, Fiddleford. I lost my memory, too, alright? Everything before I was nineteen is gone. I don't know if I have parents who might be still alive, or brothers or sisters, or... or anything. I don't even know what my name used to be. I lost my memory and nothin' was left. But look, just because I don't know who I used to be don't mean the person I am wasn't worth being. And it took me a while, too, you know? I spent a solid ten years not bein' somebody I'm proud of, but- Fiddleford, even if you never remembered a single thing, you'd still be worth being. Okay?"

She wipes her eyes and looks up at him. His eyes are wide behind his glasses, and he looks torn between wanting to smile comfortingly and being shocked and uncomfortable with her confession—so, a pretty normal-looking reaction, as far as she knows.

"Okay?" she repeats, and he nods.

"Okay."

"So let's get you unpacked, hey?" she asks, sniffling.

"Miz Ripley?" he asks, and she perks up a little.

"Yeah, Fiddleford? You don't gotta say Miss, we're friends."

"Who did that to you?" he asks, and for a few seconds he sounds... pissed would be the word she'd choose, if she had anything to compare it against. Maybe some part of him remembers the cult (that he started, but she's pretty sure he's in no position to take that responsibility anymore.)

"Aw, I dunno, Fiddleford. I was... kidnapped, and I think they thought a head injury would make me easier to control," she says, only lying by omission because she's not sure how he'd handle aliens yet. "Lucky for us they was dead wrong on that one, though, huh?"

"Well all the same I think I'd like a shot at evapora-tizin' the feller'd done such a thing," he growls, and she grins.

"Hey, you and me both, pal." She shuffles through his medical papers, chewing on her lower lip as she reads over old diagnoses. She glances up once he's done—looks like he mostly hung everything up, apparently Ford left behind a bunch of cedar coat hangers, so that's nice. "Hey, Fiddleford, I know you can't remember anything before recent times, but this thing says sometimes, you don't know if you're seein' something that's real or if it's not real. Does that still happen?"

He lets out a soft, nervous cackle. "Well, I suppose if'n I don't know it's not real I wouldn't know if it's still happenin', would I?"

"That's a very good point," she says seriously, mostly because it hadn't occurred to her that he wouldn't know. "Okay. Well, if you ever get concerned that something might not be real, go ahead and ask me. We live in a weird place where a lot of stuff happens that doesn't happen other places, so if you see something that might be wrong, just ask me, okay?"

"Will do! So whaddya wanna do now?" he asks, and she does have a good suggestion—maybe hang
out with the kids and Stan and Soos, or go and grab groceries, something simple- but her phone rings.

"Hold that thought, Fiddleford, I gotta take this," she says, patting his hand.

She stands, flipping her phone open. "Hey, Sanchez, what you got for me?"

"Well he-urgh-llo to you, too."

"Don't do that to me," she hisses. "You know my guts are weak."

"Wow, Savage, th-that's exactly the iron stomach and unwavering c-c-constitution I'd expect from someone who killed a chaos god."

"It's not cute!" Ripley takes a deep breath, really wishing she'd have learned by now not to let Sanchez- any Sanchez- get under her skin like that. Fiddleford is doing that awkward "trying not to eavesdrop on a loud phone conversation happening in the same room" squirm. "Friend, I've got about a thousand things on my plate right now. Please, forgive my impatience but go on and get to the thing you called to tell me."

"You wanted portal coordinates to get the fuel for Pines's monument to his own failure, right?"

"Oh good, yeah, I do. Hold on, let me get a pencil." She cradles the phone against her ear as she starts digging around through the various dusty drawers, pawing around at the (while very cool-looking) horribly frustrating apothecary with its several dozen little drawers. "God... just... my kingdom for a fucking pencil, I can't even--"

"You r-really oughta watch what you're sayin' around those precious little angel children," Sanchez remarks drily.

Fiddleford stands, peering over her shoulder, and opens the third drawer down, the second row over. There are four or five (heavily chewed-upon) pencils, all of them sharp enough to write with, the erasers stiff and cracked with age.

"Thanks, hun," she says, relieved as she grabs one, holding it in one hand and the phone in the other as she dashes over to the calendar and starts writing on the coarse paper next to the picture of the owl. "Okay, Sanchez, what's the good word?"

"Okay, 46*-526-4938.076004," he says slowly.

"...seven... six... double-oh... four," Ripley repeats.

"Double zero," Sanchez says insistently.

"I drew'em with the lines to make it zeroes, get off my ass," she says, squinting at it. "What is that, Ohio?"

"Abandoned facility in Hawkins, Indiana," Sanchez says, sighing heavily. "Jesus Christ, who cares what stupid state it's in, you're not gonna be sightseeing."

"Well I might be!" Ripley says, before sighing heavily at him. "No, no, you're right, I'm not gonna be sightseeing." Ripley gives Fiddleford a small, strained smile, and he returns a gap-toothed grin.

"Also, the facility's abandoned but it's a former MKULTRA testing lab, soooo--"

"Sanchez, I don't know what that is. Is that bad? Is it- is it gonna be fucked up?" Ripley asks,
frowning.

He is silent for a... pretty long time. That's never ever a good sign with him.

"You know what, don't sweat it. The feds don't need anything there, and even if you do trip the security, it's, what, two thousand miles away from where you live? Just portal out of there."

"I-I really can't, it's not safe to do it less than five hundred miles awa-"

"Well, don't blame me if you get caught," he snaps.

"It's just Earth feds, right?" she asks, and he goes silent again. "Dang, Sanchez, it's just Earthling American Feds, right?"

"What do you want from me, a lie? No, it's got an open passage through to the Hub Realm, so, theoretically you're lookin' at-

"The Hub," Ripley repeats hollowly. "It's got a wound through to the Hub. Meaning... anybody. Everybody." She sits down heavily on the couch next to Fiddleford, staring unhappily at the ceiling. Theoretically everybody, but also theoretically nobody. She and Ford have never been, but that's because they did everything they could to avoid it, especially after more than one version of the Galactic Federation started looking for them.

"But hey! You're only gonna portal there and out- or, you know, run five hundred miles and then portal, whatever."

"Rick, is that... really the only option?"

"Savage, you're trying to find a fuel source for portal generator that doesn't even function as a working portal generator. If everything you've told me is correct, that thing was designed to run off toxic waste-"

"Okay, Sanchez, yes-"

"-I mean I don't give a fuck but where exactly do you think the fumes and runoff go when that thing gets turned on? So either you go to Bumfuck, Indiana and get the only halfway-clean fuel source that could run that shitty portal without exploding half the equipment-"

"-okay-"

"-or you drive half an hour away to the nearest "secure facility" and get caught stealing barrels of radioactive sludge and, I-I dunno, lose your teeth probably."

"Yes! Thank you! I'll do as you said!" Ripley snaps, taking a deep breath. "I understand the situation, Sanchez, I'm not going to screw this up any more than I have to."

"I-I mean other than turning it on in the first place." He waits until he's sure Ripley's not going to respond to that. "Whatever. Let me know when you're going to be turning that shit on so I can get the kids out of this dimension."

"It's not going to be that dangerous, Sanchez, we fixed the glaring error in the design where the portal didn't have defined edges that could tear off rifts, it's-"

"Savage, just... give me a head's up before you do, f-for old time's sake."

"Old times?!" Ripley doesn't have a chance to say anything else before he abruptly disconnects. She
tosses the phone down and groans, putting her hands over her face.

Fiddleford clears his throat. "S-sounds a little bit like you're doin' something might be a little dangerous, huh?"

"Used to be dangerous," Ripley mutters, lowering her hands to give Fiddleford what she hopes is a reassuring smile. "Don't worry about it. I mean, I'm sure if you took a look at the mechanical stuff you'd be able to fix it up so it was totally smooth and seamless and also had a coffeemaker and a robot masseuse, because you're a genius, but it's better than it used to be and that's all that matters. The old way was terrible."

"If ya say so," he says, frowning. "Uh- y-you know, I noticed you weren't at lunch, d'ya wanna eat before we do anything else?"

"Huh? Oh! God, Fiddleford, I totally forgot to check if you ate lunch," Ripley says, an electric prickle running under her skin. "I'm sorry. You hungry?"

"No, I- it's fine," he mumbles into his beard, looking awkward as his knee starts bouncing lightly. Ripley immediately feels even worse- two days in and she's already making a mess out of trying to help Fiddleford. God. And she's barely even seen the kids today, she's doing worse as an auntie now that she lives with them than she did when she didn't. Ugh, and- and Sanchez is right, this portal is dangerous for the kids to be around, it was dangerous the way Ford built it probably because Bill made him build it that way, but who the hell is she to think she could fix his mistakes?

It really is no wonder Ford ditched her the first chance he got. She-

Ripley takes a deep breath, standing suddenly. "Excuse... 'scuze me, Fiddleford, I gotta... the bathroom." She hurries to the door, lurches past Soos with a barely-coherent apology, and slams and locks the door to the downstairs bathroom with a shuddering sob.

"Stop thinking like her," she tells herself, trying desperately to use the meditation techniques she and Ford used to practice to help him sleep. She takes off her glasses with shaking hands, leaning on the sink so she can see if her eyes are any different- but- no, they're the same, a little bloodshot from the dust maybe, but nothing out of the ordinary. Ripley hisses out a breath, running her fingertips along the year-old scar that crosses her face, where Natashoggoth tried to take her.

"It's over, it's over, she can't do anything, get your shit together," she says miserably. "You can't... you can't help if you don't get your shit together."

I can't help them even with my shit together, I don't know why I thought I could do this, I wasn't anything before Ford and without him I'm-

Crack.

It takes Ripley a moment to realize that she's slapped herself in the face, although the moment she realizes it of course she did, she has to snap herself out of this, out of whatever this is, whether it's really Natashoggoth her coming back or if it's just Ripley's fucked up brain being fucked-

-crack.

She can do this. She can do this. She can get through just one fucking day of, of whatever this is, she can get the fuel Sanchez told her about even if it's gonna be hard and if she gets caught that's it that's the end Stan'll think she just fucked off and Ford'll never get to come home and she should just admit that she can't do anything right so nobody gets their hopes-
Ripley stops because something actually kind of hurt in that last one, and there's hot thick eye fluid bursting out before the scream came from every mouth liquid running down her face and the taste of blood on her lips and she's so fucking sure that she's going to see that the scar is an open wound again, that her face is peeling itself off, so when she finally looks up into the mirror and sees it's just a nosebleed she almost cries with relief. Nosebleeds ain't bad. It's probably from all the dust in Ford's old room. Nothing bad happening here.

There's a knock on the door.

"You doin' okay in there?" Stan asks, and Ripley turns on the water, rinsing her face off before she starts trying to wash off the little red dots splattered across the white porcelain.

"M'fine," she calls back.

"You don't sound fine," he replies, and she sighs, wiping her nose again and feeling dismayed that it's still bleeding. She vaguely recalls needing tissues for a nosebleed, but she doesn't want to walk over and get toilet paper when A. her face is wet so it'll be gross anyway, and B. that means dripping blood all over the floor, which will probably give Soos or Fiddleford a heart attack. "Ripley? Mabel wants to know if you want your sweater for Sweater Town."

"N-no, don't, I'll ruin it, I'm bleeding," she replies, frowning. There's a moment's pause.

"I'm coming in there."

"What? Wh-" Ripley starts, sure that she'd locked the door, but after a couple of jiggles- well, Stan would know how to unlock the doors in his own house- the door opens and Stan is there, staring at her with the green sweater looped over one arm.

"What happened to your face?" he asks slowly, shutting the door behind him. Ripley looks frantically at the mirror, sure this time it's her scar reopening, but- no, just her face, a little red, dripping with bloody water, her glasses off, her hair kind of a wreck.

"God, you scared me," she says softly, sniffing back a little to try to stop the bleeding. "No, man, it's... I'm having a nosebleed because you ain't cleaned that room in thirty years, it's dusty in there."

Stan grabs a hand towel and gently shoves her back until she gets the hint and sits down on the closed toilet seat. "Chin up," he tells her, and when she puts her chin up he pinches her nose shut with the towel.

"Pretty sure if anybody knows how to get blood out of a sweater, it's Mabel," he remarks. She huffs at him.

"You gave McGucket a scare," he says quietly.

"Sorry," she mutters, her voice muffled by towel.

"You missed it," he says, forcing himself to be cheerful like she doesn't know by now what that sounds like. "There was a mutiny over the way I run my business, can you believe it?"
"Oh?" she manages to ask.

"Mabel thinks she can do a better job runnin' the Shack than me," he adds.

"Uh huh?"

"So we placed ourselves a little wager- if I make more money on vacation than she does running the Shack, then she has to wear a Loser Shirt all summer."


"If she wins, then she gets to run the Shack full-time."

"Doesn't sound like she actually wins," Ripley points out, rolling her eyes. Stan winks and shushes her with a finger to his lips.

"So I'm going to take a little vacation. Seventy-two hours to give the kids and Soos a chance to run things. Seems to me leavin' you here'd give them an unfair advantage, so guess who's coming with?"

She stares blankly at him. He gives her a nudge.

"You're welcome," he adds.

"We can't leave Fiddleford here with Soos and the kids," she points out, and he sighs.

"Okaaay, so the three of us will take a vacation for a few days. Come on, it'll be good."

"You realize we have work to do on this vacation," Ripley mutters, pushing his hand and the towel away. He checks her face over to make sure she's not still bleeding before giving her a thumb's up.

"It's gonna be fun."

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They take Ripley's car- after a long, drawn-out conversation with the kids and Soos on what to do if there's an emergency, ANY emergency, seriously Ripley will drop everything and cut a hole through the fabric of space itself in order to get home immediately, and Soos here's money for meals please make sure Abuelita's comfortable in Ripley's room and above all guys STAY OUT OF THE WOODS- and another, significantly briefer conversation with Tate explaining semi-truthfully that a short trip away from the chaos of town might do his dad some good. And honestly, it does- once they're out of Gravity Falls Fiddleford starts relaxing in the backseat, to the point where, when the B-52's come on the radio about an hour in, he joins Ripley in (loudly and terribly) singing along to Love Shack.

It's not exactly a long drive to Spokane, but by the time they get up to Walla Walla Stan forcibly ejects Ripley from the driver's seat and turns the radio off for the remainder of the trip. She elects not to take it personally, since she knows from Dipper that having the radio on while driving is terribly distracting to Stan.

The first hotel they get to doesn't have any vacancies and the second one, out on the edge of the city limits near the highway, only has one room with two doubles. They take it anyway, since Ripley's sure that at least the first night she won't be sleeping there and she honestly doubts she will be the second night, either.

"Run the whole plan by me and see if you can spot the thing ya missed," Stan tells her, after they
settle in and are sitting on the edges of the bed nearest the door while McGucket tries to find something on local Spokane TV.

"Wow, rude," Ripley tells him, frowning. "So... I wait til ten tonight, portal through to the spot with the fuel, run out to the town, ride the bus to the next town over, portal back around ten at night... sleep off my adventure and drive back home on day three?"

"What are me and McGucket doin' during this whole thing?" Stan presses, and Ripley shrugs uncomfortable.

"Staying safe here, I guess."

"And if this place has security and they catch you out, or you get stopped at any point in time between gettin' there and portalling back, then what?"

"Say, what are you two talkin' about?" Fiddleford asks. Ripley shrugs, frowning.

"I'll think of something, won't I?"

"No, coz here's what you're gonna think: gee, if something happens to me, nobody's gonna have any way to know about it. If I get caught and they ship me to Guantanamo they're never know where Aunt Ripley went. Better make sure I take Stan with me so he can watch my back," Stan says, using his high pitched "other people's voices" voice.

"What's Guantanamo?" Ripley asks, and Stan throws his hands up.

"McGucket, back me up on this, willya?"

"Fiddleford, you don't have to do anything you don't want to do," Ripley says, and she and Stan give each other the evil eye for a moment before Fiddleford clears his throat.

"What... exackly... are we deliberatenin' here?"

Stan gives Ripley a searching look, and she shrugs at him.

"Well, Fiddleford, while you and Stan have fun relaxing at the hotel for a couple days, I'm going to be... using my portable portal generator to go to Indiana, steal some fuel for my other portal generator, and then make my way back to you guys once it's safe." Stan puts his hand over his mouth and Ripley can barely hear him mutter to himself about how good Ripley is at keeping secrets.

"Your portal generator?" Fiddleford echoes, his voice shaking.

"Our portal generator," Ripley amends, putting a hand on Stan's shoulder. He rolls his eyes at her.

"Alright, meanwhile, Fidds, I'm sayin' if anybody's gonna be pullin' a heist on a spooky Cold War government facility from hell, we oughta be followin' basic safety rules!"

"The Buddy System is not basic safety rules, you're making that up!" Ripley protests.

"Uh, fellers?"

"Oh, like you would know!"

"What's that supposed to mean!?"

"Hey, now, friends-" Fiddleford interrupts, adjusting his glasses. "I feel like somebody's gotta ask
why yer stealin' from the govern'ment instead'a enjoyin' this'ere vacation?"

"Because we can't buy it from the government," Ripley mutters.

"And you already have a... p-portal generator... but you need to use this other fella?" he asks, and Ripley looks at Stan, shrugging.

"My little one only works if I know where to go... the big one runs the search... program..."

"So why'ntcha attach the little guy to the big feller so's the big thingamajigger can run the search and the little doohickey actually does the openin' part?" Fiddleford asks.

Stan blinks at Ripley, then looks at Fiddleford, scratching his chin. "...can we attach them?"

Ripley stands up, pacing a little bit, before sitting down heavily on the edge of the bed. "I mean... theoretically? It could be done. Ford's done it before."

"Why didn't we think of that, then?" Stan asks, and Ripley shrugs helplessly.

"I don't know, man, I mean... it... really felt like... like the only option we had was... was using... that thing," Ripley says slowly, glancing over her shoulder to frown at the other two. "You think there's some kind of... low-energy psychic field in the lab that makes people obsessed with opening that portal specifically?"

"Why would I think that?" Stan asks, a touch exasperated.

"So neither of ya'll ever considered doin' it that way?" Fiddleford asks, frowning.

"Heh, well, this proves you're the only engineer in the room," Ripley grins weakly, before sighing. "Wow, I'm gonna have to set up some kind of mental shield around the equipment, and I am terrible at that kinda thing. We really are gonna have to steal that journal from Gleeful, somewhere in those three books Ford'll've had to have written down a recipe. Still... it doesn't change the plan for this weekend, I still have to-"

"Wait, why? You just said it could be done Fidds' way!" Stan says, affronted.

"I said it could be done, but I didn't say I can do it! Stan, I'm not smart enough to rig something up like that!" Ripley snaps, before she takes a deep breath. "Although... I mean, technically I know two people who are smart enough to do it... but I'm not about to force the one in this room to do anything he's not comfortable with."

"Who're you- oh," Stan sighs.

"Who are you talkin' about?" Fiddleford asks, and Ripley gives him a pointed look.

"Um, you, because you're an engineering genius," she says, then shrugs. "And you're not comfortable... with working on the portal?"

"What makes ya say that?" he asks, and she blinks, really wishing they weren't having this conversation now.

"Because... you... hooboy. Stan, help me explain," she says, and Stan grabs the remote from Fiddleford and snorts.

"I'm in no way qualified to explain your husband to this sad bastard," he says loftily.
"Wife," Ripley mutters under her breath, before frowning. "Thanks for the assist, jerk."

"You're welcome," he tells her, before changing the channel to an episode of Ca$h Wheel. "Man, I would totally win if I got on this show."

"Fiddleford," Ripley says brightly, patting the edge of the bed to invite him to sit next to her. "Look, you know how me an' Stan are basically like brother and sister?"

"Well y'both bicker like kin," he agrees, and she nods.

"Yeah, see, I'm married to Stan's brother. That's Ford. Ford's... Ford's your friend from college, the one you can't remember. But don't worry, we don't care that you don't remember, because we like you for you!" she adds quickly, and Fiddleford cringes slightly but nods. "Anyway, how much do you remember about... the stuff that happened when you started losing your memory and whatnot?"

"Not... a great deal," he says. She nods, fighting the urge to run out of the room rather than face the rest of what she's going to say.

"So, uh, it turns out, at least some of that was self-inflicted by this weird memory gun," she says, taking a deep breath. "Aaaaand you erased your memory because you were traumatized by the work you and Ford were doin' together including working on the very portal we've been talking about this whole time. Also Ford was sucked into the portal and has been wanderin' around for the last thirty years and we're trying to rescue him."

"No foreplay, just gettin' right to it," Stan comments drily. "Direct. Forceful even."

"Ahh," Fiddleford says nervously.

"Don't worry," she says, throwing her shoe at Stan and hitting him solidly in the side. "We've done everything we can to make the Monster Portal safer to use than it was when you got your head sucked into it and you saw terribly traumatizing stuff-"

"AHH?"

"-and you've already given us the best way out of using the Monster Portal, which we never would have thought of without your help! Fiddleford, you're amazing, don't scream, please don't scream," Ripley says, wagging her fingers.

"Wait, so you can get another genius to fix the portal for us?" Stan asks, squinting over at them. "I thought you said-"

"Well, I mean, I said I know of two that can help us and the one's in this room and the other is not someone you'll probably be... happy to see?"

"Are you sayin' I did this to my own fool self!?" Fiddleford all but shrieks.

"Looks like that's the case, yeah," Stan grunts, and Ripley throws her other shoe at him. "SERIOUSLY, cut that out!"

"Everybody makes mistakes!" Ripley says, pointing aggressively at Stan despite turning to face Fiddleford, who's covering his face with his hands and practically vibrating off the bed. "Look, everybody makes mistakes, okay? Stan and me, we made mistakes, we make mistakes all damn day! And Ford- trust me, that guy's all about mistakes. Nobody alive doesn't make mistakes. We're not gonna judge you for what happened in the past because we don't know what we would or wouldn't do, and we don't want you to judge Past You, because Past You didn't know what would happen,
okay?"

There's a knocking at the door and everyone freezes.

"Hey, we're getting noise complaints," someone says through the door. "Can you guys keep it down in there?"

"KEEP IT T'YERSELF, WE'RE HAVIN' US AN EMOTIONAL BREAKTHROUGH!"
Fiddleford yells back. Stan starts wheezing with laughter, his face turning tomato-red.

There's a pause.

"Just... stop yelling, please. Other guests are sleeping. Assholes."

Ripley buries her face in her pillow, clutching it to her head with both hands.

"We need to leave a nice tip for these people when we leave," she says, muffled.

"Like hell we do!" Stan says immediately.

"So are we not goin' to portalize over t'Indiana or are we doin'... that thing?" Fiddleford asks, after a moment.

"Yeah, who's this other scientist you've been keepin' from me?" Stan demands, and Ripley gives him a flat glare.

"You're not going to fight him when he gets here? You promise not to fight him when he's here even though I'm sure you'll want to?"

"Wow, that's a really specific promise to make, what's the-"

Ripley coughs loudly into her hand.

"That- that was just a cough, you didn't say anything," Stan points out.

"Ahem." Ripley kicks her feet a little. "So. Funny story! Guess who I happen to be friends with?"

"Is it someone outside of this room?" Fiddleford asks.

"Yep. For the purposes of this game, it's someone outside of this room."

"And it's someone I'm gonna want to fight as soon as I see him," Stan adds.


"And it's a scientist on par with Ford and Fidds here," Stan says.

"Yep."

Stan stares at her. She grins slowly, watching as he starts to figure it out. "...no."

"Eh? Eh?" Fiddleford demands, looking between them. "What? Who?"

"Doctor Ricardo Felipe Sanchez," Ripley says, giving Stan the finger guns.

"How!? How do you know that clown!?"
"Rick Sanchez," Fiddleford repeats, looking down at his hands.

"He went to college with Ford, which I'm sure you already know, Stanley." Ripley says pointedly. Stan cringes, looking horrified. "And yeah, Rick's the type to kiss and tell. Apparently."

"But how do you know him?" Stan asks, and Ripley shrugs.

"It's a big multiverse, Stan, you meet a lot of people, and apparently the Sanchezes all got together to make it easy for themselves. Don't ask me how anything works, I'm just one of the idiots who gets taken along for the ride sometimes," she sighs, massaging her temples. "Oh boy. Okay. I'll call him tomorrow- it's late on the East Coast where he is- and see if he'd be interested in comin' by the Shack, and if he can't then, it's fine, I'll just go with plan A like I was gonna in the first place."

"We threw Plan A out! Plan A involves getting picked up by the Feds and thrown into Guantanamo!" Stan snaps.

"I don't care about the Feds or Guantanamo," Ripley says, exasperated. "I can break out of a human prison, Stan! I'm more worried about the horrible monsters and interdimensional cops who are gonna home in on me opening up a portal so close to a passage to the Hub Realm!"

She shuts her mouth, pressing her fingers over her lips as she takes in both of their horrified expressions.

"Monsters?" Fiddleford echoes faintly.

"SCIFI COPS?" Stan cries.

"But look, I can probably fight my way out of most situations- so- so don't worry, guys, even if I get caught I'm not gonna like, die, unless I get eaten or they recognize me from the wanted posters-" Ripley repeats softly, blinking. "Sweet shitting sarsaparilla!" Fiddleford wails, clutching at his beard.

"What he said!" Stan agrees, folding his arms. "Are you seriously still trying to say this is a good plan?"

"Sweet shitting sarsaparilla?" Ripley repeats softly, blinking. "Stan, I just... Ford's way will definitely mean us getting caught and the portal wrecking itself, the way it did when he turned it on the last time."

"So what's wrong with McGucket's idea? That was a solid idea! Nobody died of McGucket's idea!" Stan grabs her arm. "And when exactly did you envision telling us you might die doing this, Ripley?"

"Oh, come on, you know even if I failed you could do it Ford's way and get the portal working," Ripley argues, and he stares at her, his face doing something complicated that she can't read. "It would be a delay, it wouldn't mean never getting Ford back, it just-"

"And what am I gonna tell Ford then?" Stan asks quietly. "Hey, bro, welcome home, you missed your wife, she died failing to help bring you back."

"Fellas, let's just take a moment-" Fiddleford says, in the horrible silence after that sentence.

"You guys get something to eat," Ripley says woodenly, tossing her wallet onto the bed. "I'm going for a walk."
"Ripley," Stan starts, drumming his fingers on his knees. "Leave the portal generator."

She bristles immediately, before yanking it out of her bag and dropping it on the bed.

(Stan's waiting up when she stumbles in hours later, and it would be funny if McGucket wasn't sleeping fitfully on the other bed, bags of takeout from a fried chicken place on the nightstand. "Good thing you didn't have your sword," Stan mutters, looking her over. "You get somebody to buy you drinks or what?" She snorts and reassures him that she and Ford know how to get free drinks, they're professionals. He watches unhappily as she kicks off her shoes, untidily throwing her clothing around the room as she shambles toward the bed, and hands over her Mabel Sweater. She needs his help pulling it on. "Can't believe you got wasted," he mutters, and she scoffs at him, wasted is nothing like this, wasted is blacking out and waking up weird places, okay, this is nothing. She flops down on top of the covers, the hood pulled up over her head. She confesses: never. She was never going to tell Stan that Indiana might mean dying. She's already fucking everything up. She didn't want him to expect her to fuck this up, too.)

(You're not fucking everything up, he tells her, and she doesn't believe him because if that were true they'd have Ford back. Now you're just bein stupid, he tells her, and pulls the hood lower over her face and wraps an arm around her. Go to sleep in Sweater Town, you'll feel better in the morning.)

(She wakes up to gray light filtering through the curtains, Fiddleford and Stan snoring like a chorus of bullfrogs from hell, her face mashed against one broad, fuzzy shoulder, and Stan must've been on to something about Sweater Town, because she does feel better.)

It's not too awkward of a day, once Ripley gets Fiddleford to compromise and wear flipflops so he doesn't get kicked out of anywhere with a no shoes policy. They go and buy some Hawaiian-style tourist shirts so Ripley and Fiddleford can match Stan, and Ripley apologizes to Fiddleford for making him feel awkward the night before. They go to Denny's and get Grand Slams and not only does Fiddleford win Ripley a wine-colored crushed-velvet teddy bear out of the claw machine, he does it with his beard. They sip coffee and Stan frets over figuring out how to make enough money to beat Mabel in their little wager until Ripley stares him down and asks him why the heck he isn't planning on just letting that little girl win when it's not like she's going to legally take ownership of his business if he loses their bet. Stan can't think of a good answer to that one.

Fiddleford grabs onto her while they're wandering around downtown, burying his face in her side as he asks her to check something for him.

"Sure, Fidds, what?" Ripley asks, already picking up on Stan's unasked-for nickname. Stan takes a few steps before he realizes they've stopped.

"Real or not real spooky-face clown feller starin' at me from the middle of traffic?"

Ripley looks.

"Well, I don't see any clowns, but I know from personal experience I can beat the shit out of thirty-five clowns at once," Ripley says, patting his back.

"Why would you do that to some poor innocent clowns?" Stan asks, scowling.

"They were trying to kill me!" Ripley protests, before pausing. "And technically they were nuns, but, eh. Nuns, clowns, same thing."

"I'm tryin' to decide if this is a story I wanna git told," Fiddleford says, after a moment.

"Ah, I'll probably tell you after Ford gets home, I don't wanna tell it more'n once," Ripley replies,
smiling. "You still see a clown around here?"

"Nah, he must've skedoodled," he says, and she nods.

"Well, let me know if you see anything else out of the ordinary." She meets Stan's gaze, and he rolls his eyes.

They find out there's a tourbus that'll take them to a local attraction- a fancy mansion that also has a vineyard with wine tasting! They're totally doing it. Ripley calls the Shack while they're on the bus, but nobody picks up.

"Do you think the kids are okay?" she asks Stan, and he nods emphatically.

"They have Abuelita lookin' after'em, trust me. If anything did happen, she would ninja around fixing it. Don't worry."

"Gonna worry," she says, and he sighs noisily. They get to the mansion-slash-vineyard and Ripley remembers that her phone can take pictures; she takes a picture of Stan standing next to the entrance, and one of Fiddleford with a tiny wineglass in each hand yelling, "PINKIES OUT, FELLERS!" and one of Stan and Fiddleford playing a game of checkers on the enormous stone checkerboard set into the lavish gardens. She texts that one to Tate; he replies with a tiny picture of a thumb's up and a single word, "fun." She gets Stan to take a picture of her fondling a bunch of grapes (Ford'll think it's funny) and Fiddleford points out a large fancy-looking painting of an old-timey guy who is definitely not Nikola Tesla.

"Take a picture and tell Ford it's ya'll and Nikola Tesla," he says, and Ripley shows him how to hold the button while she and Stan stand on either side of the painting, pointing and making shit-eating grins at the camera. "Oh wow, this's gonna drive'im crazier'n a shithouse rat at an LSD factory."

"That's so specific," Ripley says, snickering. "We should figure out a way to frame this picture."

"I bet Dipper can figure out how to do that," Stan points out, grinning down at the picture on her phone.

"Speaking of which," Ripley says, saving the photo before she dials up the Shack again.

"Mabel's House of Mystery, Mabel speaking!" chirps the voice on the other end.

"Oh, good, hey munchkin!" Ripley says, perking up. "Ya'll didn't answer the phone earlier, did you get busy around the Shack?"

"Oh, um... yes. Yes, we got busy."

"Oh... kay. Good, that's good. You guys stayin' out of trouble, baby?"

"Yep!" Ripley narrows her eyes- it's a little quick on the draw to sound totally innocent, but surely the kids would tell her if they needed help, right?

"You guys treatin' Abuelita nice?"

"Yeah, she's so cute," Mabel sighs. "I love her."

"Aw, that's good, I'm glad you like her. We went to a mansion with a winery on it, did you guys do anything fun today?"

"Um, haha, no, just... workin'! As usual! That's us!"
"Okay, honey, is there something you wanna tell me?" Ripley asks, blinking.

"Uhhh nope gotta run love you bye!"

"They burned the house down, didn't they," Stan states grimly.

"I think your phone wouldn't work if they did that," Ripley says, sighing. "Soos and Abuelita are both responsible adults-

Stan gives her an extremely pointed look.

"Soos and Abuelita are both adults and Abuelita's responsible," Ripley corrects, rolling her eyes. "At least one person would have told us if something bad was happening, right?"

"Riiight. Come on, Fidds, we gotta catch the bus back," Stan huffs.

They're back at the hotel when Stan reveals that his pockets are full of corks and spoons stolen out of the mansion's little bistro cafe. Fiddleford uses the spoons to jam out a little song for them. All in all, it's a good day.

Ripley calls Sanchez after dinner and it goes to voicemail.

"You were right about not turning on Ford's stupid Monster Portal," she says quietly. "Call me back when you get this, I have a shockingly huge favor to ask of you."

They spend the rest of the evening at the hotel pool, relaxing on loungers in the muggy summer moonlight, and Fiddleford and Stan take turns pointing out constellations but the only one Ripley recognizes is the Dipper one.

They go to bed and nobody gets to sleep, so they turn on a movie and drowse.

"S'weird not to be up all night workin' in the lab," Stan mutters.

"S'really weird doin' fun adults-only stuff all day," Ripley points out, yawning. She has no idea what's going on in the movie- is it Sherlock Holmes but handsome and fightey? Maybe?

"Heck, I think it's pretty weird the way that yeller-eyed fella kept followin' us around all day," Fiddleford admits, totally enthralled by the Handsome Sherlock Holmes movie.

Stan tenses, and Ripley sits all the way up, so fast the Mabel-Hood falls off her head.

"Yellow-eyed fella?" she repeats. "When'd you see that?"

"Oh, all day," Fiddleford says, before he notices her face. "Hey, what's the matter, Ripley?"

She swallows, tugging the hood back up over her face. "Nothing. Nothing, just... hey, Stan, we might want to check out the Ripleymobile before we head back home, see if there's anything wrong with the brakes, that sorta thing."

"I was just thinking the same thing," Stan mutters darkly.

"Wait, was- was that feller real?" Fiddleford asks tentatively.

"Hey, if he was he's gettin' an ass-whuppin," Ripley says, trying a smile. "And if he wasn't real, well, I still want to know if you see somebody like that again, Fidds. Even if it's just, like, a dream or something. Okay?"
"Okay," he repeats, getting distracted by what would have to be a very distracting display of Handsome Sherlock Holmes if you were into that sort of thing.

Stan and Ripley stay awake long after Fiddleford falls asleep, and she tells him they have some stuff they should talk about when they're alone.

He tells her he figured as much.

(The ride home is uneventful, even though they stop twice as often as they did on their ride up to check the tires and check to see if anything looks... damaged. Nothing is.)

(Ripley walks up to the porch and frowns, her head tilted to one side. "I feel like this door should be more... to the right," she says, frowning. "Does this look normal to you, Stan?)"

"What makes sense about that statement, Ripley? Do you think the kids got a carpenter out here and moved the door three inches just to screw around?" he asks.

"No... I suppose not," she admits. "That would be ridiculous."

"Yeah, unless it were one'a them cursed doors ya git downtown sometimes," Fiddleford adds.

They stare silently for a few moments.

"I think I woulda noticed if my door was cursed before now," Stan says finally.)

(The kids are ecstatic to see them, even if they only made a single dollar in profits. Stan has no idea how they did that badly, doesn't want to know how, but when Ripley tries to alleviate the mood by showing off the bear Fiddleford won for her the kids and Soos and Abuelita all seem to agree that Mabel still won. Luckily, Stan doesn't have to cede ownership of the Shack to her. DOUBLE luckily, Ripley and Fiddleford get to watch the filming of the Stan Wrong Song.)

Chapter End Notes

*The other framed photo of a lady is Ada Lovelace, because of course Ford would.
Sometimes he wakes up and he's Old Man until someone starts calling him by name. Today he wakes up and he's Fiddleford, because it was Fiddleford who had Amanda.

Today he remembers Amanda. Not... not her face, not her hair or the smell of her, not how they met or how long they dated or what the wedding was like, not the household they shared in Palo Alto even though he knows (today, he knows just as well he might not know this tomorrow) that she is all of those things, that he should know those things. He knows the name, Amanda. He knows that if he cannot remember these things that there is no one else he can ask, because Amanda's dead, and Tate was too young to know any of this before she died, and it wasn't Tate's job to remember.

He remembers her name, Amanda, and he remembers that they had a joke but not what the joke was, and he remembers that part of the joke was that they sometimes called their quiet, even-tempered toddler Mr. Spock, although he forgets the name of the TV show and he forgets how to say the nickname, all he has is that she was Amanda and they had a joke and she was his and she is dead.

It hurts to remember. It hurts to remember just this and no more, and know that it's his own fault, that it was his own choice (why? why?) to scoop Amanda and Tate and Ford and everything and everyone he loved out of his own head. His fingers itch to grab something he isn't sure exists, for a moment he thinks to himself it wouldn't hurt if I didn't remember, and he thinks no, that's what caused this whole dang mess.

He feels a moment of rage- none of this would have happened if you'd listened to me, you pompous ass, you coward, you obsessive bastard- and he feels vaguely certain who he's angry at, but he's not sure what it was Ripley's friend Stan's brother Ford did. He feels a moment of guilt, because it's been a few days and Ripley's given up asking him if he remembers Ford, but everything he feels about Ford is sharp and hot and hurtful and he doesn't know if he can reconcile that with the beloved spouse she's searching for, the lost brother, the oldest and best of friends she's so sure he should remember in Ford's place.

Everywhere around him is a memory, even after they cleaned the junk out. Sitting on the couch with Ford, talking about- something. Science, probably. Ford staggering out of the en-suite bathroom, bleeding from one eye and pretending he doesn't know why. The colored light from the window turning Ford's brown hair plum-purple, even while they argued about- something.

It's better not to hurt them with what he remembers- the little boy who sometimes says something that makes Fiddleford feel like a kid in college again, the little girl who throws her strength around to raise her family up, the old man he knows he's "known" three times as long as he knew Ford but who he only remembers as a vague entity in a suit before this summer, the woman who came in and immediately started looking for shadow-devils when he saw them in the corners of the room (thought he saw, he reminds himself, because there was nothing.) They include him in things; they ask him questions and pay attention to his answers. He didn't know how long it had been since someone had done that until they started doing it.

Fiddleford stands next to Stan in the kitchen, watching out the window as Ripley throws the kids around the yard, and he's not at all sure what they're supposed to be doing but it looks like they're having fun, anyway.

"Mugs're in the top left," Stan mutters, and Fiddleford realizes he's talking to him.

"Eh? What?" he asks, confused by the sudden statement.

"Oh. Y-yeah." Fiddleford grabs a mug and pours himself some coffee, his hands barely shaking at all. He gets a spoon- one of the fancy new ones from the winery- and gets the tin of sugar out. He's aware that someone missing as many teeth as he is probably doesn't need a whole lot of sugar, but it's a big spoon, so lots of sugar it is. He catches Stan smirking at him as he's stirring it in. "What? Wh-what's so funny?"

"You know, at first, it was like... I'd better leave everything the way it was, so it wouldn't look like I'd wrecked his "system" or whatever by the time he got home. And then I got lazy, I guess." Stan sips his coffee, turning to look at Ripley and the kids again- this time, the kids are throwing each other around the yard while Ripley cheers from the side, occasionally stepping in to correct someone's stance. "S'funny to realize that sugar's been in the same tin in the same spot in the same side-cupboard for what, thirty-six years?"

Fiddleford brings the mug to his lips, stops, lowers it. "What?"

"You know where everything is if it's in here or in his room," Stan says, before pulling out a frying pan and a mixing bowl. "It's funny. I woulda never thought of myself as some kinda... creature of habit before you got here. But here I am, leaving all his shit in the same place he left it."

"I don't remember him," Fiddleford says, frowning as Stan reaches into the fridge. "Not... not the way ya'll want, just-"

"McGucket. I couldn't give two shits if you remember him or not. Whatever went down between the two'a you, that's something he's gonna have to fix, not me." Stan stands, arms full of milk and eggs and butter. "Pass me a whisk, willya?"

Fiddleford grabs a whisk and passes it over, watching as Stan starts making pancake batter. "...he loved pancakes."

"Everybody loves my pancakes," Stan says, giving him a look that dares him to disagree.

"Well, I reckon I'd have to test that theory," Fiddleford replies, and Stan stares at him for a moment before a very small grin tugs at the corner of his mouth.

"Yeah, well, prepare to have your mind blown. Again."

"You're an awful man," Fiddleford remarks into his mug, and Stan just chuckles at him from the stove.

"Hey, I may be an awful man, but I'm also the best-lookin' guy who's ever made you pancakes in his underwear."

Fiddleford narrows his eyes a little, before shrugging. "Well, as long as we're gonna be sharin' uncomfortable candid stories with one another, no, you ain't. I lived with Ford, who also made pancakes when the mood struck."

"Ahaha, gross, it's gross because I'm imagining you and my brother and it's weird," Stan laughs. "And it's been decades since I've had anything like a normal relationship with him so I'm grossed out by the idea of anyone being intimate with him, even if it's just platonic friend shit."

Fiddleford stands up. "Are you feelin' alright? You're... kinda pullin' a Pioneer Day with the weird... confessional tangentializin'."
"Yeah, it is pretty weird," Stan agrees cheerfully. "But the kids have been lookin' at me funny all morning so I'm gonna go out on a limb here and say they probably did something to me to make me incapable of lying. Not-sorry, but you're guaranteed to hear a lot of gross personal information about me today that nobody asked for."

"Oh," Fiddleford says, frowning. "Does Ripley know?"

"Nah, I'm gonna let that be a total surprise, because it hasn't occurred to me how my actions might affect other people."

"Right then! Well, breakfast should be interestin'," Fiddleford says, after a moment.

The pancakes- "Stancakes," to use the terminology Ripley and the kids insist on- are pretty good, fairly fluffy, mostly taste like the margarine and maple syrup that get slathered on everybody's. Mostly, Stan lets the kids talk, staring down at a newspaper that Fiddleford saw him read earlier so he can avoid talking too much. It's not a bad plan for someone who's finding himself incapable of deception.

"So, Stan, you got any plans today?" Ripley asks, glancing over with a warm smile.

"Well, see, as a small business I file my taxes quarterly so I'm gonna have to take most of the day for that. Normally I'd just take a couple hours to do it and then take the rest of the day off, but I'm guilty of massive tax fraud so it'll probably take a while," Stan says cheerfully.

Ripley stares at him, letting her fork dangle in her hand for a moment. "I... see. So... anyway, uh, I was thinking about heading into town today, see about hiring that glazer we got to fix the kitchen window to come around and replace the, uh, the bad windows."

"You mean the windows that look like that monster who kept trying to kill you and my brother and caused you massive psychological trauma? Good riddance, I have no idea why Ford would build his house with that but I'm pretty worried it ain't gonna be for a good reason," Stan says. Fiddleford tugs on his beard, glancing at the twins and the way they're giving each other uneasy looks- yeah, that's the face of guilt. Heck, he doesn't even remember raising Tate and he recognizes the face a kid makes when they know they done wrong. Must be some kinda universal constant.

"Oh... cool. Cool. Yeah. So... uh." Ripley flounders, before putting her fork down. "Hey, you know what, I'm pretty full, I'm gonna head out of here and get started, you, uh, you have fun with your tax fraud stuff."

"You stay safe, we'd probably have a real rough time if anything happened to you," Stan tells her, waving her out. Ripley blinks, looking terribly uncomfortable before she edges towards the door.

"Thank... you?" She flees before he can say anything else.

"Well, I better start getting ready for work so I don't miss my daily bowel movement. When you get to be my age, kids, regularity is like gold," Stan says, patting a horrified Dipper on the shoulder as he passes on his way out of the kitchen.

"Truthfulness is always the answer, huh?" Dipper asks, shoving his sister.

"It's better this way!" Mabel hisses, shoving him back before turning doe eyes on Fiddleford. "Right, Mr. McGucket?"

"Well that ain't a conversation I'm qualified to have!" Fiddleford admits, cackling nervously. "Say, kids, d'you know where your uncle keeps the art supplies? I had an idea I wanted to take down afore
I- forget-

Mabel is all of a sudden way, way into his personal space, beaming like she's just won a prize, tugging him out of his chair and leading him out of the kitchen. "Come with me and prepare to have your mind blown. Uh, again."

"Wow, Mabel," Dipper mutters from behind them.

Half a dozen blueprints later, Fiddleford realizes two things: one (and this is just a guess) is that coming up with designs for giant killer robots must not be the huge sign of incurable mental instability he's been worried it is, considering the number of drawings Mabel's making of herself as a kaiju fighting each of the new creations he comes up with. The second is that his favorite color must be the reddish orange of autumn leaves-sunsets on the coast-sunrise on the red cedar trees in the peaceful part of the forest. Mabel's been encouraging him to focus on what the robots look like from an aesthetic point of view, and he has to admit that coloring in his designs does have a certain soothing effect.

"Blammo!" Mabel says proudly, slapping a finished drawing down onto the table. Fiddleford adjusts his glasses to peer down at it- it's not to scale, can't be, because the Unicorn-Vampiretaur Robot is only meant to be fifty feet tall and in the drawing Mabel and the U-V.taur Robot are both enormous enough that Mabel included the Seattle Space Needle for reference, including what Fiddleford assumes is the rest of Seattle, engulfed in flames.

"Mabelzilla appears to be immune to the death ray," he says seriously, tapping his chin with a crayon. "What's this glowy thingamahickey around her?"

"That's my magical forcefield that activates every time I'm in danger," Mabel says proudly. "It's infinitely powerful and reflective! That's why I used glitter and also why the city's on fire."

"The addition of magic into this scientific nightmare complicates things," he says, handing over his finished blueprint. It's the Gobblewonker, but instead of green it's orange, instead of flippers it has a bunch of buff human arms (including a list of materials to replicate the look of human skin over the machinery) and it also shoots a rainbow of lasers out of its mouth. "I'm gonna have to send out Gobble-Two while I'm designin' somethin' with magic in mind, even though the magic field means I'm sacrificin' another city."

"Ooh, rainbow-lasers," Mabel says, taking the drawing with a huge smile. He nods to himself, then sets to work creating a giant humanoid Hunky Knight Paladin robot who has magic armor and is too handsome for Mabelzilla to want to punch in the face.

He waits until he's done drawing the fancy skull-and-roses design on Hunky Paladin's armor before he remembers to ask something. "Hey, what was your uncle sayin' about some kinda... evil window that was hurtin' your Auntie?"

"Oh," Mabel says, glancing up. "Well... I dunno, to be honest, but one of the windows upstairs scared Aunt Ripley when she moved in. It's a big triangle and I guess she thought it looks like it has an eyeball, and it scared her."

"the room is dark but for the light of candles, and Stanford's in an awkward lotus position, wearing slacks and a trenchcoat indoors like a damn fool, surrounded by little statues and pictures of that cussed yellow triangle, and when he opens his eyes they look like a cat's

Fiddleford shivers, his right foot tapping against the floor hard enough to jostle his knee against the table.
"Well, it's... a good thing she's gittin' 'em replaced, then," he says.

"Yep," Mabel says, patiently waiting until he moves his knee before she tries to use her glitter on the next picture.

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Mabel and Dipper go outside to play with Mabel's little pig. Fiddleford, after using some push pins to stick his and Mabel's drawings to the walls of his/Ford's room and a few minutes of feeling like a puppet with cut strings, decides to go outside too. He doesn't remember ever watching Tate play with another kid at this age, but he's afraid that it was because it never happened, not that he doesn't remember it. He sighs and runs his fingers through his beard, wondering absentmindedly when the last time he shaved was, if he should try to shave anytime soon, if he even remembers what to do-

-he spots the blue car Ripley drives coming in from the end of the road, and calls to the kids to stay clear of the driveway with their game. By the thunderous expression on her face and the echoing slam of her car door, it might be a good idea to steer clear of Ripley, too.

"E-everything hunky dory?" Fiddleford asks as she stomps her way up to the porch.

"It's fine, I guess," she mutters, throwing herself down onto the couch on Stan's back porch. "Except I went to three glass repair places in town today and as soon as I explained what we needed they all said they'd need to do an evaluation appraisal look-over thing, and that nobody, NOBODY, can do the appraisal sooner than Monday, even the same-day repair place we used last time, even though today is THURSDAY. And I was like, yeah but what if my window is broken and I need it fixed? They told me where to buy a tarp and duct tape! I got half a mind to put a fist through'em and be done with it!"

"Through the repairman or the window?" Fiddleford asks slowly. Ripley considers the question.

"Window. It'd get dicey if I got arrested." No sooner she says this that the sheriff's patrolcar pulls up and parks messily right next to Ripley's vehicle. She snorts a laugh as the narrow-eyed look Fiddleford gives her. "Hey, I didn't actually do anything, they're not here for me. Probably."

Upon seeing the car, the kids freeze, look at one another, and scurry inside past Ripley and Fiddleford.

"Ooh, young criminals," Ripley says, laughing as they go. "They sure do take after their Grunkles, don't they."

"From the limited data I got at my disposal I'd say so," Fiddleford agrees, bemused. "Maybe a little after their Auntie too, I reckon."

"Haha, aw, shucks, Fidds," Ripley snickers. She peers over at the vending machine, wrinkling her nose a little. "Not that I'm complaining about the free soda situation, but I wish Stan stocked Sprite."

"Stuff'll rot yer teeth," he says, and she flops her head back onto the couch cushion, making a wavy hand motion.

"Hey, Mr. McGucket, Mrs. Pines," Soos says, popping his head out the back door.

"Soos, sweetheart, you're caught up on the whole... Stan Pines brothers mix up, right?" Ripley asks, sitting her head up with a tired, jerky motion. "Right? I know we talked a tiny bit but I was depending on the kids to tell you most-"
"Uh, yeah, haha, it's kinda weird and I'm gonna have to rewrite a chapter of my fanfiction now, but I know it's Not-Stan you're married to," the man admits, blushing slightly.

"Soooo... you know it's probably more appropriate that you stop calling me Mrs. Pines and start calling me Aunt Ripley," she says, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes ma'am Mrs. Aunt Ripley," he says, sounding awfully close to crying from Fiddleford's hearing. She nods encouragingly.

"You was sayin', buddy?"

"Just that I fixed the bathroom up for you, Mr. McGucket," he says, sniffing. "A-and I like all the anime mobile-suit drawings you and Mabel put up in your room, they're pretty good."

"What's an anime?" Fiddleford asks slowly.

"Yeah, what's an anime?" Ripley repeats, blinking. Any danger of the tall young man crying evaporates immediately as he's lit up from within, like the question has awakened a higher calling.

"Doods. I have so much to show you." Soos goes into a pitched explanation of what anime is and the various genres- to be fair, it does sound very interesting when it's being explained by someone who clearly adores the medium. He's just starting to suggest they arrange to visit his Abuelita's house to watch some films when Stan shambles past, looking vaguely dismayed and untidy. "Hey, Mr. Pines, you okay? What did the sheriff want?"

"Uh, yeah, m'fine," Stan mutters, straightening himself out. "I have no idea, Soos, why aren't you workin'? Come on, let's... go empty out the suggestion box'r something."

Ripley waits until the two of them are out of earshot before she nudges Fiddleford. "They're a couple of weirdos, it's adorable."

"H'yeah, it's somethin' alright," Fiddleford agrees. "Hey, kin I ask you somethin'?"

"Always, Fidds. Let's get a snack, though," she says easily, walking him back into the house and through to the kitchen. From here they can see Stan and Soos stroll out, only to be stopped by Dipper and Mabel. Mabel's got some kind of big brown box in her arms. Ripley digs around the freezer until she finds some popsicles, the kind with little riddles and jokes on the sticks. She offers one to Fiddleford, and he can't remember how he feels about grape flavor so he accepts it. Whatever the light yellow flavor is- Fiddleford wants to say pina colada, even though he's not sure what that tastes like- Ripley seems like she enjoys it.

"So yer friend the scientist. The... other scientist," Fiddleford begins, trying to keep up so the purple doesn't start dripping onto his hand.

"Sanchez? Wha'd'bout him?" Ripley asks around a mouthful of popsicle.

"Did he say anything 'bout helpin' y'all with yer engineerin' issue yet?" Fiddleford asks nervously, and Ripley shakes her head.

"No, he hasn't called me back yet. But he's a pretty busy guy, I don't hear from him most weeks anyway. Why?"

"S-supposin' you got another engineerin' friend who might know a thing'r two about a thing or two," Fiddleford says softly, biting off the end of his popsicle before it can make a mess.
"Oh," Ripley says, sounding surprised. She looks like she wants to say more, but there's yellow sugar melting onto her hand, so she takes a minute or two to eat the rest of her popsicle, looking thoughtful. "Well... I mean, if you want to take a look at my little portal generator first, that might be a good idea. Get comfortable with it. I'm worried that being down there might, I dunno, make you remember some of the bad stuff in a bad way, and I'd rather you just be happy and regular like you been."

She sighs. "Plus I think we ran into a snag. It's all well and good that we ain't gonna use the biggun for an actual portal opener, but we gotta turn it on a little bit to run the search function. I'm not sure if I'm prepared to knock the power out for the entire town, even if I think we could get it done in under fifteen minutes. But! Let's not get ahead of ourselves." She chomps down onto the little wooden stick, holding it in her teeth as she stands. "Wai' righ' here, I'm get Sparky."

"Sparky?" Fiddleford asks, but she's gone. He glances down at his popsicle stick. Cookies and scream. He turns the stick over. What's a ghost's favorite ice cream flavor?

"That's objectively terrible," he sighs to himself as he waits for her return. She comes within a minute or two, a small toolkit in one hand and something that looks deceptively like a hefty metal flashlight in the other.

"Open'er up," she says, grinning. "I took the power core out so it can't accidentally turn on while you're playin' with it, and Fiddleford, just do whatever you want to do. Take it apart, look at it, move things around. You can't break it worse than I can fix it, and, hey, even if you do, I got a pretty good idea where I can get help to make a new one."

The next twenty minutes are... well. If four or five days and nights living in Ford's old house brought back memories of Ford, being up to his wrists in a tiny miracle of a machine bring back memories of Fiddleford- young, happy, full of promise. Ripley mostly watches, eating a second popsicle as she does, handing over tools when he asks for them by name and answering what few questions he has. Fiddleford looks up at her, her mouth stained orange, and he smiles.

"You an' Ford built this?" he asks. She draws herself up, beaming.

"So this is a good story, alright? That was mine, just a sword that I used and maintained, and see, Ford had this crazy idea to turn it into a portal opener, this about eight years back, so-"

It is a pretty good story, mostly because Fiddleford doesn't have to listen too closely to pick up the key notes. He rolls a tiny pick in his fingers. This is going to work.

The kids spend all of dinner chattering excitedly about falling into the Bottomless Pit out back. Apparently it's actually bottomless, except for when it's got a bottom, but the bottom's about four feet up and seven feet to the side of the pit itself, where they landed, and where Stan landed the second time about a minute later. The kids and Stan go into a little more detail than Fiddleford's comfortable with, describing the endless, featureless falling.

"Ooh, glad I missed that one," Ripley says heartily, digging into her third helping of box mashed potatoes, canned peas in "butter" sauce, and what Stan is insistent on calling Salisbury Brown Meat. She hasn't yet noticed that both of the twins have started spooning peas onto her plate while she's not looking; Stan has noticed, but Fiddleford's also spotted him egging the kids on by managing to do it from across the table.

This family really is made for one another, he thinks to himself, catching Dipper's eye as he turns his
fork into a very simple catapult and launches peas directly onto Ripley's plate while she turns to Mabel and says something about a Sev'ral Timez concert the window repairman told her about today. Fiddleford's never seen such wholehearted admiration from a kid Dipper's age before now.

Stan slams a fist on the table, startling everybody. "We have a winner!" he roars, clapping Fiddleford on the back.

"Yeah we do!" Mabel crows.

"This guy!" Dipper adds, pointing at Fiddleford. Ripley blinks, looking confused- happy, but deeply confused.

"What are you goofballs talking about?" she asks, scooping the peas up on her fork and putting them in her mouth with a puzzled smile. Stan and the kids go absolutely bananas, whooping and banging on the table and chanting, GUCK-ET-GUCK-ET-GUCK-ET. Fiddleford shrugs and grins when she catches his eye.

They play a board game together, Necronomiconopoly, which Fiddleford is sure can't be appropriate for children. The kids fight over who gets to be the racecar until Stan takes the racecar, since it is his game. (Is it? Fiddleford has vague memories of playing this game before. Maybe it's Ford's?) They spend nearly two frustrating hours on it before they figure out that Stan, as the bank, can't possibly be allowed to play, and Ripley's little token (sailboat wrapped in tentacles) ends up getting permanently stuck in the Mountains of Madness (do not pass Go, do not collect three hundred dollars) because Mabel wedged it in there just a little too hard.

They wait until the kids are in bed, drinking coffee and talking about nothing in particular. It feels like a ritual to Fiddleford- easy, comforting, stupid jokes and casual affection in place of chanting, Stan's slippers and Ripley's hooded sweater in place of robes- and he wonders if they know how they sound to an outsider. He wonders if he's right to feel like an outsider at all- they've tried so hard, even Stan, curmudgeon that he is- to make him feel like he's a part of whatever this is. He wonders if he's right to feel this nervous about what they're going to do tonight.

Stan tries to teach Fiddleford how to play poker- it doesn't really go well, because he can't keep the numbers and the shapes and the colors straight in his head, even when he's looking at the cards in his hands- but Ripley, it seems, is the same way. They end up coaxing Stan into dealing Three Card Monty, and he becomes louder and louder the more they play- the Mr. Mystery persona at his finest, teasing Ripley mercilessly when she doesn't pick the right card, flirting shamelessly with Fiddleford when he wins.

"Stan, you would have loved Lottocron 9," Ripley tells him, making a face as she sips at room-temperature coffee that's been sitting out for a while now. "You would have probably lived like a king there."

"Yeah? Tell me about Lottocron 9, Blondie the Great and Terrible," he grins, his eyes dancing behind his glasses. For a moment Fiddleford can forget that this is an old man in his underwear instead of a young man in the Mystery Suit. Ripley snorts at the nickname, at whatever in-joke he's invoking. Fiddleford's used to hearing other people laugh at some joke that's flown over his head, usually at his expense. It's hard to remember that this isn't like that, that they aren't like the people he's been around or seen these past few decades.

"Okay, so get this, it's actually called the Gambling Dimension, and everyone gambles," Ripley says, putting up a finger. "But get this, man. Everybody gambles. Everything. All the time. For every reason. Who am I gettin' married to? Let me just put on a blindfold and walk until I hit my new spouse."
"To be fair, that's how some people do it here, too," Stan says, winking at Fiddleford.

"And do you think anybody plays it safe by making sure they make this decision in a room with only people they really, really want to marry? No, Stan. Random people. People who only got there because they flipped a coin to turn left instead'a right. Everything is literally a gamble." She waggles her eyebrows at them. "So you can imagine, Ford and I did... not gamble most of the time. Ford and I did very well for ourselves, which is why we had to leave in a hurry, we didn't really pretend to be gambling either. Ford thought it was beneath him."

Stan barks a laugh, shuffling his cards with a fancy dealer's move.

"Let me guess. Poindexter was all, *I never gamble. In a bet there is a fool and a thief!*" Stan says, in such a perfect imitation of Ford's voice and face that for a moment Fiddleford and Ripley both startle back from him. Fiddleford's heart is racing- *here he's here he can't be here we haven't got him yet who is this who is he* and Ripley's hands are shaking so badly that she's got cold coffee all over them.

"Jesus Christ, Stan," she says, her voice small. "No wonder you got away with it."

"I always got away with it," Stan says, still too far into his cheerful carnival Barker to see how badly shaken she is. Fiddleford tries to inhale slowly- this isn't 1982, there's nothing to forget, the world never ended- and Ripley stands, swiping at the spilled coffee with a napkin before she stands to put her mug in the sink.

"S-stan, I think if'n ya never do that again, it'd be too soon," Fiddleford says, tangling his hands in his beard and pulling gently, as his knee bounces rapidly under the table.

Stan gives a devilish grin, puffing out his chest, and Fiddleford groans a little and knows he's going to be doing The Voice before he even speaks. "Quantum mechanics! The sum of the square roots of any two sides of an isosceles triangle is equal to the square root of the remaining side! A fool and his money are soon par-

"Dammit, Stan, cut that out!" Ripley snaps from the sink, in a voice like something from Fiddleford's haziest nightmares. There is a crunch from one fist as pieces of the heavy stoneware mug crumble out between her clenched fingers, a sharp gasp- sharp *gasps*- coming from Ripley herself as she looks down and realizes what's happened. She clutches at the sleeves of her green sweater, her knuckles turning white, her shoulders hunching.

"Hey," Stan says, standing up. "Hey, relax, okay?"

"No," she whispers, shaking her head. "*No. No no no.*"

"Look, I won't do the voice anymore, I didn't think it would bother you," Stan says, reaching out. His fingertips brush her shoulder and she flinches back, and Fiddleford can see her face as she backs away from Stan, her eyes wide and staring behind her glasses- and through her bangs- and on the gentle dip of her throat between her collar bones. Fiddleford practically throws himself back, sending his kitchen chair clattering to the floor. He blinks again, and there's nothing but skin, just two eyes, but she looks terrified and Stan looks worried and they both look like they're going to throw up.

Fiddleford's afraid if he asks if what he saw was real or not that he wouldn't be happy with the answer.

"Hey, look, come on," Stan says, extending a hand. "It's over. Look, you know I'm an asshole, right? I didn't mean to do... whatever just happened. Right? You know that, Ripley?"
"What's happening?" Fiddleford asks, his voice high. She swallows, letting Stan grab her hand and
run it under the tap under the pretense of making sure there's no glass in her skin.

"I... I'm kinda sick, Fidds," she says, after a minute. "I don't want the kids to know, and I didn't
wanna worry you, so I didn't tell you. I'm kinda... kinda sick."

"Yeah, but," Stan says, injecting his fake carnival cheerfulness into his voice, "Ford'll fix it."

"Yeah," Ripley sighs, looking down. Stan reaches over with one wet hand and tugs the hood up
over her head. She snorts gently.

"Sick," Fiddleford repeats slowly. He knows it's awfully distracting but his foot is tapping a rapid
tattoo against the kitchen floor.

"Sick. Infected. Same difference," she mutters. "So, you know, just in case wanting to have my
stupid wife back isn't enough of a reason to bring that knucklehead home, I probably need him to
help make sure I don't, like, turn into some kind of monster like in The Thing."

"You're not gonna turn into the monster from The Thing," Stan says gruffly, rolling his eyes. "Stop
that."

"Get a load of this guy, Fidds, thinks he can tell me what to do," Ripley sniffs.

"What's the monster from The Thing?" Fiddleford asks nervously. Ripley opens her mouth, then
shuts it, eyes huge behind her glasses.

"You did miss that movie, didn't you? Came out in '82."

Stan hisses, wincing. "Yeah, you... weren't watchin' movies then, were ya."

"So it's a movie? Should I watch-"

"Oh no," Ripley says quickly. "No, that- that would be a bad idea. It's a scary movie. You won't like
it."

He watches her expression, the grudging nod Stan throws his way.

"Y-yeah, okay, I'm gonna take yer word for it, fellers."

Stan sighs. "I'm gonna check the kids, see if they're asleep."

"We don't need to hide what we're doing from them anymore," Ripley says quietly, and he elbows
her side.

"We also don't need two twelve year olds wanderin' around the basement lab," he responds. She
nods uncomfortably and stands stock-still in the kitchen once he's gone; Fiddleford realizes with a
pang (of what?) that it's because she's alone with him now.

"Hey," she says, looking down. "I just. I hope you know, I'm not... I would die before I let anything
happen to any of you, Fiddleford. You don't gotta be scared."

"I'm not scared," he tells her, and she gives him a watery smile.

"Cool."

Fiddleford is nowhere near as talented a liar as Stan is, but she must really want to believe it.
Fiddleford looks up at the portal that ruined his life, and he's... surprised, but not very, when Ripley reaches out and takes his hand.

"So, tada or whatever," Stan says, folding his arms across his chest.

"You put lights in," Fiddleford says, after a moment.

"I put lights in," Ripley says, leaning over. "This joker was working in the dark for thirty years. This is why you need glasses, Stan."

"It's real clean in here," Fiddleford adds. Ripley points triumphantly at Fiddleford, then at Stan. "And... yer not gonna turn this sucker on, are ya?"

"Not unless it's the only way," Stan says, running a hand over the old console.

"I mean, look at this thing, Fidds, it's terrible," Ripley says, sighing. "No offense, I know you worked on this thing, but at no point in the history of anything did it have to be this big or yucky."

"None taken," Fiddleford says, frowning into his beard. "Yucky...?"

"Oh, don't get her started," Stan sighs, but fondly.

"Fiddleford, this thing was designed to fail," Ripley says, waving her arms. "Look at it! Terrible. First of all, Fiddleford, none of this is your fault, because Ford was being lied to and mind-controlled half the time and he was lying to you about it, so none of what happened is your fault, okay. But this thing is a literal, it's a, it's literally a doomsday device for the sole purpose of, of, of-

"Doom!" Stan interrupts. "Yeah, I never understood what you two were supposed to be doing with this thing, but it turned on- by itself, good job with safety features- for like a minute, and then broke immediately."

"I don't know, either," Fiddleford says, tugging his beard. Their smiles fade, and Ripley sighs, putting her hands on her hips.

"Well, buddy. You wanna rewire some stuff with me tonight? Nothin' rough, I just want to make sure there's no way power from the control console is going to the actual turbines doin' the actual opening. Between the two of us, it's gonna take, what, an hour?"

"Sounds about right," Stan says, opening a startlingly familiar red book and taking out a sheaf of photocopied papers. "We still need to fix the steering-thing."

"I had an idea about that," Ripley says, pulling out a heavy red toolbox. "Or, well, we could always try to steal the last journal off Gideon, but we should be able to turn this bad boy on and start running the search tonight."

"Really? Tonight?" Fiddleford asks, taking a step back. From here it doesn't look like something he built himself. From here it looks like a giant gleaming triangle with a dark, gaping maw, ready to eat-

"Yep, tonight. Finally." Ripley looks up, unmistakably proud. Fiddleford's seen that look before; he's seen it in this room before, and it worries him.

He remembers-

*his back on the floor, blue lights flashing overhead, a broad hand on his shoulder*
-and swallows drily.

"As long as we're gonna be safe," he says quietly. Ripley and Stan give him identical thumbs’ ups.

(They work for more than an hour, closer to three and a half, because after they're done rerouting the power lines Ripley and Stan try a few different things with the console. Stan looks at him and at Ripley, makes sure they're standing well away from the portal itself, just in case, takes a deep breath, flips it on. The soft blue glow makes Fiddleford's stomach turn. The light casts an unnatural pallor on Stan's face, and Fiddleford has to remind himself not to shy away when the man scoops him and Ripley up in a crushing embrace. We did it, we did it, he's coming home for real, Stan keeps saying.)

(They leave it running- they have to, they're not using nearly enough power to turn on the actual portal itself, but it wastes far more energy to power on the search function than it does to leave it running. Fiddleford's not sure of Stan's math on that one, but he'll say anything to get them to finish what they're doing down here and come upstairs.)

(He sleeps fitfully, and dreams of the Thing He Saw, all chunky gold ichor and pulsating ink, and it laughs and laughs, holding his two year old son, his baby, opens its mouth and the appendage that comes out is too vile and prehensile to be a tongue, it tells him we'll meet again, spectacles, it tells him what to say and it asks if he wants to see the time and date and manner of the death of his serious-natured, soft-haired little son, and one sharp thing like a finger draws slowly across his little boy's neck, and then he is yanked back out and That Thing's voice is all he can think or hear or say, even as he feels Stanford's hands on his shoulders, shaking him awake, asking what he saw, and refusing to accept when he tells Stanford this has to end.)

(In the dream he knows that is where it ended. The dream does not end. That Thing drips upward through the floorboards, didja miss me, specs? and there is no mouth but it is grinning all the same.)

(He wakes up and he's Old Man, and he's scared, because everything is a blur, he remembers only pieces, and they're so kind to him, and so gentle, the girl with the pig and the boy with the book and the old man and the woman, and by the time he remembers enough of yesterday to be Fiddleford for them he does not remember the dream.)
The heat is unbearable. Dipper knows that heat rises, expects it to be hot in the attic, but it's somehow even hotter when he finally heads downstairs.

Aunt Ripley is stretched out on the floor next to Grunkle Stan, both of them staring blearily at the ceiling, both of them dressed identically in a pair of Stan's shorts and undershirts.

"Save... yourself," Ripley wheezes, using a folded-over newspaper to fan herself with one hand as she reaches toward Dipper. "It's... hot... as... balls."

Stan swats her on the arm. "Language."

"Too hot for propriety," Ripley mutters. "Sorry." Stan makes a tired sort of "weh" noise and points at the newspaper.

"Why are you both dressed like that?" Dipper asks, and Aunt Ripley groans and starts fanning Stan's face for a while.

"I don't own any shorts yet, and my no-sleeve shirts are all in the laundry," she explains.

"The word you want is tank top," Stan mutters, eyes closed.

"The word I want, I can't say, because somebody thinks I should watch my language," she grumbles. He goes feh but otherwise remains motionless. Mabel comes downstairs, also groaning, wearing just a t-shirt and her skirt because it's too hot for sweaters.

"Aunt Ripley, didn't Grunkle Ford have some kind of... I dunno, magic cold wind spell or something that you wrote down in your journal?" she asks, and Ripley sort of whimpers.

"Just Blood Rain. God forbid he learns how to make Rain Rain. Just... Blood Rain." They all consider this prospect. They all groan, and Dipper and Mabel flop down onto the floor, too. Dipper isn't even hungry for breakfast, it's so hot. Dipper frowns after about a minute, and both he and Mabel sit up at the same time, making the same face at one another.

"Aunt Ripley, why would Grunkle Ford even have a spell to make it rain blood?" Dipper asks, and Ripley shrugs aggressively at him.

"Gonna go out on a limb here and say it's coz he hung around the wrong people," she says, before leaning over to fan him and Mabel a bit.

Soos walks in on them like that- everyone too hot and lethargic to do anything, Aunt Ripley and Grunkle Stan laying around in Stan's underwear- and whatever conclusion he draws is... probably the right one, because he takes off his shirt and lies down, too.

"Dood, Stan, your house is like an oven right now," he says, already sweating.

"Tell me somethin' I don't know," Stan mutters.

"It's nowhere near this hot outside," Soos replies. Aunt Ripley stops fanning.
"Are you serious?" she asks.

"Haha, yeah, it's way hotter in here," Soos says from his position on the floor. Aunt Ripley sits up, the sweat making her hair stick to her forehead and neck.

"Wait, like... a lot hotter?" she asks slowly.

"I wasn't even sweating outside," Soos replies. Aunt Ripley shakes Stan's shoulder.

"Okay, everybody out of the house, I think the basement's on fire," she says, and Stan shoots upright.

"What?!"

"Soos, get the kids out, thank you," she says, and Soos scoops Dipper and Mabel up in his sweaty arms.

"Yes ma'am! Let me rescue you, doods!" he cries out, marching steadily towards the front door.

"Stan, I have to carry Fiddleford out of here, don't make me carry you out too or you'll regret it," Aunt Ripley says, before Soos carries Dipper outside and neatly deposits him and Mabel onto the grass.

"Soos, I think we could've walked," Dipper mumbles. The sun's bright, but it really is cooler outside than it is inside. Mabel squints, looking around.

"Where's Waddles?" She catapults to her feet and Soos barely manages to catch her before she hurtles back into the house. "Soos, let me go, I have to save Waddles!"

There's a squawk from inside, and Stan comes out carrying a startled and upset-looking Aunt Ripley in a bridal carry, with a completely panicking Fiddleford clinging to both their fronts. Waddles trots along just behind him, and Mabel jackknifes her body out of Soos's grip and hits the ground running, scooping the pig up and running back towards Dipper.

"There ya go," Stan says, unceremoniously dumping Aunt Ripley- and, by association, Fiddleford-onto the grass. "Definitely safe now."

"Grunkle Stan, you don't have a basement?" Dipper begins, and Aunt Ripley gives him a really weird embarrassed smile. "...you have a secret basement. Of course you do."

"It makes so much sense!" Soos says, before adding in a low tone, "Called it."

"You did not call it," Stan says, rolling his eyes.

"Begging your pardon, Mr. Pines, but I have a seventy-chapter work-in-progress fanfiction that says otherwise," Soos says happily.

"You wrote a book? About Stan and everything?" Ripley asks brightly. "Soos, can I read it?"

"My house is on fire?" Stan asks, gesturing at the house. They all glance upwards. Nothing appears to be actually on fire.

"Aunt Ripley, what makes you think the secret basement's on fire?" Mabel asks finally.

"We left a machine on," Ripley sighs.
"So there's no... vents or anything?" Stan asks, and he and Ripley both look at Fiddleford, for some reason.

"I'm guessin' there are vents," Fiddleford says, after a minute. "An' they're all up in your house."

"Well, now what?" Stan asks, sighing. "How're we gonna get down there?"

Soos raises a hand.

"Yes. Soos."

"Well, it's a basement, doods, why don't we just dig down?"

"Holy shit-taki mushrooms, fellers," Fiddleford mutters under his breath. Dipper catches the swear and appreciates, for Mabel's sake, that Fiddleford at least made the attempt to cover it up. "Listen for a moment, if'n ya dig out from beneath the house, the house could collapse in on the basement, destroyin' both the house and the portal."

"Oh," Ripley says, frowning. Mabel raises her hand, bouncing on her heels. "Yeah, sweetie, what's your idea?"

"Why don't you just dig out a small hole to check out how bad it is first?" she asks. Stan and Ripley look at each other, then at Fiddleford.

"Well- other than the inherent danger in diggin' into a basement that might be fulla fire," he says hesitantly, and Stan and Ripley whoop.

"Small hole it is! Thanks, Smart Adult," Ripley says, holding out her hand for a high five. Fiddleford very hesitantly taps his palm against it.

"H-how am I the Smart Adult?" Fiddleford asks, and Ripley snorts a laugh.

"Fidds, you're absolutely the Smart Adult. Kids, back me up- I'm Fun Adult, Stan's Responsible Mystery Adult, Ford's Irresponsible Science Adult, that makes Fiddleford Smart Adult." Dipper and Mabel look at one another, trying to figure out Aunt Ripley's logic.

"How is Grunkle Stan the only responsible one?" Mabel asks. Stan gestures wildly at Ripley.

"See? Even the kids know I should be the Fun Adult."

"Well, of the four of us, only one person's actually held a job and paid a mortgage off in the past... how long, Fidds, fifteen, ten years?"

"I don't know why you expect me to remember that," Fiddleford says slowly, and Ripley coughs and pats his back.

"Well, either way, point proven. Stan doesn't have to be all that responsible to be the most responsible person any of us knows, other than Abuelita who's the most responsible by far." Ripley pauses, then adds, "And frankly, she's too good to be lumped in with the rest of us bad influences."

"No arguments there, Mrs. Aunt Ripley," Soos says, leaning over to give Ripley a high five.
"So you guys are... actually doing this," Dipper says, after a moment. "You're going to dig a hole into a basement that might or might not be on fire."

"Yeah, just to check if it's okay, maybe vent it out a little," Ripley says brightly. "That's gonna work, right Fidds?"

"Please don't ask me to give my blessings to this'ere venture," Fiddleford says, exchanging a look with Dipper over the top of his glasses. Dipper hasn't felt this much kinship with someone not-Mabel in forever. "If you two are votin' me Smart Adult then maybe you should spend a minute or two thinkin' about-

He pauses. Ripley's already up and digging through Stan's shed twenty feet away.

"Stan, you got shovels here, right?" she calls over her shoulder. Mabel looks up, still petting Waddles' head.

"There oughtta be like, four shovels in there," he yells back. Dipper winces- there's really no need to be this loud, they're only twenty feet away, not-

"We don't need four shovels," she replies, still yelling but this time adding huge, exaggerated arm movements to illustrate her point.

"We want it done fast, don't we?" Stan responds at the top of his lungs. Mabel stifles a giggle, masking it with a kiss to Waddles' snout.

"Fellers," Fiddleford tries to intervene.

"Well I can only shovel one shovel at a time," Ripley yells, turning around and twirling both of the shovels in her hands. "And even if I get you in on this, that's still only two!"

"Well what about-

"We're not makin' anybody else dig, Oldster!"

"H-hey, I'd be happy to help out," Soos tries to say, using a normal volume and looking a tad confused.

"There, see? Soos wants to dig," Stan calls back to her, hands cupped around his mouth to make himself even louder.

"Soos can't dig, him and Fidds're taking the kids out of here so they can do something fun today! I ain't makin' them kids stand around watchin' us dig a hole, Stan!"

The trees echo, stan! stan... stan....

Ripley and Stan are standing perfectly still, turning red in the face from trying not to let their expressions change. All she needs is a fez, Dipper thinks.

"You know what, Mr. McGucket and I can take the Mystery Twins to the pool today if you want," Soos says.

"That's a good idea," Ripley says, her voice strained. She clears her throat. "I'll run in and grab your suits, kids."

Even after she darts in- complaining loudly about how much hotter it is- and comes back out with Dipper's trunks and Mabel's suit, she still has that weird constipated Mabel-with-a-secret face on. It's
not that big a secret, though, because as soon as Soos and McGucket and Mabel and Dipper are all in Soos's truck, she and Stan start giggling like a bunch of teenaged weirdos.

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Dipper's not sure what he expects to see when they get back from the community pool. A giant hole in the ground with steam and light coming out? A person-sized hole with a ladder going down it? Literally anything that includes a hole?

He doesn't get any of those things- there's a big circle of dirt where evidently Ripley and Stan had been digging, and then for whatever reason they'd gone and filled the hole back in. The front door and the side door are both open, with waist-high industrial fans blowing air out of the house. Aunt Ripley's changed out of Stan's underwear- which can only be a good thing- although why she's wearing long sleeves tucked into gloves and jeans tucked into boots in this heat is a mystery.

"So I see ya'll hit the basement's cinderblock roof," Fiddleford says drily, after eyeballing the hole in the ground. "I'm surprised ya'll didn't accidentally hit the septic tank."

"Oh, no, we did," Stan grumbles. Aunt Ripley gives a thumbs' up, pulling a pair of safety goggles on over her glasses.

"So what's the new plan, doods? Why are you dressed up like that?" Soos asks, taking the towel off his shoulders to wipe his face.

"New plan is use the fans to suck all the bad, hot air out, right? That's how... that's how that works," Ripley says uncertainly. "And meanwhile, I'll go in through the door. That's why I'm all covered up, in case it's mega-hot in there. Although we figured if anything was ON fire it'd be, you know, already on fire in here-"

"But Aunt Ripley, if it IS on fire, opening the door will make a giant fire blast like in that movie, right?" Dipper asks nervously. "Isn't- isn't that why you guys wanted to dig in the first place?"

"Oh... I, uh, no, I just thought the doorknobs would be hot," Ripley says slowly.

Fiddleford stares at them for a minute, before sighing deeply. "Kids, go upstairs to change and grab any clothing you'll need to sleep over at Soos's granny's house. If this house isn't on fire in the next five minutes, these two will... probably make that happen."

"Hey, have a little faith," Ripley says cheerfully. Dipper and Mabel dash upstairs together, throwing on dry clothing and tossing a change of clothes into their backpacks- not because they really think Stan and Ripley are going to burn the house down, but another night in a house this hot will be torture. By the time they get back downstairs, Stan and Fiddleford are arguing quietly next to the snack machine, which has been pulled off of the wall to reveal a secret door. They both seem to be dressed- or, well, Fiddleford's wearing pants and a shirt and those rubber clogs Aunt Ripley got him, Stan's got the Mystery suit on but nothing's buttoned and his tie's loose at his neck. Soos is standing back, looking anxious and wearing the shirt he discarded earlier.

"Oooh, a secret passage!" Mabel says, perking up immediately. "Is that the Secret Basement?"

"Yeah, pumpkin, but you can't go in there until Aunt Ripley comes back," Stan says, ruffling her hair.

"Are you kiddin', Pines? She's not goin' down there period!" Fiddleford says, clutching at his hat. "There is nothin' safe down there, and by rights we oughta be-"
There's a soft sound- *whumpf*- and Dipper thinks at first that his hair's standing on end, but then everything starts drifting gently upwards. It's barely anything- less than an inch, at most- but everyone in the room flails simultaneously, Soos and Mabel looking surprised more than anything else, Stan and Fiddleford looking outright panicked. There's another *whumpf* sound and everything falls, the heavier displays in the Shack with a loud thunk. There's a loud whoooshing noise, and all of a sudden it's nowhere near as hot as it was.

"No," Fiddleford says softly, eyes huge behind his round lenses.

"What what what was that?" Mabel cries excitedly, jumping up to try to make herself float again.

"It's not supposed to be on! What's taking her so long?!!" Stan asks, scrambling to the passageway and punching in a code. The door opens and Aunt Ripley staggers out, breathing hard.

"It's bad," she says, catching her breath. "It's bad. I don't know how, it's doing something, one of the turbines was active, it's not a portal but it's trying to be. I shut it down- had to destroy it to make it stop- but-"

"Are you okay? You get- hurt or-" Stan starts, and she shakes her head.

"Nothin' bad," she says, putting a hand on his. "The computer's 'bout to be scrap metal in a second, Stan. There's smoke comin' out the sides. An' it says it found him, Stan, but it's not makin' any sense, it says he- it says he's- where the portal used to open up onto," she says, looking unhappily at Fiddleford. "I-It says he's in the Nightmare Realm, Stan."

"That sounds bad," Soos says cautiously.

"It's so bad," Ripley whimpers. "I was gonna portal into wherever he was and run around looking until I found him, then bring him home here. I... Stan, I can't do that with this. Not just because it'll be literally impossible- but that's where... it's where the stuff huntin' Ford an' me was from, it's where she's from, Stan, I can't."

"Then I'll do it!" Stan snaps. "I'll just-"

"What in tarnation is that unholy wind comin' from?" Fiddleford interrupts, and Ripley looks startled, like she's only just noticing the sound.

"Uh, Aunt Ripley, you said you turned off one of the turbines?" Dipper asks nervously. "Doesn't... doesn't that mean there are more that could turn on?"

She goes pale, and runs back to the elevator. "Fidds, I need your help, I'm too stupid to do this!" she calls back, and he frowns and follows, a hand clutching Stan's sleeve and pulling him along beside him.

"Come on, yer draggin' er back with me," he says seriously, a dangerous glint in his eye as they step into the elevator.

Dipper, Mabel, and Soos all look at one another.

"They didn't tell us to stay up here," Dipper says slowly.

"Well, Stan actually did, dood," Soos says, hands up. "So-"

"What he said was that we couldn't go in until Aunt Ripley came back," Mabel says, standing on her toes. "And Aunt Ripley came back. So... loophole."
"And that's where they're working on the portal to get Grunkle Ford back!" Dipper adds, jerking his thumb towards the passageway. "If it wasn't safe to go in they wouldn't keep going in there!"

"Doods, you know what they meant," Soos says nervously, trying to be stern and failing pretty badly. "You can't go in there just because it's gonna be the scene of a really... emotional reunion between two brothers, two best friends, and a marriage-"

Dipper and Mabel glance at one another- they don't have Twin ESP, but they don't need it to come to the same conclusion. They turn towards Soos and flash him their deadliest tandem puppy faces. Soos groans and runs his fingers through his hair under his hat.

"Doods, come on!" he pleads, before sighing. "Oh, who am I kidding? I really want to go in there, too- FINE, but we're holding hands the entire time, got it?"

"Got it!" Mabel chirps, taking Soos's hand. Dipper sighs, but he kind of does feel better after grabbing Soos's other hand.

It really only takes about a minute to take the elevator down, but it feels like longer. By the time they get down there it's already chaos. The three adults are scrambling around, trying to do... something to a machine that looks like one of those ridiculously big room-sized computers from forever ago. Aunt Ripley hisses and yanks off a panel, shielding her face as smoke comes out.

"This isn't gonna work. Stan, throw me a rope!" she yells.

"What for?" he yells back, wearing huge yellow rubber gloves and doing something complicated-looking to a pipe.

"Oh, for- Fidds, throw me a rope, please!" she says, and Fiddleford throws a nylon rope at her before ducking his head back under a counter.

"What do you need the rope for!?" Stan repeats, standing and looking at her. She's already got one end tied around her waist, and is tying the other end around the legs of a heavy-looking desk.

"I have to go in there and disconnect the-"

"LIKE HELL YOU ARE!" Fiddleford interrupts. "Do you want to get sucked in!?"

"There's nothin' to get sucked into yet!" Ripley snaps, a heavy-looking monkey wrench in one hand and her big metal flashlight in the other- which is weird, because there's plenty of light, even though it looks like one of the big yellow construction lamps is flickering. "Guys, it's either this or it gets so broken it takes another thirty years! I ain't waitin' til ya'll ninety-two!" She tears a door open and- yeah. Dipper's brain short-circuits a little at what he's seeing.

Dipper and Mabel both instinctively clutch closer to Soos and each other. The other side of the door is awash in cyan-blue light, and Dipper can see the glint and shadow of heavy machinery, of things being dragged closer to the light, of Aunt Ripley being dragged closer-

"Dadblast it, Stan, shut it down!" Fiddleford snaps.

"I'm-" Stan yanks something out of the wall and some of the lights and noises stop. The windy rushing noise in the other room does not.

Mabel hides her face in Soos's side, but Dipper watches as Aunt Ripley struggles to open a panel on the side of a huge metal cylinder that looks like a plane engine stood up on one side, before dropping the wrench and turning on her flashlight- which- isn't a flashlight, it's a lightsaber, and Dipper can
hear Soos's appreciative *oh, dood* even over the sound of all the wind and wreckage-

-and she stabs the lightsaber into the panel, the metal turning hot orange and melting around the blade. The blue light fades. The wind noises slow down and stop. Grunkle Stan and Fiddleford drop their tools, and the only sound is soft from the other side, the snap-crackle of Aunt Ripley's lazer sword destroying the turbine, her breathing heavy enough that they can hear it from this far away.

"Motherfucker," she sobs, the blade of her sword disappearing as she drops it to the floor, burying her face in her hands. "Motherfucker, we were this close, we were *this fucking close!* I need a fucking- I need a drink-" she says, turning back and freezing, her eyes wide, "-of water! Just water, just- fudge-"

"What is she sayin'?" Fiddleford asks in a low tone.

Dipper realizes she's not staring back at Stan and Fiddleford, she's staring at him.

"Wha- when, when did you guys get down here?" she asks, and Stan and Fiddleford finally notice that Soos and Mabel and Dipper are in the room.

"Kids, for cryin' out loud!" Stan says, sounding... exhausted. He sounds tired and old, Dipper realizes, and he sort of wishes they hadn't come down here.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Pines, I-" Soos starts, his voice rough with emotion.

"We just... wanted to see Grunkle Ford," Mabel says softly.

"Us too, sweetie," Stan says quietly.

"Let's go upstairs 'fore this devil-machine decides'a turn isself back on," Fiddleford mutters.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Aunt Ripley is quiet at dinner. She doesn't look up or ask about how it was at the pool, or say anything nice about Wendy when Dipper mentions that she's a part-time lifeguard there, or react at all when Fiddleford and Soos tell her about the Floaty-Duck Uprising. The only time she says anything at all are when Mabel tells her that she met a merman named Mermando and that he's trapped and needs to go home- *you let me know if you need a ride anywhere to hang out with your friend, pumpkin-* and when Soos mentions that Gideon was there at the pool in that chair Stan likes. Even then, she doesn't say anything, just looks up and has a funny look on her face like she's thinking hard about it.

She goes upstairs with Dipper and Mabel when it's bedtime and asks for their laundry so they can go to the pool together tomorrow. She doesn't own a swimsuit- as far as Dipper can tell, she's just wearing a pair of Grunkle Stan's boxers (black with playing cards on them) and a Mystery Shack t-shirt knotted at the waist- but when they get to the pool she stands waist-high in the water and makes small talk with Mabel and her new friend Mermando while Mr. McGucket sits at the edge of the pool with his feet in the water.

"Not to be rude, Dipper, but your Aunt doesn't look like she even likes water," Wendy points out. "Look, she's just leaning up against the side of the pool glaring off into space."

"At least she's not in Pool Jail with Grunkle Stan," he points out, and she laughs. Only... when Dipper looks again, she's not just gazing aimlessly into the distance, she looks more like she's waiting. Dipper's got other jobs to do around the pool, but he glances back every so often and she's still there, not really interacting with Fiddleford or Mabel or Mabel's friend unless one of them
accidentally nudges her.

And then Bud Gleeful pulls up and takes Gideon home, and that's when her demeanor changes, she sits up and actually turns to talk to the people around her.

Aunt Ripley waits until she's driving them all home before she tells Stan that she's going to do something drastic and illegal.

"Does it have something to do with Gideon?" Dipper asks from the backseat, and Aunt Ripley tilts her mirror to look back at him.

"Can I count on you to convince Wendy to put him in Pool Jail tomorrow?" she asks, and Dipper nods slowly.

"That would be a flagrant abuse of my lifeguard powers," he says, scratching his chin. "How long does he need to be in Pool Jail?"

"You're a good nephew," she says seriously. "Exactly as long as you want him to be, just don't let him out until after I come pick you up."

"Perfect," Grunkle Stan says cheerfully, using the same bouncy-fake tone he's been using on them ever since they shut the portal down last night. "Finally I'll get to have my perfect chair all to myself and not have that punk Gideon interfere!"

"Hah! No, Stan, I need your help on this," Ripley says firmly.

"Why don't you get Fidds to help you?" Stan asks sullenly.

"Don't volunteer me for nothin'," Fiddleford says heavily- he's got the window seat and Mabel's got the other one, so Dipper's squished in between them.

"Because I made a promise not to let certain people near Fidds and if I break it that would make me a liar," Ripley says carefully. "And I care about Fidds' health. Plus this is one of the guys who jumped me in the woods a couple weeks ago, so, you know, if it turns out he's home I'll probably need someone to stop me from beating the crap out of him."

The car is silent for a few moments.

"Language," Stan says finally.

"Crap isn't a bad swear in the Ripleymobile," she mutters darkly.

"Crap will get you detention in school," Dipper says.

"Now you're both going to your rooms," Stan says suddenly, holding up a finger. "I'm not havin' your parents call me in September asking why you're cussin'!"

"Yeah, cussin' like a dingus who doesn't know any good cusses," Ripley mutters.

"You're going to your room, too, Missy," Stan informs her.

"Why am I going to my room?" Dipper protests, and Mabel snorts a laugh.

"I'm going to my room and I will stay there indefinitely," Fiddleford mutters.

"But I have to do something for Mr. Poolcheck tonight at midnight," Dipper says, and Ripley parks
the car just in time for both her and Stan to turn in their seats and look at Dipper.

"Is that so," Ripley says coolly.

"Mister Weird Lifeguard thinks you can just go somewhere unattended in the middle of the night with no adult supervision?" Stan asks slowly.

"Mr. Poolcheck's an adult," Dipper points out.

"A real adult who we trust," Ripley clarifies, eyes narrowed. "You know what? You know what? Why don't we all head out to the pool tonight, huh? Family bonding times. If Mr. Poolcheck has a job for you in the middle of the night, it's a job you can do with heavily armed loved ones standing nearby."

"Can I come too?" Mabel asks. "I probably need help rescuing Mermando tonight."

"We'll all go," Stan says, reaching back and patting her on the head.

They do all go. To say Mr. Poolcheck is unhappy is... an understatement, and Dipper's pretty sure Aunt Ripley's actually kind of glad when he starts yelling, because she corrals him out behind the supply building and starts laying into him so viciously and absolutely that Dipper's pretty sure Mr. Poolcheck might actually die of being yelled at.

The less that can be said about returning Mermando to Lake Gravity Falls, the better. When Aunt Ripley finally comes back from verbally destroying Mr. Poolcheck and asked why her car smells like low tide, Mabel just giggles and Fiddleford- who had a minor nervous breakdown in the process of driving Aunt Ripley's enormous old car at breakneck speeds to save the life of a dying merman- just mutters that he has a migraine and wants to go home.

(They get home so late that the sun is starting to peek over the tops of the trees, and Grunkle Stan makes comments that he normally gets up around now, and Aunt Ripley goes straight to her room and only comes out to peck everyone on the cheek- even Stan and Fiddleford- before going to sleep in her Mabel Sweater. For the first time since Mabel put the jar of fireflies in their room, Dipper goes to sleep without the green glow of the little bugs.)

(For the first time since Mabel put the jar of fireflies in their room, Dipper has a nightmare- a bad one. The portal's back on and gravity's being weird and everything is covered in the pale blue light, but nobody even notices or acts like they care what's happening. You're right to be worried, kid, a voice says behind him, and the person looks... like him, but weird, like if Tyrone had come out sneering and older. "Who are you?" Dipper asks, and the person rolls his eyes. I'm you, obviously. I'm your subconscious mind. The only person you trust, the only person you can trust. That's not true," Dipper argues, and the other him rolls his golden eyes a little. Oh sure, you like her, she's your sister so you have to. But you don't trust her. And you're right not to. Dipper covers his ears.)

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(In Gravity Falls there is no one you can trust. Trust no one.)
Dipper wakes up to a late breakfast/early lunch and feels... unsettled, all the way to the pool. He feels unsettled putting Gideon in Pool Jail, even though he wasn't really doing anything and Aunt Ripley wouldn't give a reason for it earlier. He feels unsettled when Mr. Poolcheck finds a reason to fire him, and when Aunt Ripley comes and picks him and Mabel and Soos and Fiddleford up, both her and Stan looking sweaty and tired and pleased with themselves.

He feels unsettled when, after dinner, Aunt Ripley and Stan and Fiddleford ask Soos to take the kids outside to play while they all spend almost an hour and a half talking privately. He feels unsettled when Mabel asks him if he thinks Gideon's going to find out about whatever it was Aunt Ripley and Grunkle Stan were doing. He feels unsettled when Aunt Ripley pokes her head out the back door and asks the three of them if they're ready to see something cool and hopefully meet a member of the family.

He feels unsettled in the elevator all the way down, and as Aunt Ripley puts on a pair of safety goggles and ties herself to the desk again and turns on her lightsaber and says, "Alright, Pines Family and Associates, let's see if this works."

Chapter End Notes

Short chapter, sorry. Was a huge struggle to write and also we got hit by Hurricane Matthew. Make it up with a longer than usual chapter next.
Leo

_He sees the open portal before him deep within the Nightmare Realm and he knows it's pure idiocy, he knows it leads home, he knows this portal being open will tear the fabric of reality apart, but if he steps through at least he can contain the inevitable rift, the damage has already been done._

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

The portal is not so much a rip in the fabric of space as it is a series of small open sores, worn thin by who knows how many years of abuse. The slightest pressure from either end would tear the portal completely open, and if Ford still believed in miracles he would call the fact that Bill must not know how thin reality has been stretched here a _miracle_. As it is-

As it is, he knows it's only a matter of time before the local fauna starts to leak through, wreaking untold havoc on the unsuspecting ecosystem on the other side.

"There he is!" a voice shrieks- vaguely familiar, one of the Henchmaniacs but not one Ford can identify immediately.

A portal opens in front of him- a proper portal, not these diseased pinholes- slashed violently through the landscape, small enough to admit a single person as long as nothing connects it to the unnatural holes nearby, but of course it would take only a few moments to make the portal much, much bigger. Ford can hear the approach of Bill's cohorts- if they come while the portal is open, they will be able to rip it even further, but if it's closed it should buy him a little bit of time to figure out a way to patch over the weak spots. He turns just enough to throw a concussion grenade into the mass of limbs and mouths and eyes behind him, the blast sending him tumbling towards the portal with a wave of destructive energy that he can only hope doesn't exacerbate the issue.

His boots land on something metallic and unyielding, although it shifts enough under his weight that he doesn't feel like it's properly solid. He stumbles but only a little, taking steps into a weirdly familiar space, the flashing lights of the portal still burned into his retinas and blinding him against the relative darkness.

The shadowy figure before him solidifies into an old man with a gravelly voice. "I-I can't believe it. Finally, after all these years- you're actually here, brother!"

Stanley. Stanley.

Something hot and ugly rises in Ford- how dare _how dare how dare_- and he swings a fist, jaw clenched in a grim scowl even as he scans the room for signs of the dangerous creatures who've been hunting him through the Nightmare Realm. His fist connects with Stanley's jaw and sends him sprawling, even though Ford at least has the sense to pull his punch- he's pissed, but he's not in danger from Stanley, theoretically.

"Hey!" someone- humanoid, female, familiar- snaps nearby, and Ford can't believe Stanley's let outsiders into his lab like this. There's a lot of movement out of the corners of his eyes, but his focus right now is on the man responsible for this mess.

"Ow jeez, what the heck was that for?!" Stanley asks, rubbing his face with one broad hand, holding a hand out to keep the other people in the room back.

"That was an insanely risky move, restarting this portal!" Ford growls, waving an arm. "Didn't you
"What warnings?" Stanley asks, bristling. "Hey, you know what, how about a thank-you to the people who rescued you from the Nightmare Realm?"

"Thank you?! You really think I'm about to thank-" Ford pauses and snatches Stanley's arm, yanking him close. "Who told you that? Who were you working with?!"

"Hey, knock it off!" another voice yells- sounds like a frail old man, vaguely familiar, and Ford's ire rises, so many people are in here and any one of them could be working for Bill, Stanley's such a fucking idiot- and of course Stanley takes a swing, because when all you have is a hammer all problems look like punching bags. Ford knocks him to the ground, twisting his arm up behind his back to pin him in place, and Stanley's still trying to protest that he's not going to take it easy on Ford just because he's fam-

"What the fuck, Ford?!" the female snarls, and strong arms wrap around him under his armpits and lift him entirely off his brother's body, Ford tenses for a moment but only just long enough to realize that something followed him from the other side, in an instant Ford's gun is out and he's got the barrel pressed against something soft over his shoulder, there's a soft choking sound in his ear, it must be against the creature's throat.

Two things happen simultaneously.

Stanley twists under him, crying out, "LANGUAGE!" before he sees the creature behind Ford and goes still with terror, one hand raised slightly.

Two voices- children's voices- shriek out at him from behind one of the adult-sized figures, "Don't shoot!" and "Aunt Ripley, look out!"

Ford realizes the arms around his chest are shaking badly, and Stanley raises his other hand, eyes huge behind thick, hornrimmed glasses.

"Stanford, put the gun down," he says slowly. "You're safe. It's safe. Put the gun down."

"F-Ford?" the voice rasps at his ear, naggingly familiar. "Ford, don't shoot me in front of the kids, honey, please."

"There are children in here," Ford says, blinking around the room as he lowers his weapon- keeping it in his hand, because the thing talking behind him is still going to have to be dealt with. "And... an old man and some sort of... hairless gopher?"

Stanley gets up, his hands still up. "It's your family, Ford. It's just us in here- you're an uncle, these kids are Shermie's grandkids. Soos is my- Soos. And you know Fidds and Ripley, right?"

Ford tenses. The old man bearded must... must be Fiddleford. The hairless gopher clutching two children to his chest, presumably, is Soos. And that would make the person behind him, arms trembling and wrapped around his chest- that would- that makes her-

"Lee, listen to me," Ford says quietly. "When it lets go of me, you're going to take the kids and Fiddleford out of here-"

"What?" Stanley asks, blinking.

"Oh Jesus," it sighs behind him, letting him go. "Ford, if you're gonna shoot me, please shoot me somewhere nonessential-"
"What is wrong with you!?" Fiddleford asks, sounding a touch hysterical. "Nobody's shootin' nobody, y'hear?"

"No, no, it's reasonable, listen," it says, as Ford darts away and puts himself between his family and the thing from the Nightmare Realm. "If Ford thinks I'm a shapeshifter or a telepathic memory worm, he shoots me somewhere nonfatal and we can prove right away that I'm human, because shapeshifter blood ain't red and memory worms can't survive bein' shot anywhere, so it's a win-win. Trust me, honey, if it makes sense with the kinda lives we had."

"Don't listen to it," Ford says flatly, leveling his gun at the thing wearing her long-dead face. "I don't know how you got here or found out about her, but you should have done your research."

"Aunt Ripley, why does he keep doing that?" one of the children asks- a girl, he thinks.

"Ford-" it says plaintively.

"Ripley Savage has been dead for eighteen years," he hisses furiously. "And you made the last mistake of your life trying to pretend to-"

"Eighteen years?" it asks, pressing stolen lips together. "Oh, Ford, no wonder."

"Shut up!" he snaps, and something in the creature before him snaps, too.

"You know what? You know what, no, I fuh- I fudging won't shut up, All-Star, because you're being stupid! You think I'm dead because you threw me off a building! We could have got out of that zombie mess together-"

"Be quiet!" Ford roars, and it's got something in its shaking hands, could be a weapon-

"We didn't need a third person for a three part harmony, you brat!" it shrieks. "All you had to do was record one of us singing and pitched it onto a different octave, and then you and me could have sang with the recording! We didn't even need to sing every time we needed to kill the zombies, because you could have recorded us singing the first time! And I'll bet your dumbass didn't even think about that, I'll bet you never even thought that we had an easy way out of there, because you had to be right all the fuck- all the fudging time!"

Ford stares, backing slightly into Stanley, his chest hurting as he breathes, the thing in front of him twisting its mouth into something bitter and sour and unhappy.

"Who told you about the zombies?" he asks shakily.

"Nobody, you idiot, I was there, you pushed me off a building-"

"Stop saying that!" he snarls, and it stops, making a face he hasn't seen in twenty years, since the last really big fight they- no. No. No. She died. She died eighteen years ago. She's gone. She's been gone.

"Ford," it says quietly. "You don't trust your eyes, right? You don't trust me. It's okay. But you trust yourself, right? You trust something you made." It crouches down, rolling a metal cylinder across the floor to him. "It's Sparky. There's been some changes made- Stan and I have worked on it, Fiddleford's worked on it, I've had two different Rick Sanchezes help me out with this... but it's still your work, Ford, it's still the thing you made. That's how we got you. We didn't open your stupid monster portal. It was Sparky."

Ford grabs the handle- and how familiar the outside chassis is, the slightly awkward way he had to
hold it coming back to him because it was fit to her hands- and looks down at it for several long minutes.

"Hand over your weapons," he says flatly. "Now."

"I'm not armed, you dingus," it says, throwing its hands up. "You're holding my sword. I lost my knife. The laser's upstairs because I ran out of fuel and I haven't used it for anything other than intimidation in two years." It lowers its hands, sighing. "Ford, please. What do you want from me? Because if you want me to get into all the gross details of every weird thing we ever did, here, right now, in front of God and Stan and the kids-"

"No," Ford says, roughly, and behind him he feels Stanley shudder lightly at the thought. "That's fine. That... that won't be necessary."

It stares at him, deflating slowly. "Oh. Okay. Good... good. So... you can put the gun down, sweetie."

Ford considers that.

"Just one question- how did you survive?"

"I got picked up by a doctor. Took weeks and weeks to get better enough to travel." It hesitates, looking mistrustfully at him. "You're not making a very good impression on the kids, All-Star."

"Kids," he repeats dully, before he finally takes his eyes off of this... abomination, focusing his gaze on the others in the lab. Stanley- a disturbingly familiar old man, looking far too like their father. A hunched, wizened old man with a long beard and a long nose that he recognizes immediately, even if everything else looks strange on him- Fiddleford. And three young people- a tall, fat man, and two children who look startlingly like the most recent pictures Ford's seen of Sherman's son Jacob.

"Hi, Grunkle Ford," the girl chirps, extending a hand. "I'm Mabel. We've been waiting all summer to meet you!" He takes her hand and she shakes it enthusiastically, beaming at him. "Whoa-ho, a six-fingered handshake? That's a whole finger friendlier than normal!"

"Hah, this kid's weird, I like her," Ford chuckles, unable to help himself.

"Oh gosh, you're really here," the boy child wheezes, clutching a blue and white ballcap against his head with one hand. "We've been wondering about you ever since we found your Journal and now you're-"

"You've read my Journals?" Ford asks, torn between being stupidly pleased and somewhat aghast that his Journals have been found and are all in the same place.

"Read them? I've practically lived them, there's been so many questions and now you're here and we can finally- houurrgh, okay, no, just-" The boy leans over, and the thing wearing his dead wife's face comes over and rubs circles into the back of his vest, making soft noises and telling him to take a deep breath and let his tummy settle.

"Dipper, if it's gonna happen, just let it happen," Fiddleford says sympathetically. Ford looks around him at the sheer... number of people, it's been a long time since he was trapped in a room with this many people, and he forces himself to take a deep breath.

"We'll have time for introductions later. First, Stanley- are there any other security breaches, does anyone else at all know about the portal?"
"Uh, just the people in this room," Stanley says confidently.

"And Rick Sanchez of this dimension," the thing pretending to be his dead wife pipes up. Ford winces, and interestingly enough Stanley winces, and that makes Ford even more suspicious.

"Okay, Rick Sanchez plus the people in this room-

"And Wendy, doods," the big guy- Zeus?- adds.

"Wendy, Rick, and the people in this room," Stanley says proudly.

"Assumin' neither of them told anybody," Fiddleford sighs, wringing his hands.

"Stanley, you knucklehead, what part of 'horrifying secret portal with instructions that must be destroyed' did you not understand? This is an unmitigated disaster," Ford snaps, pinching the bridge of his nose under his glasses.

"No it isn't, you dramatic dingdong," the thing retorts in Ripley's voice. "Soos'll call Wendy and I'll call Rick. Stop trying to scare the kiddos."

"Well, we can't stay down here anymore, the portal opening could have attracted any number of-" Ford starts, pointedly ignoring it.

"We're not all going to fit in the elevator in one shot," Stanley says, and the girl- Mabel, Ford remembers, her name is Mabel- bounces in place, one hand waving furiously over her head.

"Wait, wait, wait! Grunkle Ford, why are you so mad at Grunkle Stan? What happened after you and Mr. McGucket got separated? What happened after you pushed Aunt Ripley off a roof?"

"Yeah," the boy adds, seemingly feeling better, clicking a pen with a small notebook in his hand. "Grunkle Ford, we've been literally dying to find out more about you! Where did you learn all the weird magic spells and stuff? How did you get into cryptozoology? How did you discover all the amazing secrets in Gravity Falls?"

The thing wearing Ripley's skin laughs a little. "Dipper, Mabel, come on. Can we all get upstairs before we give Grunkle Ford the third degree? He's probably really hungry, too."

It ushers the children towards the elevator, taking the big one- Soos- by the hand. "Come on, Old Dude Squad can take the second leg up."

The four of them get into the elevator before Ford can think of a safe way to make sure it doesn't get upstairs, and he swallows tightly, hoping against hope that it still needs to pretend to be her long enough that those kids aren't in immediate danger yet.

"Stanford, what the fuck," Stanley says, after a moment.

"Do not start with me, Stanley," Ford hisses, and his twin pauses, frowning deeply at him, but says nothing else.

"The Nightmare Realm," Fiddleford says flatly, cleaning his glasses with his shirt. "Interestin'. I find it real fascinatin' that's the name of the place you let me get sucked into after I begged ya not to open the portal-"

"Fiddleford-"

"And I find it real fascinatin' indeed that ya got yer fool self sucked in after that, after I begged ya to
destroy it after all what I'd seen," Fiddleford interrupts, radiating anger.

"Hey, Fidds, come on, that part wasn't all his fault," Stanley interjects guiltily.

"He could have melted this thing down fer scrap any ol' time," Fiddleford mutters, and the elevator dings.

"Fiddleford, I'm sorry," Ford says, and he really does mean it. "I didn't... I couldn't-"

"Git yer ass upstairs afore the kids come lookin' for us," Fiddleford says decisively, stepping inside the elevator and folding his thin arms over his chest.

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Stanley mutters something about making a late dinner and hands Ford an unfamiliar towel and a set of slightly familiar clothing, shoving him towards his bathroom and insisting Ford shower. It's... nice, for a few minutes, just to be clean and alone, but something has to be done about this thing trying to pass itself off as Ripley. He sighs, turning the water off and toweling his head off before he puts on the star sapphire necklace, brushing his fingers against the smooth stone like he always does when he thinks of... about her. He'll wait, get it alone. Once it's dead it should revert to its true form, and then he can explain to Stanley and the kids exactly how much danger they were in with that thing in the house. (Clone maybe? Shapeshifter isn't ruled out, but it seemed unusually eager to prove that it wasn't a shapeshifter. Some sort of demon manifestation affecting their minds directly? Yes, but if that were the case, Ford wouldn't see her face, Ford wouldn't be able to be affected, it wouldn't look so much like her, it wouldn't hurt to look at her.)

After Ford walks out- clean, dressed in clean clothing- chairs are dragged from the kitchen to the room that he thinks of as a testing lab and which has apparently been transformed over the years into a garden-variety living room with a couch and a television and- Ford scowls a little- his possibly-haunted possibly-psychic Tyrannosaurus skull with a doily on top. Everyone looks at him like he's a ticking time-bomb, and he wishes this were over with already.

"We ordered pizza," the thing says softly. "And Mabel and I have a cake in the oven, so, you know, that'll... that'll be good. We should be ready for dessert by the time all the stories get finished up."

Soos and the children look expectantly at Stanley, for some reason- Fiddleford just looks resentfully at the table, his knee bouncing a little.

"Okay, okay, I've made everyone wait for some of these answers," he sighs, sitting up and adjusting his suit jacket. "It all started a lifetime ago, 1960-or-something, Glass Shard Beach, New Jersey-"

"Mother of God, Stan, does it honestly go back that far?" it asks, appalled.

"Who's tellin' the story?" Stanley demands, and it sighs heavily, pulling an arm around the boy. (D-something, Danny? Decker? Ford tries, but none of those feel right.)

"Proceed!" it says, opening a can of Pitt Cola one-handed and taking a noisy sip.

"So we lived with my Ma and my Pa in an apartment over the family pawn shop in the Lead Paint District-"

"The Lead Paint District?" Fiddleford interrupts. Stanley glares, and he shrugs.

"Now, Dad was a strict guy, tough as a cinderblock and not easily impressed. Ma was a pathological liar...."
Ford sits and listens with the rest of them as Stanley- for reasons that are increasingly unclear to him- gives a brief overview of their childhoods in Glass Shard Beach, the finding of the Stan O'War, their troubles with bullies... as he starts to describe the ill-fated science fair project Ford starts to feel that old wound reopen, up until Fiddleford clears his throat.

"You can't keep interrupting," Stanley tells him.

"Just droppin' inta this story as the only engineer in the room, kids," Fiddleford says, leaning forward. "But a perpetual motion machine is both extremely unlikely an' not, as a matter of fact, a replacement for actually fillin' out a college application."

"Are you saying I couldn't have built-" Ford starts, offended.

"At seventeen? In 1967, using materials you had to buy yerself? Sure, Ford, ya built a machine that never existed before and never existed since." The thing wearing her face gives Fiddleford a nudge.

"Aw, don't fight, Fidds," it says, and Ford can't stand the idea of agreeing with anything it says, so he takes a deep breath and motions for Stanley to continue.

Stanley clears his throat, telling a very abridged version of the night Stanley was kicked out left home, and the story has to get paused again so he can grudgingly accept a hug from the girl Mabel. Ford finds he doesn't much care for the scrutinizing looks on Fiddleford's face or on the... thing's face. Stanley puts the story on hold after the pizza deliveryman comes, and that thing goes into the kitchen with the boy to get plates so they can finish the story while eating.

"Cake's coolin' on the counter, Mabel and I will frost it after this," it says to Stanley, and he shrugs.

"Anyway, back to my, uh, entire life story," he mutters, and the gopher man perks up, leaning forward to hear every word. "So I had decided I wasn't gonna show my face at home until I'd made something of myself. Unfortunately, the treasure-hunting business was slow going..." The next several minutes are full of a tale that consists, in Ford's estimation, of about 80% outright lies. Every time Stanley says something particularly egregious, Fiddleford and the thing beside him make eye contact with each other and on at least two occasions they make eye contact with him, too. The three kids, though, are eating out of Stanley's hands- literally, at one point, when Stanley makes an outrageous claim while gesturing with a slice of pizza in his hand and Mabel, enthralled with the story, takes a bite out of it.

Stanley glances down at her and seems to notice that he's missing half a slice of pizza, and the boy-Danny? Donnie?- chimes in, looking over at Ford.

"But wait, what about you, Grunkle Ford? Did you ever end up getting to go to your dream school?"

"Not exactly," Ford admits, his mouth twisting slightly at the memory. "But I'm sure Fiddleford here can tell you about-"

"No, I can't," Fiddleford says sharply. "But do go on and tell'em about the college my family and I had to work and sacrifice for in order fer me to go to school at all."

Ford clears his throat and tells them about Backupsmore, about what it was like to work and study and do everything in his power to prove himself- with a short, falsely cheerful interjection from Stanley about how well he'd been doing at the time- and about the search for meaning, for a place where he could fit in, that culminated in his decision to live in Gravity Falls. He finds himself strangely hesitant to tell these bright-eyed children all of the... gory details surrounding Bill or his involvement with the portal itself, and neatly excises him from the narrative. Fiddleford doesn't say
anything at the deception, although the thing does that stupid thing Ripley she always used to do with her face when she caught him in a half-truth, eyes hooded and eyebrows raised.

Stanley takes over when it comes to tell of that final, fateful night: the argument, the physical altercation- although he notices Stanley, too, keeps certain details out of the story- and then the immediate aftermath. The rest of the story is short and bitter- some nonsense about transforming the house, over a thirty year period, into a tourist trap.

The thing clears its throat. "Well, that was the worst story I've ever heard in my life, and it's not even the first time I've heard it. So... uh, everybody here knows the next part of the story, where Ford and me end up gettin-"

Ford stands abruptly, unable to listen to another word in her voice. "I'm going to bed."

"Oh," the kids say, looking disappointed. Mabel adds, "But you haven't had Welcome Home cake yet! We still have to frost it and decorate it!"

"Oh," Ford says, floundering. "Well- you can get me for a slice of Welcome Home cake after it's ready, I'll just be in my room-

"Um," Stanley says, and the thing stands, patting Stanley's arm.

"Hey, don't worry, I'll explain the current sleeping arrangements, you guys go nuts with the cake. Mabel, baby, I expect every color of edible glitter you got."

"Yes ma'am!" Mabel says, saluting smartly before grabbing her brother's arm. "Come on, Dipper!"

The thing gives Ford a nervous smile, before beckoning him down the hall, past the door to his study and toward a door that by rights would lead to a small lab for nonhazardous experiments. Instead of his equipment there's a mattress on some wooden pallets, made up with sheets and a pillow, and some furniture lined up against the wall. Storage boxes and plastic bins line the other wall, and Ford's old Electron Carpet is centered in the middle of the floor. It picks up a backpack off the floor, making a wide motion with its arm.

"So! Right now you have the guest room, because we're not gonna disrupt Fiddleford or Stan or the kids, that would be- it's- so you have the guest room," it says brightly, fumbling over its words. "Fiddleford lives here now, he's in the other room down there. Stan's upstairs in the master and the kids are in the attic."

Ford looks around. There are drawings on the walls that look like Fiddleford's work, and others that are done in a decidedly childish hand.

"Do you mean to tell me I'm finally in my own home and I don't actually-" he starts, gently shutting the door and unholstering his gun.

"Oh, no, no, no, this is just- it's just temporary, the kids are here for the summer, I'm sure you and Stan and Fidds can figure out a permanent thing," it says, breathing hard. "And, uh, sorry, I was staying here while we were figuring out how to get you home, but it's all yours now, so-"

"The only chance you have at surviving is to tell me what exactly Bill offered you to come here and make this happen," he says, pointing the barrel of his gun at the livid bruise forming on its throat. Something is vibrating against his chest, practically bouncing against the scarred skin under his sweater.

"Nothing- that's not, that didn't happen, Stanford," it says, eyes wide. "Honey, please, I wouldn't-"
Ford stares for a long time. The vibration on his chest continues, and after a long moment he reaches up and clutches the pendant hanging around his neck.

"...nineteen years ago," he says quietly, "I gave... something, on our anniversary..."

The vibration in the star sapphire pendant fades a little as he pulls on a thin silver chain and lifts the pendant's mate out of the collar of her shirt.

"Nineteen years is a lifetime ago," she says softly, tears filling her eyes as she blinks. "But for me it was only four years, Stanford. It's been about three years since that rooftop."

"But," he says, and why is his breath ragged in his chest now? Why does he feel like his heart's about to explode? "But I searched and searched, and you're-I hadn't even given up yet after only three years, how-"

Tears are rolling down her face. She reaches a hand out, and Ford whimpers softly, unsure he's even made a real sound until she bites her lower lip and steps forward, her hand gently pushing the gun to the side so it's pointed at the carpet.

"I know, Ford, I know. I searched for you too, and- and I got here and I met your family- our family, Ford. They're ours. This place is ours. It's home. You're home now, dearheart."

"It's not real," he says, shivering slightly. "It's not real. This- this is some kind of- trick. Or hallucination. My mind is creating-"

"Honeybunch, would your mind create this?" she asks, reaching back to hand him the framed photo off the dresser. It's Ripley and Stan- as they are now, not the younger people he imagines, wearing gaudy Hawaiian shirts- and they're both grinning and pointing at a framed oil painting. There's a sticker on the frame that reads "US AND NIKOLA TESLA."

Ford jerks his face away from the offending photograph immediately.

"That's not Nikola Tesla," he says, and she smiles and reaches out. Her hand brushes his cheek and he jerks away without thinking, his heart racing again.

"I- I'm sorry," he says, and she smiles brightly, drawing her hand back.

"It's okay, babe, I understand. Look, those kids- Mabel and Dipper? You're going to adore them. And you owe Fiddleford and Stan a series of long conversations and apologies, sweetie, don't look at me like you don't know what for, because I think you know exactly what for." She opens the door, hefting the backpack strap onto her shoulder.

"Come on, Ford, there's a slice of cake that I've waiting been forever to eat with you."

Ford takes a deep, bracing breath, putting the photo back onto the dresser. "Yes. Of course."

He doesn't understand until he's got the plate in his hand, dusted with way too much pink and gold glitter that he sincerely hopes is actually edible, and takes his first bite. It's good- well, it's fresh cake, he hasn't eaten anything like this in years- and when he looks down he sees it's some sort of... white cake with brightly colored splotches...

"...no," he says slowly, startling Stan and Fiddleford, and Ripley's got the same obnoxious grin she always gets when she gets to prove him wrong. "Is... is this really-"
"Funfetti," she says triumphantly, holding out a fist and letting Mabel bump her own smaller fist against it.

(Ford is mentally, physically, emotionally exhausted- the children are already upstairs, Soos on his portable telephone on the back porch- and when Stan grabs Ripley's elbow on her way out the kitchen door Ford thinks he's not supposed to hear him ask where the hell she thinks she's going, or her reply, don't worry, I'm gonna stay at Tyler's for a little while, just until things are normal, I'll still be here in the morning.)

(This ain't normal, he hears Stan say, and she whispers in reply, Stan, don't tell him about the stuff I told you on Pioneer day, alright? Ford has no idea what that means. It's mine to tell, he's got enough to worry about, it's gonna be fine, you just gotta trust me that I know. Ford makes his way over to the door, intent on joining this conversation that's apparently about him, but the blue car is already pulling away in the dark. What was that about? he asks, and Stanley just sighs at him, come on, Sixer, we can talk after everybody's had some sleep.)

(Ford hasn't imagined being home in this dimension in over a decade. He never imagined that he would cry himself to sleep on a bed that still smells like her.)

He's awake before sunrise, and he's surprised that Stanley is, too. Stan pours him a cup of coffee, and it's been so long that Ford isn't... entirely sure what he wants to put in it.

"You still got a sweet tooth?" Stan asks, taking out the sugar. "Apparently everybody in this house-hey, Fidds- apparently everybody in this house is nuts for sugar. Some more than others. You'll find out when Mabel gets in here." Fiddleford makes a soft noise, peering out the window before pouring himself a cup of coffee and taking the sugar from Stan.

"Not back yet," he mutters, and Stan shrugs.

"She'll be back in time for training with the kids, she said."

"Training? With- the twins, Dipper and Mabel?" Ford asks blearily, half to make sure he's getting the names right.

"Ayep, 'pparently she thinks the kids oughta be able to defend 'emselves," Fiddleford says, taking a sip of his coffee and passing the sugar back to Stan. Bemused, Stan passes it over to Ford.

"Oh, that's- that's good. She's a pretty good teacher." Ford frowns, looking out the window, too. "Why didn't she stay, at least for the night? It was pretty late..."

"Hooboy," Stan says, blinking. "I did not sign up to be the fuckin'... third-wheel messenger service between you two."

"Same," Fiddleford says, frowning.

"I have no idea what it is you're trying to convey, Stanley, but-" Ford starts, and Stan puts a box of cereal down on the table with a touch more force than necessary.

"True or false, genius, that's your wife you haven't seen since you pushed her off a roof," Stan says, and Ford bristles.

"I didn't know it was off a roof at the time-" he tries, and stops when he realizes how that sounds, sighing. "Yes."

"So why are you asking us why she didn't stay? Why didn't you ask her to stay?" Stan presses, and
Ford blinks, looking down at his mug.

"...she wanted me to ask her to stay, didn't she?" Ford asks finally, and Fiddleford groans loudly.

"I ain't been married to a human bein' in thirty years and I know ya shoulda had this conversation yesterday," he says, exasperated.


"Don't Fiddleford me, I'm still ornery as heck atcha, but it's dang embarrassifyin' how clueless yer bein' about this," his old friend snaps.

"He was always this clueless," Stan mutters around a mouthful of cereal. "Ask him about prom sometime."

"I'm sure I don't wanna," Fiddleford says, and Ford leans back from the table, bewildered.

"What exactly did I do to deserve this? I just- I literally just got here," he says, and Stan snorts.

Whatever his brother's going to say is cut off by the sound of tires on gravel, and in about a minute the door opens and Ripley's there, real, looking much the same as she did last night.

"Hey, guys, I see you got a start on breakfast," she says, pocketing her keys. "Is-"

"Ripley!" Ford says loudly, standing up and startling her back a little. "Would- would you please come discuss something with me?"

"Uh... right this very second, or can it wait?" she asks slowly, blinking.

"It can't wait," Ford says firmly. Fiddleford's got his hand pressed over his mouth, and Stan's got his back turned, his ears turning bright red as he starts choking on his own laughter.

"Okay... got stuff to do with the kids but I can... let 'em sleep in, I suppose," she says, frowning slightly. He grabs her by the hand and walks her back to the guest room where he slept the night, carefully shutting the door behind them and opening up his bag. He takes out a sheet of parchment, stained and folded over hundreds of times, and looks solemnly at her.

From here, the bruise on her throat looks worse. From here, he can see at least four unfamiliar scars, including a painful-looking one across her face hidden by the bottom of her frames. From here, the dark smudges under her eyes are almost the same purple as the bruise on her throat, the bruise that he put there.

"Why did the chicken cross the road?" Ford asks solemnly, and she blinks at him. He takes a deep breath and reads off the punchline, "Who cares, it's a matter of cosmic insignificance, you fuck."

She bursts out laughing, just like she does every single time he says it.

"Oh my god, Ford, you still got it, honey-

"Ripley," he says softly, putting the paper down and stepping close. "Ripley. Ripley. I haven't... I haven't seen you in eighteen years. I haven't heard your name in eighteen years. I haven't heard you laugh since before..."

"Aw, Stanford," she says, blushing.

"Please stay here. Please stay with me. Please don't make me wait eight whole hours between seeing you again," he says seriously, and she huffs a laugh.
"Well, eight whole hours, I guess I can't say no to-"

He closes the distance between them, cupping his hands against the sides of her face, leaning in close- there's a new oddly floral smell that he guesses is soap of some kind but under it it's still her, she still smells the same, and her body relaxes against his in stages, her hands pulling around the small of his back.

"I've been to hell. This was worse. Losing you- and the dreams- and working, and realizing that you were gone forever-"

"Ford," she breathes out, and he presses his forehead against hers, unable to meet her gaze.

"I'm an idiot. I should have looked longer, I should have tried harder, I-"

"Sweetheart, I don't know what I would have done if I had to wait an extra fifteen years," she tells him, her voice heavy with emotion. "I was losin' it after three."

Ford gulps in a shaky breath, but when he opens his eyes she's still there, she hasn't disappeared.

"I was so sure that you were dead," he confesses. "I don't understand at all how you're here."

"You know I'm gonna have to go into all the gross, weird details with you," she says seriously, pressing a small smooch on his chin. "But later."

He looks at her, and her smile is all easy forgiveness, like it's okay, like she still- after-

"It's been eighteen years," he says again, and she curls a hand around his. "I've... I've changed so much. Do you still... even want-"

"Ford," she sighs, her smile fading. "You're still the same idiot. It's been eighteen years and you've changed so much. Do you still even want me?"

"Ah," he says, relief flooding through him. "I just... I've had so much time to contemplate being... alone, being without you-"

"Ford. Fordsy. Stanford honey." She pulls his hand so she can kiss the knuckle right in the middle, which she's always said is her favorite for symmetrical reasons. "It's been a long time and I'd be an idiot to not... expect you to move on." She hesitates, and when her smile returns it's... not exactly what he remembers being a good smile, but he's spent the better part of two decades wishing he could see her make any sort of smile at all.

"Um," he says, putting that twelve PhD vocabulary to good use.

"Dear. Eat something and have an honest conversation with either your brother or your best friend." She pulls away, and that seems... like... not the thing Ford would have wanted to happen next, but he's not even sure what it is he wants to happen next. "I have to spend an hour with those two kids. You know how important consistency is with learnin' some of this stuff. You could probably teach them a thing or two about a thing or two."

"I don't know how appropriate it would be to teach kids how to roughhouse in a turtleneck-" he begins, flustered, and she flashes a wicked smile at him.

"Oh, no, don't worry, dear. I already told Stan and Fidds about your tattoos. The worst of the "shocked" laughter is over. I expect to see you in a tanktop and shorts tomorrow."
"No," he says quietly, and she snorts a little and shuts the door on him.

He stands in the middle of the room, not... entirely sure if things are all right or settled properly, but by the time he's back out in the kitchen Stan's handing him a bowl and a spoon and Fiddleford's making sniffling noises about the fact that Ford pours the milk first, and the kids are laughing so loudly from the backyard that it feels like the house is full of people.

"Stan, could I have a word?" he asks, rinsing out his bowl after Stan- with an unusual patience- shows him where to put the milk and cereal away.

"Sure," Stan says, and when they step into the entryway Stan leans in close and asks if he's going to get punched. As soon as Ford tells him no, he grabs him in a fierce hug, his broad barrel-chest shaking with utterly silent sobs.

"Stanley," Ford tries to say, awkwardly reaching up to pat his brother's back.

"I can't believe it took so long, Ford, I'm so sorry," he says into the dark red wool of Ford's shirt. "I'm such an idiot, I wasted so much time trying and-"

"Stan," Ford says, sighing. Stan sniffs loudly at him. "Stan, when did you find the other two journals?"

"We found Journal 3 at the beginning of the month," Stan says, leaning back and wiping his nose on the sleeve of his robe. "We stole Journal 2 yesterday.

"You... really?" Ford tries to wrap his mind around it and has... serious trouble. "And when did you realize that half of the instructions were written in invisible ink?"

The look on Stan's face is a mixture of shock and outrage and intense horror. "Invisible what?"

Ford puts his hands on Stan's shoulders, as much to keep himself from making noise as it is to steady his brother. "So you're telling me you got the portal even partially operational using roughly... one sixth of the instructions needed to operate it."

"You monster," Stan says flatly, huffing. "Invisible ink. Let me guess, those 'warnings' you mentioned last night, invisible ink, huh?"

"You're not an idiot," Ford says, after a moment.

"No, I'm an idiot, but it apparently runs in the family," Stan says, rolling his eyes. "And the only reason Ripley and I didn't use your basement portal is because she found out the fuel source is toxic waste, Ford. You've been an idiot forever, don't act like this is the first time you realized."

Ford sucks in a breath, looking away. "I freely admit that mistakes were make, Stanley-"

"Well that's a first." Stan brushes his hands off. "So. You didn't pull me out here to get called an idiot, what was it you wanted to talk about?"

"I don't know where to start. Why- why did you do this to my house? What is this Mystery Shack nonsense, Stan, I hate tacky tourist garbage-"

"Oh yeah, like that was my skunk ape snowglobe I found in your bedroom," Stan says, unimpressed.

"And why is Fiddleford living here?" Ford continues, determined not to be derailed again.

"First of all- Stanford, I'm sorry, but the last thing you said was to do something. Even if I'd known
about all these so-called warnings you left me, I... I couldn't have just left you on the other side of that portal to rot." Stan sighs, adjusting his robe. "And that meant paying your mortgage so I wouldn't lose the lab, so I wouldn't lose you. I had to think of something and I was runnin' out of options. As for Fidds..." Stan rubs the back of his neck, clearly uncomfortable.

"Nobody... told you what's been goin' on for him for the last thirty years, right?"

"No," Ford says, frowning. "Stan, what-"

"He's been homeless most of it, Ford. He's been... really lucid ever since Ripley found out about him and made him move in, but he still has really bad days, Ford. Like... really bad. He forgets how old his kid is most of the time, he'll forget why he's here or who we are- honestly most of the time he doesn't remember you except that he's pissed off at ya."

Something cold settles in Ford's gut. He knows what this is, even if he can't quite recall-

"Yeah, see, I thought so. You wrote about his, what, his memory gun in your journal? Yeah, he didn't destroy it." Stan pauses. "It sounds like some of those hooded guys are still running around, they tried to do to Ripley what they did to Fidds, but... uh... it didn't take, I guess. You'll have to ask her."

"She didn't mention anything about being attacked," Ford says, and Stan flaps one burly arm at him, wafting a smell that's half coffee and half cologne.

"I believe my exact words were that I wasn't going to be the third-wheel messenger in whatever your marriage is about," he says dismissively. "Look, I know it's weird, but I gotta start gettin' ready for work. Gotta keep the lights on somehow, right?"

Stan moves to walk out but stops, reaching over and squeezing Ford's shoulder.

"It's.... really good to have you home, Stanford."

"Yeah, you too," Ford says without thinking, and tenses when Stan snickers. "You know what I meant!"

He needs... he needs time to think about things.
Candy and Grenda are set to come over for lunch, but it's not until Aunt Ripley comes back from picking them up and they burst out of her backseat covered in pink t-shirts, ribbons, official Sev'ral Timez hats- that Mabel shrieks (scaring Grunkle Ford, who's just trying to make himself a sandwich) and remembers what today is.

"Heaven's sake," Mr. Fiddleford says, scooting into the kitchen as the girls run in ahead of Aunt Ripley. "Where's the fire, gals?"

"Hi, Mister McGucket!" Grenda says, and Candy gives a tiny wave. "Are you crazy today or are you regular like last time?"

"Prob'ly crazy," Mr. Fiddleford says, smiling. "Sev'ral Times fans, huh? You know, I like some of their records m'self-"

Mabel and Grenda and Candy all scream again, startling Grunkle Ford and Mr. Fiddleford again.

"What's happening?" Grunkle Ford asks, stepping back. "Why is there this level of screaming?"

"Mr. McGucket, their concert's tonight!" Candy says, and Mr. Fiddleford's eyes light up, just like a true fan's.

"Holy bucket of billy-goats, that was a loud yell," Aunt Ripley says, finally stepping in. "What is it? Is it a spider? I can't help if it's a spider."

"The concert's tonight and Mr. Fiddleford should come with us because he loves Sev'ral Timez too!" Mabel enthuses, pointing. Mr. Fiddleford looks sort of shocked, blinking rapidly behind his glasses.

"Hey, that's a great idea, Fidds, these wacky gals need adult supervision," Ripley says cheerfully, patting Grenda's hair.

"I-is that safe?" Mr. Fiddleford asks, sounding nervous for some reason. "I'm not real good with kids-"

"Fidds, hey, you don't have to if you don't want to, but if you do want to you'll have fun at the concert," Ripley says firmly. "Right, Ford?"

"Is this your Secret Uncle from the Interdimensional Portal you told us about?" Candy asks excitedly, and Grunkle Ford gets a hunted "substitute teacher" look on his face as she offers her non-fork hand for a handshake, which he gingerly takes for just, like, a single second.

"Children," Grunkle Ford says, clutching his PB&J to his chest. "Greetings. Do- do kids still say greetings here?"

"Your uncle's like a cute old man wizard!" Grenda yells, and Mr. Fiddleford and Aunt Ripley both giggle as Grunkle Ford makes a spluttering Dipper-esque noise.

"He is a cute old man wizard," Aunt Ripley tells her seriously, pouring herself a glass of water from the sink. "Would you guys like a ride to the concert tonight?"
"Yes please Mrs. Pines," Candy says, and Grunkle Ford and Aunt Ripley both blush but neither of them tries to correct her.

Which is good. Mabel may not be having much luck in the romance department, but an actually literally star-crossed marriage between a mysterious aunt and uncle that finally gets to be reunited after years and years is almost as good. An idea strikes, and Mabel grabs Grunkle Ford's sleeve before he can escape.

"Ooh, I know! Grunkle Ford, why don't you and Aunt Ripley come to the concert too?" she asks, turning the Mabel Charm on full blast. Grunkle Ford blinks, unable to withstand her cuteness.

"I've never heard of this performer," he says, eyes darting to the side. Aunt Ripley clears her throat.

"You know what, sweetie, a concert is probably- you know, honey, it's probably a lot- the- you know, it's, your Grunkle and I probably, we probably- it would be scary, for me, to go to a concert," Aunt Ripley says, before draining the rest of her water glass. "And I wouldn't be surprised if Grunkle Ford was scared of being surrounded by hundreds of screaming people, too. The last time that happened to us, we-"

She pauses, glancing over at Grunkle Ford.

"It wasn't optimal," Grunkle Ford says.

"Well, you two can go get dinner and then come pick us up after," Mr. Fiddleford says, and Mabel reminds herself to give him a high five later. "T'won't make no sense to drive the round trip twice."

"You know what, that's a good idea," Aunt Ripley says slowly.

"Oh, but- honestly, I ought to get started on my work, I've been putting it off for far too long," Grunkle Ford starts, and Aunt Ripley gives him a Look.

"Is it more important than spending time with your niece, Fordsy?"

"Well- I mean, yes, the fate of the multiverse depends upon-"

"That was a trick question, as well you know," Aunt Ripley interrupts, washing out her glass and sticking it on the dish drainer. "You have three hours to do anything absolutely essential to the survival of the multiverse and at that point I'm comin' to getcha, it'll be a thirty minute window to prep for taking the girls somewhere nice, and if you lose track of time you're gonna go anyway but if you don't want to be dragged to a restaurant covered in engine grease you're gonna think hard about taking a shower when I tell you."

"Mrs. Pines, do you want us to give you a Date Night Makeover?" Candy asks, and Grunkle Ford takes several steps back and flees for the basement. That's fine- with Aunt Ripley and Mr. Fiddleford on board, Mabel's positive that he's going to end up with them tonight.

"Sure. I've never had a makeover," Aunt Ripley says seriously, and all three of the girls scream again.

"Good God, ya'll made a sound only dogs and whales can hear," Mr. Fiddleford says, blinking. "Scuze me, ladies, I'll see you tonight when it's concert time."

"Come on, Aunt Ripley," Mabel says triumphantly. "Time to see if we even can improve on the perfection that is your face."
"Okay," Aunt Ripley says, turning bright red- Mabel makes a mental note to remind Grunkle Ford to tell Aunt Ripley how pretty she is, because he seems like he's the type to need help with stuff like that.

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Things seem to be going pretty well, if Mabel's any judge- Aunt Ripley let Mabel and the girls do her hair and makeup, and when she went downstairs to ask Grunkle Stan if she could borrow one of his clean white shirts they could hear him yell "Hot Belgian Waffles" so loud that the window rattled, which can only be a good thing. Grunkle Ford came up when called, and after some coaxing he ditched his trenchcoat and put on a clean turtleneck sweater in plain black. The look of shock on his face when he sees Aunt Ripley for the first time is a beautiful moment Mabel will hold on to forever. The stunned silence and quiet, nervous giggles of Mr. Fiddleford when he comes out wearing slacks and the Hawaiian shirt Aunt Ripley got him and notices all the work the girls put into her hair and makeup is another beautiful moment that Mabel is determined to treasure.

"Your hair is different," Grunkle Ford manages to say, nervously picking at all twelve of his fingernails in rapid succession.

"Grenda brought out the curling iron," Aunt Ripley says happily, turning her head back and forth so the ringlets can bounce on her shoulders. "Good job, Grenda."

"You look amazing, Mrs. Pines!" Grenda says, hugging her around her middle.

"Are those false eyelashes?" Mr. Fiddleford asks. Aunt Ripley bats her eyes.

"Ye- uh, are they? I forget," she admits.

"Yes they are!" Mabel says cheerfully. "We went for sparkly purple glitter foil eyelashes to bring out the color of your eyes and draw attention to how beautiful they are! Plus they contrast so well with the gold eyeshadow we had!"

"And to show that you are fierce, like a cyborg who was built for war but has learned about Love," Candy adds, blushing.

"Aw, thanks, guys," Aunt Ripley beams at them. "I've never been a fierce beautiful cyborg before!"

Mabel gives Grunkle Ford a pointed look and elbows him. He blinks, clearly panicking in the face of such beauty.

"I, ah. I showered and changed, as requested," he says, and Aunt Ripley gives him a smile, the Hot Coral lipgloss shining in the afternoon light.

"I noticed. You look great! You too, Fidds, lookin' good," she adds, doing finger guns. "Alright, team, are we ready to have a super fun night at the concert and see some handsome gentleman singers?"

"Yeah!" Mabel, Grenda, and Mr. Fiddleford yell- Candy says yes, in a more normal voice.

It takes some figuring out, but they eventually get everyone into the Ripleymobile- Mabel, Candy, and Grenda in the back, Mr. Fiddleford between Aunt Ripley and Grunkle Ford on the bench seat. Aunt Ripley waits until everyone's buckled up before she turns on the radio and starts driving. After a few minutes, Grunkle Ford clears his throat.

"The speed limit's forty-five, Ripley."
"Huh? I'm- I'm not speeding," Aunt Ripley says, hands wrapped around the wheel, her knuckles the permanent too-white they always get when she's driving.

"Goin' five under ain't a crime," Fiddleford remarks. "Do yer thing, Ripley."

"Thank you," Ripley sniffs. "And I'm going more than five under, so you can't say I'm speeding, Ford."

"You're not- you're not going to go up to speed?" Grunkle Ford asks slowly, his head turning as a car beeps at them, then swerves around to pass. He adjusts his glasses, peering over Fiddleford. "Ripley, you're going thirty. Shouldn't- shouldn't you speed up?"

"What? No, it's fine. You want to know what happens when a car going forty-five rams into the back of a truck full of enormous logs? Because this is a logging town, Ford, if I lose control of the vehicle that will happen and we will all die," Ripley says, shuddering slightly. Grenda starts crying a little bit.

"Kids," Fiddleford says, turning back to look at them. "Don't worry. Nobody's going to die."

"Because I'm driving at a safe, reasonable speed!" Ripley says firmly. Grunkle Ford opens his mouth to say something, and Mabel's heart sinks a little. This isn't going at all like she'd wanted it to.

"Aunt Ripley! Can you tell us more about your combat instructor who thinks humans are tiny and stupid?" Mabel interrupts.

"Haha, um, okay. Well, he thought human mouths were stupid, too," she says, laughing a little. "He had those clicky pinchy things and he rubbed them together to make words, but they'd pinch on his lips and mouth if he tried to speak English so I had to learn his language. He used to say only humans could create the one language his people couldn't duplicate, but uh, I think most Earth languages would've given him the same problem. But he was real patient teachin' me how to speak his language, so it worked out in the end."

Grunkle Ford is silent for a few minutes, before asking softly, "Aggamm'i!ka berrett'eh Devaaki?"

"Aggamm'i!ka Devaaki berrettik," Aunt Ripley says automatically, in the same tone of voice she uses when she's explaining to Dipper and Mabel how to correct their stance. "G'phalata marra !affi mal."

"Language," Fiddleford sighs between them.

"Sorry," Aunt Ripley says automatically. "Fixing Ford's sentence structure is all."

"I feel like you're missing the point," Grunkle Ford mutters.

"Are you two speaking an alien language?" Candy gasps, and both of them make positive noises. "Can you teach me?"

"I can," Aunt Ripley says cheerfully. "Ford can teach you how to speak Tacidian like Yoda."

"I just didn't think you'd want to tell them about him," Grunkle Ford says quietly, and Aunt Ripley tenses.

"I can censor a story, Ford, it wasn't all bad," she says.

"Most of it was bad, Ripley, you were-"
"My story to tell," Ripley says tersely. Everyone in the backseat has the same look on their faces-
Aunt Ripley and Grunkle Ford are doing that "parents aren't fighting yet but will probably have an
'adult discussion' soon" thing. "Why don't you tell the kids something nice about your adventures?"

"None of it was nice," Grunkle Ford says, looking out the window. The silence is worse than the
argument.

Mr. Fiddleford clears his throat. "My, my. What an awkward lull in conversation."

"What about you?" Grunkle Ford asks, looking over. "You... it was only three years, right? Did you
go anywhere nice?"

"Sure did," Ripley says, using the too-cheerful voice Mabel knows she picked up off of Grunkle
Stan. "I slayed a dragon in Dimension Q4K/. I got famous for stealing a giant purple jewel on a tree
planet. Spent about three months hanging out in Dimension 52 with a cool seven-eyed lady."

"You- you were there? You saw the Oracle?" Grunkle Ford asks quickly, picking his head up. "You
didn't say-"

"Well, I did mention I got picked up by a surgeon, you know, after the roof," Ripley says pointedly.
"I didn't think it was important to say it was someone you'd met years later."

"She told you she'd meet me?" Ford asks, confused. "But- she didn't mention anything about y-"

"Hey, look, we're here," Fiddleford interrupts. "Sweet baby Jesus, thank you."

Grunkle Ford has to get out to let Fiddleford and the girls out of the car, and Mabel thinks Mr.
Fiddleford had a solid point. They came out here to have a good time and instead Aunt Ripley and
Grunkle Ford are apparently fighting? No thanks. Mabel sighs, even though she's glad to get to see
Sev'ral Timez in concert. She has to figure out a way to make everybody happy! ...later. After the
concert.

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"Alright, Greggy C., Creggy G., Leggy P., Chubby Z., Deep Chris," Mabel says, counting them off.
"We're going to have to figure out a way to get you into the car without anyone noticing."

"...what are you gals doin'?" Mr. Fiddleford asks, staring. "Is- is that-"

"Hey, bearded girl, we're being rescued by our girl, Mabel, girl," one of the boys says.

"Sweet sarsaparilla," Fiddleford says weakly.

"I know! They're just so cute!" Grenda cries out.

"Their cuteness ain't the issue, here," Fiddleford says. "Kids, yer not kidnappin' these'ere boys, are
ya?"

"We're rescuing them from their evil master!" Candy says firmly, to a chorus of yeah girl's from the
boys.

"Yeah, they need a safe place to lie low for a while," Mabel says, pouting. "Please? They'll all fit in
Aunt Ripley's trunk. Aunt Ripley and Grunkle Ford won't even notice they're there."

"That ain't right," Fiddleford says, using his beard to wipe away his forehead. "Oh, lordy."
"What do you think we should do, Mr. McGucket?" Grenda asks, and Mr. Fiddleford barks a small, panicky laugh.

"Well, I would start by not pretendin' to yer auntie that there ain't five beautiful men crammed into the trunk of her car," he says.

Aunt Ripley's car is parked at the end of the parking lot, the top down, and Aunt Ripley and Grunkle Ford are both sitting on the hood staring out into the woods, so they must not have been fighting too much.

"...remember milkshakes being this good," Grunkle Ford's saying quietly.

"They're better at Greasy's," Aunt Ripley says, before taking a sip of something. "How long ago were you there, with Jheselbraum?"

"Less than six months ago," Grunkle Ford says, and she whistles.

"That's funny, because it was about a year ago I-"

"Fellers," Mr. Fiddleford interrupts as soon as they're close. They both turn and do double-takes at the gaggle of beautiful singers with them. "We... have an issue."

"Hey girl," Leggy P. says, stepping forward and grabbing Aunt Ripley's hand to smooch the back of it. "We're goin' in your trunk, girl."

"Wha," Aunt Ripley says, blinking.

"Now, listen, kid," Grunkle Ford starts to say, before Deep Chris comes forward and does the same thing, smooching the back of Grunkle Ford's hand instead.

"All the way in your trunk, girl, tonight."

"Inappropriate!" Fiddleford snaps, and the boys all look so sad that it's adorable- even though Mabel's not entirely sure what was inappropriate about that statement, since they were planning on sticking everyone in the trunk.

"Please, Aunt Ripley, we're just trying to save them from their horrible manager," Mabel says, latching onto her arm. "He was forcing them to perform and starving them if they didn't sing good enough!"

"Yeah, Mrs. Pines, they kept the boyz in a cage backstage!" Candy adds.

"That guy was so mean!" Grenda yells, bringing both fists down onto Aunt Ripley's car hard enough to leave two fist-sized dents in the door.

"Is... is that true, Several Boyz?" Aunt Ripley asks slowly, her hand clenching around the milkshake. Grunkle Ford gently takes the cup out of her hand.

"You don't want to ruin the upholstery," he says seriously, taking out an enormous laser gun. "Alright, kids, where is this guy?"

"Are you going to yell at Mr. Bratsman?" one of the boys asks nervously. Grunkle Ford looks at his gun, then at Aunt Ripley.

"....possibly," he says.
"Are you going to intimidate him into leaving Sev'ral Timez alone and not make any more clones of them?" Mabel asks, and Aunt Ripley and Grunkle Ford exchange another look.

"Is the cloning and enslavement of humans an offense punishable by death in this dimension?" Aunt Ripley asks eventually.

"I don't think it is, no," Fiddleford says, holding his hand up. "And I'm sure that's a terrible idea yer havin' right now. The kids just wanted to give the boys a chance to lie low and make it to safety."

"I'll see if Tyler can put them up at his place," Aunt Ripley says, massaging the bridge of her nose under her glasses. "Fids, of course, is right. We can't kill that man. We have to do things... ugh. The legal way."

"See, you really are the Responsible Adult," Mabel says cheerfully. Mr. Fiddleford nods glumly.

"Wait, Fiddleford's not the only responsible-" Grunkle Ford starts, and Aunt Ripley puts a finger up.

"Go on and tell these kids that you're responsible, I double-dare you," she says, and he shuts up.

"Uh, not to get in the way of your adorable scifi romcom," Grenda says, sighing wistfully, "but the guards are probably going to start looking for the boys soon!"

"Oh, no, what will we do?" Candy cries out, grabbing onto the nearest boys to shield them with her body.

"Okay. It's cool, we're cool. Anybody claustrophobic?" Aunt Ripley asks.

"What's claustrophobic, girl?" Creggy G. asks.

"Anybody too scared to go in the trunk?" she clarifies.

"We can all fit!" the boys sing in unison. "We'll all get up inside you-ou-our trunk, girl!"

"2013, dawg!" one of them yells- Chubby Z., Mabel thinks.

"Jesus Mary and Joseph," Aunt Ripley says, biting her lower lip. "I can't actually tell if they're making an innuendo or not."

"Just shove'em in there, they don't need to sound so happy about it," Grunkle Ford says gruffly. He pauses between wedging the boy band in Aunt Ripley's trunk, a fleeting smile passing over his face before he slams the trunk shut. Aunt Ripley waits until they're all buckled up to ask what he's smiling for. "It's just like old times, is all," he says, grinning into the heel of his palm.

"Weirdo," she says fondly. Aunt Ripley ends up calling Tyler from the parking lot of his bed and breakfast- at first he's overjoyed to see her, bouncing and going on about how he hasn't seen Ripley in a week- and when she tells him what's going on and they start pulling the boy band out of the trunk of her car he starts cry-laughing and asks since when she drove a clown car full of nonthreatening teeny-bopper heartthrobs.

"You're a... clown car," she mutters, giving him a fierce hug. "Ty, I can't thank you enough for helping these kids out. If anybody comes around asking, send 'em my way."

"Of course," Tyler says, scratching his head under his hat. "Hey, is that Old Man McGucket and Mr. Mystery in the car? Why's Mr. Pines dressed like that...?"

"That's Mr. Mystery's brother and yeah, that's Fiddleford McGucket, we're... workin' some stuff out
with Tate," she says, and Mabel doesn't know how to interpret the look on Tyler's face before he shrugs and gives her another hug.

"Well, git'im, girl," he says, and she gently smacks his arm after the hug ends.

Everybody breathes a sigh of relief as Aunt Ripley starts driving towards home, which is why everyone starts groaning as soon as Grunkle Ford starts- in that particular tone of voice that never means anything good when it's your parents doing it- saying it sure is funny that Tyler said he hasn't seen Ripley in a week. Aunt Ripley avoids saying anything until they get back to the Mystery Shack, since Candy and Grenda are spending the night. Even then, she just hustles Mabel and her friends back up into the house and mumbles "nonspecific excuse" at Grunkle Ford and Mr. Fiddleford whenever they start trying to ask her anything.

"Dipper!" Aunt Ripley says, reaching out and ruffling Dipper's hair, knocking his hat loose. "What did you and Stan do all day, buddy?"

"Nothing," Dipper mutters, and Mabel knows that pouty tone, that's-

"That's a feeling sad about Wendy face!" Mabel says, pointing. "What happened?"

"Ripley, can we talk?" Grunkle Ford asks.

"I'm in the middle of a thing," Aunt Ripley says pointedly.

"No, it's nothing, just- Robbie is such a jerk," Dipper says, fixing his hat. "And I basically made Wendy cry because I'm a jerk, too, apparently."

"Aw, Dip," Aunt Ripley says.

"Why are you leaving out the fact that we went bowling?" Grunkle Stan asks, scratching himself through his robe.

"And we had fun bowling," Dipper adds.

"We kidnapped Sev'ral Timez, apparently they're clones," Candy says brightly.

"We liberated a bunch of cloned slaves," Aunt Ripley corrects.

"Sounds like you guys had a good time," Grunkle Stan says slowly, blinking.

"Ripley, why did you tell Stanley that you'd be staying at that Tyler's place last night if you didn't go to see him?" Grunkle Ford interrupts. Aunt Ripley blinks, then turns very slowly to look at him.

"Ford, I can't believe you have a bee in your bonnet over-"

"So where did you stay last night?" Grunkle Stan asks, frowning.

"Jeez louise, I'm not- I don't have to answer that," Aunt Ripley says, waving an arm. "We have the issue of our liberated clone army of handsome singers to think about. And the kids. And Fiddleford. And you two, Original Twins. It's- it's literally- who cares, alright, who cares? Because we have so much to worry about right now."

Aunt Ripley tosses her keys onto the table and pulls out her phone. "I have a phone call to make, just... have a fun sleepover, Mabel. Dipper, don't get into any trouble with these troublemakers around."
She steps outside, and Mabel clears her throat, grabbing a pitcher of Mabel Juice out of the fridge.

"Well, I'll just be- going-"

"Oh sweet Moses, don't take that with you, you girls'll be up all night," Grunkle Stan says, but Mabel's already halfway up the stairs and she can pretend she can't hear him.

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Candy and Grenda are sleeping when Aunt Ripley knocks on the door and pokes her head inside.

"It's three-thirty in th'mornin', Maymay," she says, her words all soft-edged and running together. "Can't sleep?"

"I wanted to treasure today," Mabel says, putting down her scrapbooking supplies. Aunt Ripley nods, sniffing.

"Where's Dipper?" she asks, wiping her nose on her (technically Grunkle Stan's) sleeve.

"Dipper and Grunkle Ford were having a movie marathon in the livingroom. Grunkle Ford said he hasn't seen Return of the Jedi in English." Aunt Ripley nods again.

"C'you take these eyelashes offa me? I don't wanna sleep with'em on," she murmurs.

"Yeah, of course." Mabel digs out some makeup remover wipes, and Aunt Ripley takes a few unsteady steps trying to navigate over the girls before sitting on the edge of Mabel's bed. From up close, Aunt Ripley looks like she's been crying. From up close, she smells like she's been drinking out of the "secret" cabinet in Dad's office that Mabel and Dipper aren't supposed to know about.

"So how come you're awake?" Mabel asks, careful not to yank out any of Aunt Ripley's eyelashes when she takes off the glittery fakes.

"Eh, last call's at two-thirty and it took me an hour to walk home," she says, blinking one eye at a time. "Supposin' I should shower, too."

"Probably a good idea," Mabel agrees. Aunt Ripley gestures at the Summer Memories scrapbook. "Can I see?"

So Mabel takes a few minutes, showing off the scrapbook- it's almost halfway full, so there's a lot to look at. Aunt Ripley smiles at every page, has something nice to say about every one of Mabel's drawings, and after a while she yawns and stretches her back, making a bunch of gross knuckle-popping noises from her spine as she does.

"Well, I'd better take that shower now. S'almost four, sugar, you ought to get some sleep," she says, leaning over to smooch the top of Mabel's head.

"I'm gonna get a glass of water," Mabel tells her, and she shrugs.

"Can't see the harm in that, punkin." They head down together, parting ways at the bottom of the stairs. Mabel's just sitting down at the kitchen table with her glass of water when Grunkle Ford steps in, his hair all messed up.

"I'm positive you should be in bed, young lady," he remarks.

"Can't sleep, drinking water," Mabel says, taking a big sip to illustrate her point. He sighs.
"Was that your Aunt coming in just now?" he asks.

"She came home half an hour ago, but she's taking a shower now," Mabel says truthfully- yes, sometimes there's a time and a place for a little white lie, but this doesn't seem like it. Grunkle Ford sighs again, taking a seat at the table.

"Aren't you tired, kid?" he asks, and she shrugs.

"I dunno. Sometimes my body's tired but my brain isn't," she explains, and he gives her a small smile.

"Heh, I was the same way when I was your age. Still am, sometimes, as a matter of fact. I know counting sheep doesn't help." He messes around a little, tapping his finger on the tabletop. "So does your Aunt Ripley do that sometimes?"

"What?" Mabel asks, because he could... be talking about a lot of things.

"Leave for no reason and come back late?" he asks. Mabel thinks about it.

"Well... she didn't stay with us all summer, just after she got hurt and lost her old glasses back on Pioneer Day. She didn't really do anything like that before you came home, though."

"Oh." Grunkle Ford drums his fingers on the table- the extra finger really does make a difference in the amount of drumming you can get. Mabel watches him for a while, remembering how upset Aunt Ripley looked when she came in earlier.

"Grunkle Ford, you look like you got something on your mind. Fortunately for you, the Love Doctor is in," she says seriously.

"The what now?" he asks, blinking.

"Mabel Pines, Love MD," she says, pointing her thumbs at herself. He blinks owlishly at her, then gives her another little smile.

"Thank you, Mabel, but I don't know if my problem is something you can help me with."

Which is no good at all. Mabel doesn't know a lot about her new Grunkle yet, but she knows he shouldn't be looking so sad now that he's finally home with his best bro-bro and beautiful wife and BFF Fiddleford! Clearly, this is a huge problem and everybody Mabel knows, including the rainbow puppy wearing a party hat sitting at the table next to Grunkle Ford, agrees that she needs to gear up and save the day before-

"Hey," Grunkle Ford says, putting a hand on her shoulder. "You fell asleep at the table, kid. Let's get you back upstairs, huh?"

"Mwuh," Mabel says sleepily, taking his hand and leaning against his side. He freezes for a moment, before squeezing her hand back and walking her back up to the stairs to the bedroom.

Mabel wakes up at nine-thirty, still kind of tired, but nothing more Mabel-Juice won't fix. It's a little weird because usually Aunt Ripley's waking her and Dipper up by now, but Mabel figures Aunt Ripley is letting them sleep in because of the sleepover.

When Mabel and the girls head downstairs, it's... a little unusual. Grunkle Stan has his record player out, playing a super old Rolling Stones album super loud, and he's also making a huge amount of Stancakes while making as much noise as possible. Aunt Ripley's sitting between Dipper and
Grunkle Ford at the table in her Mabel Sweater, her head down on the table and completely covered by the hood, and whenever Grunkle Stan bangs something down onto the table she groans loudly from inside Sweater Town.

"Hey, girls!" Grunkle Stan says cheerfully, slamming a platter of Stancakes down with a glint in his eye that he usually only gets when he's doing something a little bit illegal. "Did you know today's a national holiday?"

"What?! I didn't know it was a national holiday!" Grenda cries out. Aunt Ripley makes a tiny whimpering sound, and Grunkle Ford reaches over and pats her shoulder.

"Yep! It's National Noisiest Breakfast Of The Year Day!" Grunkle Stan announces, rattling the silverware drawer as he yanks it open.

"Hey, Grunkle Stan, maybe we shouldn't celebrate this year, Aunt Ripley looks like she's getting a headache," Dipper says, and Grunkle Stan actually cackles wildly at that.

"A headache, huh? That's unlikely, she would have had to do something incredibly irresponsible and against the house rules to have a headache, isn't that right, Ripley?"

Aunt Ripley moans and holds up a thumb's up, which does nothing to make Dipper feel better from what Mabel can see.

"Stanley, I'm sure we all get the point," Grunkle Ford says, sounding tired. "If you don't mind, I have a lot of work to do today downstairs, so-

"Point? What point?" Grunkle Stan booms, passing out plates. "Is it the point that people who are sick should see a doctor? Is it that people who need specific scientific nerd help need to get a move on asking specific science nerds for that help?"

"Stanley, what on Earth are you-" Grunkle Ford asks, totally confused. Aunt Ripley shoots up straight, her face all squashy and red as she scrambles to get to her feet.

"You know what, I just remembered that I have a lot of stuff to do today too, I'm headin' out," she says quickly, scrabbling at the wooden pegboard where Stan hangs his keys.

"You're not okay to drive and you know that," Stan calls after her.

"I'm allowed to carry my keys, old man!" she calls back, stumbling badly.

"Mr. Pines, are we still celebrating National Noisiest Breakfast Of The Year Day?" Candy asks shyly, and Grunkle Stan seems to consider it, before turning on Grunkle Ford with a wicked grin.

"Yep."

Five minutes later Mr. Fiddleford walks in, looks at everyone- Grenda chanting and banging the table, Grunkle Ford with his head in his hands next to Dipper doing the same thing, Candy using butter knives to drum on her plate, Grunkle Stan and Mabel singing the theme song to Ducktective-and walks out without saying anything to anybody.

(After Grunkle Stan leaves to drive Candy and Grenda home, Aunt Ripley manages to mow the front and back yards and only throws up twice. She comes inside and drinks glass after glass of water, turns a tired smile on Mabel and tells her never to become a gross old sinner like her. She spends the rest of the day hanging out with Dipper and Mabel and Mr. Fiddleford and picking out entries in her Journal- which she says is half Secret Diary anyway- to read to Dipper so he can take
down important or helpful information and draw pictures that look more "official" than Ripley's own sketches.)

(Only, when Mr. Fiddleford and Mabel bring out extra drawing supplies so everybody can draw and not just Dipper, Aunt Ripley just sort of stares off at the wall and covers her paper in green crayon. It looks like a bunch of scribbles- circles, when Mabel looks at it closely. Circles with mouths and little round teeth, and eyeballs between the teeth. She waits until Aunt Ripley's page is full and she starts drawing the same picture over the old ones to ask Aunt Ripley what that's a picture of. When Aunt Ripley looks at it she jumps, then crumples up the page and mutters something about weird band logos, tossing it into Mr. Fiddleford's wastebasket.)

(After that, Aunt Ripley takes a few sheets of paper and copies some things down from her Journal, chewing on her lower lip and shaking her head when Mr. Fiddleford asks if she needs anything. She carefully tucks the pages into her Journal so they're not sticking out and goes and puts it in (her? Grunkle Ford's?) room. While she's out, Mr. Fiddleford picks up the crumpled drawing and flattens it out and looks at it, frowning, before folding it over and sticking it in one of the dusty desk drawers.)

At dinner, after there's a lull in Dipper asking Grunkle Ford questions about Gravity Falls and the anomalies and everything there, Aunt Ripley clears her throat.

"Hey, honey, what've you been up to downstairs?" she asks, poking spaghetti around with her fork. Her tummy must still be hurting, because she's barely eaten anything.

"Well, as you know, the portal downstairs was highly unstable and turning it on willy-nilly would have absolutely doomed this entire dimension," Grunkle Ford says, squaring his shoulders. "It's a miracle that you found a way to open and direct a portal without using that one-

"You mean it's a miracle that Fiddleford had such a good idea to do something else, because going by the instructions you left we would have probably blown somethin' up," Grunkle Stan says tartly, spinning his pasta on his fork.

"Fellers, don't drag me inta this," Mr. Fiddleford mutters around a mouthful of breadstick, trying to sound like he doesn't care even though his foot is doing the tappy thing he does whenever he gets nervous or excited.

"You're a gift, Fidds," Aunt Ripley says sternly.

"As I was saying," Grunkle Ford says, looking at the ceiling. "I've been working to patch the holes worn through the fabric of spacetime, but any pressure at all- from either side- could cause a rift to form that would be immediately fatal to every lifeform on this planet. So, you know. I've been busy."

Dipper and Aunt Ripley both make the same goggly-eyed face at him.

"But not too busy, right?" Grunkle Stan asks, staring hard.

"No, I've absolutely been too busy," Grunkle Ford replies.

"But not too busy for your family," Stan says, frowning.

"What part of 'too busy' and 'immediately fatal to every life on this planet' was unclear, Stanley?" Ford snaps.

"Boys," Mr. Fiddleford says in a warning tone. "Yer givin' the rest of us indigestion."

"Just want to make it clear to everybody that you're still-" Stan starts, but Ford interrupts.
"Stanley, my personal feelings about spending unnecessary time with you completely aside, I have important work to do. I can't be sucked into... whatever it is you're trying to plan for the weekend. I am literally trying to save the world, so if there's anything more important than that."

"Unnecessary?! Really?"

"I'm gonna go feed this to whatever pet likes spaghetti," Aunt Ripley says, standing up.

"I have work to do," Ford says, putting his fork down. "And it's going to be slow going without help."

"Stan can help you, he's-" Aunt Ripley starts.

"Unqualified to perform this task," Ford says sharply, taking his empty plate to the sink.

"Of course," Stan says quietly to his spaghetti. Aunt Ripley takes a deep breath, then another.

"Well! I'm obviously even less qualified to assist, so, you know, I hope you have a lot of fun down there, by yourself, doing whatever," she says briskly.

"Well, it won't be fun, because it will be work trying to repair the damage," Ford says grumpily, but Aunt Ripley's already gone.

Dipper and Mabel exchange unhappy looks.

"Yikes," Mabel says, after a minute.

"You wanna do the dishes with me, Fidds?" Grunkle Stan asks. "I mean, it'd be someone else's turn, but he's too busy to do dishes, so."

"I'll dry if it'll buy me a single meal in this house that doesn't go all corndogged up the bootstraps," Mr. Fiddleford says.

"I don't... I don't know what that means," Grunkle Stan says, as Grunkle Ford stomps heavily out of the room. Stan makes a disgusted noise. "Kids, go... play a game or something."

Dipper and Mabel- after exchanging another unhappy look- go upstairs and spend some time setting up a mini-golf obstacle course out of random junk they find in the attic. (It's way easier and more interesting now that they can shrink or grow anything to be the right size for a mini-golf obstacle course, for one.)

Dipper's coaxing one of Stan's spare glass eyes into a water glass when he looks over at Mabel, brow furrowed. It takes Mabel a minute to realize it's because she's gently banging her head against the wall.

"Sorry," she says, not really sorry at all because it didn't hurt. "I just... Dipper, is it just me or is everybody being really stupid lately?"

"Stupid how?" he asks, somehow missing the water glass from, like, six inches away.

"Grunkle Stan and Grunkle Ford can't stop arguing," she says, frowning. "Even though they're twins and should be best bro-bros, like us. And Grunkle Ford and Aunt Ripley keep fighting, too, and they love each other. And Grunkle Ford and Grunkle Fidds don't... seem like they've made up at all."

"Are we calling him Grunkle Fidds now?" Dipper asks, looking surprised. "He's nice, and everything, I just-"
"Well, we can try it out, it took a while for Mystery Twins," she shrugs.

"True, true." Dipper picks up the glass eye, blowing on it to get some dust off. "I dunno, Mabel. I would've thought that it's an old person thing to be kind of jerky, but I was being pretty jerky to Wendy yesterday, and Robbie's nothing but jerky and he's just a teenager."

"Soos isn't jerky," Mabel reminds him, taking out her own glass eye and using an umbrella to golf it through the clothespin Ferris wheel and into a bucket.

"That's because Soos is, like, awesome," Dipper points out. Mabel can't really find an argument there.

Chapter End Notes

The album is "Emotional Rescue."
He'll never admit that it's because he's worried about both of them. He'll tell a thousand lies first. He'll tell a half-truth and say that it's because he knows it'll annoy Ford to death to be roused from sleep by him of all people, by the private joke he plans on using to cheer Ripley up.

Stan knocks on the door and it opens before he has a chance to reach for the handle; Ripley blinks at him, the expression on her face settling into a blank, tired smile.

"Oh, hey," she says, letting him in. Stan tries to see if he can spot another person in bed without actually having to see his brother, but there's nobody else in the room.

"Coffee's ready," he says, and she yawns, scrubbing a hand over her forehead. "Poindexter's already up and at 'em, huh?"

"I guess so," Ripley says, digging out a pair of loose pants and a mostly-clean tank top from inside her backpack.

"I thought you'd put all your stuff in the drawers," Stan tries to sound nonchalant, hands on his hips.

"Um, well, you know. Don't... don't want to make him feel..." Ripley waves a hand. "He's already upset that the house isn't really his anymore, no point in making him feel like he doesn't have his own space."

"It's supposed to be your space," Stan points out, scratching his chest.

"It's just temporary until things get normal," she tells him, shucking off her Mabel sweater. "Shut the door if you're staying, I don't want to scandalize Fiddleford or the kids with the sight of all this real estate," she says, motioning at her entire body. Stan sighs and shuts the door.

"So you look like crap. I mean, like you barely slept at all. You and my brother being old and gross and hashing out your feelin's all night long or whatever?" he asks hopefully, and she scoffs, changing quickly. He averts his eyes, even though it's mostly all stuff he's already seen.

"Nah, he never came up from the basement. You know how he is. Busy," she sighs. Stan glances back at her, frowning as she puts her hair into a bun, and she waggles her eyebrows at him. "Face gonna get stuck like that, Old Man."

"Just wonderin' when you're gonna tell him you need his help for that psycho goddess infection you got there," he says quietly. Her smile freezes.

"Stan, don't tell him. You cannot tell him. Okay?"

"No, not okay. This can't keep goin' on like it has," he says, and she huffs at him.

"I will, okay? Just... when he's ready. When he's not busy. I have a few things I can try- cleansing rituals, protection spells, that kinda thing." She carefully folds her Mabel Sweater, although- Stan really should probably wash that thing, come to think of it.

"I mean, you should at least tell him that it's a thing that's happening," Stan says, shifting his weight a little. "Even if he's not actively workin' on it, he's gonna wanna know what's goin' on with you."

"No point in makin' him worry needlessly," she says, and he actually has to stop and give her a look.
"What the heck is it, Stanno?"

"Needlessly?" he repeats. "Ripley, there were eyes and mouths coming out of your."

"It's not gonna happen again," she says, biting her lower lip. "So just... don't tell Ford, Stan." She opens the door just, it seems, as Ford was reaching out to grab the knob. They both take a step back, looking startled by each other.

"I, ah-" Ford starts, and Ripley clutches the front of her shirt, exhaling all at once.

"Mother of God, you're tryin' t'kill me," she wheezes, taking a few breaths. "Why. Why are you trying to kill me."

"I apologize, it wasn't my intention to startle you," Ford says, like an idiot.

"Wow, this is amazing, just truly... truly painful to witness," Stan says flatly. "Ford, are you just now coming in to go to sleep? Because it's seven in the morning, it's a little late for-"

"No, I still have far too much to do. I just came upstairs to retrieve a few necessary items from my pack," Ford replies in a way-too-formal tone that puts Stan's teeth on edge. Stan jabs Ripley's arm, motioning at her to talk once Ford turns away. Ripley rubs the back of her neck.

"Uh, F-Ford, hey. There's this... thing I really need your, um. Ford. Can I-"

"May you," Ford corrects automatically, not turning to look. "Ripley, I've been meaning to ask, but where is my third Journal?"

"There's photocopies downstairs," Ripley tells him.

"I don't want photocopies, I want the actual journal," Ford snaps, standing. "As it is in fact my journal. Bad enough the second one's missing so many pages, so if you and Stanley are quite through-"

"What did I do?" Stan asks, throwing his hands up.

"Ford, you stuck it in the ground with the intention of never seeing it again," Ripley says, frowning. "As far as I'm concerned, that means it belongs to someone else now, and you're gonna have to ask nicely."

Ford pinches the bridge of his nose, inhaling slowly. "Fine. Will you please give me my journal back."

"We don't have it," Ripley says, toeing her feet into her sneakers. "It's Dipper's. You'll have to ask him if he's willing to part with it. Maybe you can spend a whole minute talking to that kid, who knows." She steps out of the room heading for the kitchen, probably. Stan points after her, and Ford shoots him a dirty look, so he leaves, too.

As far as workdays go, it's alright. Ripley manages to take the kids out in the morning for an hour of roughhousing under the guise of teaching them stuff, which is just wild, and everyone eats breakfast together (except Ford, but who even cares at this point.) Ripley makes a few calls while the kids scatter, and Ford catches her and Fiddleford on their way out of the house.

"Where's Dipper?" he asks, and Ripley raises an eyebrow at him.

"The kid scampered off with Soos," she says, unimpressed. "Guess you'll have to wait til he's not
busy to ask a favor of him. Come on, Fidds, we have some stores to hit before we check in on Tyler and
the clone-boys."

"Never ends with you people, I swear," Fidds mutters under his breath on their way out. Stan makes
sure he's on his way out of the room before Ford has a chance to recover from their sudden
departure.

By the time they come back, Mabel's got it in her head that she wants to go to the mall to buy the...
Tummy Huggy... Wuvvy... Baby-Bjorn thing for pigs or whatever it is, and Ripley and Fidds
volunteer to take her so she's not wandering around like an unwanted child. Dipper still isn't back
from whatever he and Soos are doing, which leaves Stan stuck with watching the pig so it doesn't get
snatched up by coyotes or condors or, whatever, chupacabras or whatever it is that lives around here.

Of course, a tourbus pulls up right as the Ripleymobile pulls away. Stan has exactly half a second to
stress about how he's supposed to watch the stupid pig while he's working when Ford comes up
from the basement. Stan kicks the vending machine back into place just in time to hide the doorway
from the first wave of tourists, and Ford- to his credit- looks slightly embarrassed to have almost
exposed their entire operation like that.

"Just who I wanted to see," Stan says brightly, which is... eh, mostly true. He hefts Waddles into
Ford's arms, leaving his brother blinking.

"Stan, what the fuck is this pig about?" he asks finally, and Stan grins and slaps his shoulder.

"Language, Einstein! That pig is literally Mabel's favorite thing in the entire world, and the actual last
thing you want to do is disappoint that little girl, I assure you," he says smoothly. Ford blanches
slightly as the pig sniffs his shirt a little, clearly mistaking Ford's garbagey old man B.O. smell for
food. "So just... watch the little bacon angel for a bit, since one of us has to go to work and the other
one is you."

"Honestly-" Ford protests, and Stan tunes out whatever else he has to say, since, obviously, it's going
to be secondary to the ability to keep the water running and the lights on for another month. By the
time Stan's finishing up giving a tour he realizes two things: one is that he's not entirely sure that Ford
isn't going to live up to his "Irresponsible Science Adult" title and do something weird to the pig. The
second thing is that he doesn't remember telling Ford that the pig's not allowed to be outside.

He spends about a minute fretting and trying not to let the idiot tourgroup see him sweat, right up
until he sweeps the sheet off of the Cornicorn and discovers that Ford did not, in fact, put the pig
outside, or watch the pig at all, because the Cornicorn is mostly gone. Mostly, because what little's
left of Stan's hard work is in the process of being eaten by the pig.

Ford can be bitched at later. First... first Stan needs to figure out what to do with this little pink
menace.

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Oh sweet Paul Bunyan on a pogo stick, that was a mistake. The only bright side to this entire mess is
that they're all, finally, doing something together as a family- well, okay, there are two bright sides,
because Ford is equally unwilling to admit his culpability in the pig's abduction and not only played
along with Stan's rambling lies, but added in details of his own. For a minute there it almost feels like
they're a team again, even if they're a team lying to cover their asses so that Mabel doesn't lose
whatever faith she's managed to scrape up in the two of them.

The downside, of course, being everything else- the trek through the forest, the unbelievably creepy
collapsed chapel that visibly gives Ripley the willies, the physically arduous climb down, the steadily increasing anxiety from Fidds as he starts slipping more and more into his old jargon-spewing weird story-telling ways.

"Alright, but hear me out- an accidental kiss still counts as a kiss," Fidds is saying, and Dipper is getting pretty specific denying that inter-species accidental kisses don't count when he steps forward and shines his lantern directly into the face of a fucking Tyrannosaurus Rex. Everyone screams, even Ford- although Stan notices that both Ford and Ripley pull out weapons, Ford some sort of scifi weirdo gun, Ripley her lightsaber thing.

"Oh my gosh," Dipper says, eyes wide as he moves the lantern around, revealing dozens of the critters trapped in the sticky golden sap. "They're all trapped inside the tree sap- that must be how the pterodactyl survived 65 million years! And now the summer heat is melting them lose or something, look."

"Holy moly, forget the Cornicorn," Stan says cheerfully, waving an arm at the dinosaurs. If the kid-in-a-candy store look on Ripley's face is any indication, there's going to be tons of adults willing to pay money to be here. "This is the attraction of a lifetime! I could bring people down here and turn it into some sorta theme park! Jurassic... Sap Hole!" he grins, elbowing Ripley.

"Haha, copyright," Ripley snickers, before turning and elbowing Ford. "More like Cretaceous Sap Hole, right All-star?"

"I still can't believe that's really a thing," Ford mutters, rolling his eyes. "Dinosaur clone theme park disaster movie, it doesn't even sound right as a concept..."

"Sounds like we're gonna have us a movie night after we rescue Waddles," Ripley says cheerfully. "You in, Soos?"

"Haha, yeah dawg, I'll bring all three Jurassic Park movies over," Soos replies.

"There's three of them!" Ripley squeaks, shaking Ford a little. "Seven hours of dinosaur movies! Clear your schedule!"

"I'm only here to make sure none of you breaks your neck or gets eaten," Ford huffs.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, bro," Stan sighs, before looking around again. Hell, this could be really good for business. "Stick the ticket booth down here to keep people from leaving when they see the price, velvety-rope deal around these guys, this place could be a gold mine! Yeesh, I shoulda put that pig outside ages ago-"

"Wait," Mabel says, turning toward him.

"Heheheh, oh my golly, fellas. This place was already a gold mine," Fiddleford points out, grabbing Stan's arm as he gestures towards what looks like the last earthly remains of a gold miner.

"Oh, neat, Haunted Cretaceous Sap Hole," Ripley says brightly.

"You guys said the dinosaur flew into the house," Mabel says accusingly, and both Stan and Ford freeze momentarily.

"Well, if you look at it a certain-"

"I mean, technically, you know-"
"You put Waddles outside and then you both lied to me about it," Mabel realizes, tears already streaming down her little cheeks.

"Hey, that wouldn'ta happened if Ford had paid attention to the pig while I was busy, he was supposed to be watching it," Stan says, backpedaling.

"Of all the nerve- Stanley, what on Earth made you think I could or would babysit a pig for you, of all people," Ford says, holding up his hands. Ripley is just looking at the two of them like she can't decide if she's disappointed or slightly horrified.

"You two keep fighting and acting stupid and now because of you my pig might be dead!" Mabel sobs into her hands. "Waddles might be dead!"

"Hey, Ford was being stupid first," Stan protests weakly.

"Mabel, be reasonable," Ford sighs, holding out his hands. "It's an animal. It's an animal that people eat. What exactly do you envision happening to this pig once it hits a certain-"

"-nope! Stop! Cease! Desist!" Ripley interrupts, shocked. "Not helping, Stanford, seriously!"

"That's it, I'm done!" Mabel cries out, rubbing furiously at her eyes. "Grunkle Stan, Grunkle Ford, I'm never speaking to either of you ever again!"

"What? Kid, you can't be serious," Stan sighs.

"What was that? A voice on the wind? Because I don't hear anybody talking!" Mabel shouts, her voice echoing.

"For crying out loud, kid," Ford says, looking as helpless as Stan feels in the face of an angry niece.

"Lalala-LALA, sure is nice and silent around here!"

"Aw, doods, don't fight," Soos begins to say, before everything devolves into even more of a shitshow than it already is.

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The good news is, they found Waddles. That's it. That's the only good part of this.

The pterodactyl screams overhead. Moments later, human screams- the kids and Soos for sure, possibly Ripley and Fiddleford mixed in there- follow.

Stan hisses as he buckles on the Huggy Wuvvy Tummy Bundle, glaring over at Ford in the shade of the enormous mushroom they're both taking refuge under. "I'm gonna blame this one on you."

"Don't be absurd," Ford hisses back, gun in hand. "You're the one who put the pig outside."

"I am willing to work with you on this," Stan grunts, stuffing Waddles into the carrier. At least the pig's not too weirded out by it- he probably remembers Stan doing the same thing on Summerween. Pigs can remember stuff, right? "I am willing to accept twenty percent of the blame here."

"Stanley, did you forget how math works? The idea of my shouldering eighty percent of the blame is preposterous!" Ford snaps, peeking his head out. "He's coming back around, Stan!"

"I think it's a lady pterodactyl," Stan corrects, sliding on his brass knuckles. "Wow, that's got to be the dumbest thing I've ever said."
"I doubt it," Ford says sternly, giving Stan a boost. "Now!"

"Hup!" Stan just likes saying that, leaping up as the pterodactyl swoops down low. "Aright, you want this pig, wiseguy? Then you're gonna have to go through us, you flying devil!"

He lands several punches- damn, that's actually pretty satisfying- before the screeching beast almost succeeds in bucking him and Waddles off its neck.

"Oh no ya don't!" Stan hears someone yell, and with no small measure of unbridled delight he realizes it's Ford, leaping down off one of the gigantic mushrooms onto the pterodactyl's outstretched leg like a bat out of hell. Amazingly, he looks both furious and determined, exactly as cool as Dipper must've thought he was from reading the Journals as he wrestles himself up onto the creature's back to join Stan. Less amazingly, instead of shooting it like Stan or literally anyone else might have, Ford's using his scifi weirdo-gun as a bludgeon.

Well, once a Pines, always a Pines. Stan gives Ford a slight nudge, grinning wildly as he brings his fist down into Mama Pterodactyl's eye.

"From Heck's heart, I stab at thee!" he roars over the squealing of the pig, and despite everything between them- despite the danger- Ford grins back as he rolls his eyes at him. The pterodactyl crashes headfirst into the cliffside and goes still. It's not too far to climb up, although Ford gets there a little faster, probably because he doesn't have a pig in a baby carrier (yeah, and not because he's in better shape or anything, that's... that's stupid.)

Ford gives him a hand up, though, still grinning. "Ever the flair for the dramatic, you knucklehead."

"Like you're one to talk," Stan chuckles, one hand absentmindedly resting on the pig's head. He turns quickly and makes Waddles wave his little hoof-foot-thing at Mabel, who's staring at them both with stars in her eyes. "Hey, kiddo, I found your pig."

"Grunkle Stan, Grunkle Ford, you- you saved Waddles," she cries happily, running up to take Waddles in her arms and burying her face against his fat little piggy neck.

"Heh, yeah, I guess we did," Ford says, patting her head.

"Heck yeah ya did!" Fiddleford cheers, doing either his happy little hoedown dance or his 'jig of grave danger' that looks, to Stan, exactly like the happy one.

"You're both a couple of dingdongs," Ripley says fondly, handing Stan his hat back. "Ford, I'm not gonna ask why you didn't just shoot the damn thing. You both looked super dashing just now."

"Heat of the moment, I suppose," Ford admits, standing. "Come now, we should probably-" He's cut off by the angry-sounding screech of the pterodactyl below.

"Everybody out!" Stan snaps, back in Responsible Adult mode. It's tough going for a moment there- the thing snaps at Dipper and nearly gives Stan a heart attack, but thank Bunyan that kid never takes that awful vest off- and they manage to get back to the geyser pools where they'd first come in from above.

"I think I could probably rig up some sort of-" Ford starts, raking his hand through his hair.

"We don't got the time, fellers!" Fiddleford yells, pointing as the pterodactyl scurries into the chamber.

"You got plenty time," Ripley yells back, whipping out her laser sword and turning it on. "Ford,
don't shoot unless you got a clear shot, I don't wanna get dinged by friendly fire."

"Hey, stick with the group!" Stan says sharply to her back, and Ford snaps his head up just in time to see her whop that thing's wing off its body with a graceful sweep of the sword that looks like it's gotta be choreographed or something.

"Whoa, dood, I can, uh, I can see why you married Aunt Ripley, dood," Soos says, fanning himself with his cap.

"...you have no idea," Ford says, looking slightly dazed.

"Gross, Soos," Dipper says, and Soos chuckles and apologizes for liking cool tough warrior ladies. Dipper shudders and looks away, arms around his sister, both kids ducking instinctively as the dying pterodactyl makes another hideous shrieking noise that cuts off suddenly with a weirdly loud gurgle. Ripley takes several steps back from the steaming dinocorpse, her entire front soaked in red.

"Oh, gross," Stan starts, but Ford puts a hand up.

"Is any of that blood yours?" he asks, and she doesn't answer. Stan and Fiddleford exchange uneasy looks.

"Ford, you and the kids figure out how we're gonna get out of here," Stan says, climbing out from behind the pitiful rock pile they'd been taking shelter behind and hustling over to where Ripley is. He doesn't like the blank look on her face, the absent way she's using her forearm- itself covered in the dinosaur's blood- to try to wipe the blood from her face, succeeding only in spreading it around. "Hey, you with us, toots?"

"...Stan," she says slowly, not looking at him.

"Yep, that's me," he says, squeezing her shoulder a little. "You get hit in the head or something?"

"Yeah," she says faintly, before shaking herself a little. "No. No, I- I'm not hurt."

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

"You look like maybe you're not doin' so hot."

"Yeah."

"Yeah like we need to talk to Ford right now before he sees anything freaky?" Stan asks softly.

"Ye- no. Dang, stop tryin'a trick me," she mutters, squinting at him. "My glasses are filthy."

"Can't help ya with that, dollface. Come on," he says, offering his arm. She huffs at him and takes it, leaning on his side a little more than she might normally.

"We had an idea," Dipper says once they're close enough, dark eyes darting nervously between the adults. "If this is where I think it is, this geyser goes off every twenty-one minutes or so. We should be able to hitch a ride back up to the church."

"Well, I can't think of a way for that to go wrong," Stan says brightly.

And for once, at least, nothing really does.
They all need showers but Ripley gets first dibs on account of being so disgusting and gory that she had to ride home in Soos's truck bed. Stan figures it's best to just let her take her time today, even though she's in there so long he's able to push all of her dirty laundry through the washer and the dryer before she gets out. He carries it into her room and Ford gives him a weirdly guilty look as he steps inside, his hands freezing in the act of trying to clean Ripley’s glasses with a cloth.

"These lenses really don't want to get clean," he says, and Stan doesn't really see any blood on them but he supposes it doesn't do any harm to let Ford pretend to be useful instead of acknowledging the fact that he's been fretting in here for over an hour.

"Come on, help me put her laundry away before she gets in here and kicks me out," Stan tells him, and Ford sighs and puts the glasses down to come over. Ford's doing that thing he always did- or does, Stan guesses, since he's still got the same tells- whenever he wants to ask a question but is a little scared of the answer. Stan shakes out a particularly staticky pair of yoga pants before folding them. "Something on your mind, Poindexter? Also, you're in charge of folding any underpants we find, that's your husbandly duties."

"Wifely duties," Ford mutters, but he gets to work doing it before Stan can give him a halfhearted lecture on the distribution of labor. "Stanley, do you-" He stops, then starts again. "In the cavern, she-"

He does a messy job of folding a sports bra, but, to be fair, both Ripley and Stan do the exact same thing with it.

"Does Ripley have dissociative episodes often?" he asks. Stan isn't a hundred percent sure he knows what that word means, but he has a pretty good idea.

"I don't know about often, but... sometimes she doesn't know if she's real, if this is real. Sometimes she gets stuck." Stan runs his hand over a tee-shirt, smoothing it out. "She told me about some of your... friends in low places, you know? So it was a real fuckin'... nasty shock when she took the kids upstairs and sees that one window all lit up lookin' like that Bill fella she told me about, for example."

"The- oh my goodness," Ford says in a small voice. "I... I forgot that was even there. She- she told you about Bill?"

"She didn't go into details," Stan tells him, and it doesn't escape him the tiny sigh of relief that Ford lets out. "Sometimes she's extra paranoid that he's screwing around, though."

"She's probably right to be," Ford mutters, and that... isn't a good thing, they have kids in this house, and Stan doesn't know if it's a great idea to tell Ford, but, hell, better to ask forgiveness and whatever.

"Ripley told me there was another one," Stan says, and Ford doesn't get it, shaking the static cling out of Ripley's dayglo-orange shirt. "Another thing like Bill that hunted her down after you and her got separated."

Ford looks up at that, eyebrows up over the rims of his lenses. "Another demon?"

"Or a god or energy being or whatever," Stan says, not entirely sure he's buying this whole mystical bullshit line of thinking. "Something that chose her, specifically, to fuck around. Something that hurt her pretty bad." Ford swallows whatever he thinks about saying, and Stan watches him for a moment
before adding softly, "Ford, the stuff she... the stuff she's told me about this thing, what it did, what it made her do. Did Bill do that to you?"

Ford looks pointedly down at a pair of socks, the pterodactyl's blood having left a pale brown stain. "She hasn't told me about any of this, but... well, you saw what I was like when you came here thirty years ago, Stanley."

"I'm gonna kill that fucking triangle," Stan mutters, and Ford shoots him an exasperated look.

"You can't kill a being of pure energy, Stan," he says, but gently, like they're back in school and he's explaining why someone even cares about grammar.

"Your wife did, so I'm gonna," Stan says stubbornly, separating one of Ripley's thin hoodies from a pair of underpants with an audible crackle of static cling. "Oh, this one's for you."

"Pass it over," Ford sighs, holding out his left hand. Stan passes the underwear over with his right.

Zzzzzap.

"Ow," Stan says, shaking his left- wait- his left hand- which still has a pair of Ripley's underwear in it, ugh- wait-

"What in the blazes?" Stan hears himself say, and when he looks he sees himself, when he looks down his hand has six fingers.

"What in the-" he starts to ask, and it's- oh sweet Moses, that's Ford's voice, this is a nightmare- is it a nightmare? It- Ripley opens the door and nearly jumps out of her skin, clutching the towel around her torso. Something small starts thumping against the outside of Stan's chest, under the shirt.

"Jesus H. Christ!" she yelps, before clapping a hand over her mouth. "Sorry, guys, you just- startled the hell outta me. What are you two creepers doing in here with my laundry?"

"We're- folding," Stan says helplessly, waving the hand still holding Ripley's underwear. She rolls her eyes and grabs the offending article out of his grip. Next to her Ford- or, Stan?- reaches tentatively for her arm, and she gives him a funny look.

"Okay, wiseguys, on your way. Somebody needs a shower. I may have used all the hot water," she adds sheepishly.

"That's- that's fine," Stan says, and she blinks at him. "Hey, uh, put the rest of your stuff in the drawers, though."

"Sure thing, Ford. Come on, gimme a minute."

"Wait, Bunny, I-" Ford-Stan starts to say, and she gives him a hairy eyeball and gently nudges him out the door.

"You're being weird. You just got voluntold to take your shower first. Hup," she says, shutting the door in his face.

Stan takes a step back, running his hand through his hair. This is fucked. This is fucked up. This is fucked up.

"You guys are so weird," she says fondly, tossing her towel onto the bed and thoroughly alarming
"Oh fuck," Stan says despite himself, covering his face with both hands. "I'm not Ford! I'm not Ford. I think. I think I'm Stan."

"What?" she asks, kicking her feet into the spaceship pajamas he just folded earlier. "Paws up, pumpkin."

He holds out one hand, covering his eyes with the other one.

"Well, that's six alright," she says dryly. "Say something only Stan would say."

"I told Ford about your demon problem. Not the infection part, but you- you didn't tell him about her at all," Stan(ford?) confesses. Ripley is silent for a few moments, just the rustle of clothing as she pulls on the pajama top.

"...dammit, Stan, if you told Ford about that then it's not something only Stan would say," she sighs, finally coming over and pulling his hand off his face. "Look at me. If you're not Ford, tell me about Indiana."

"You thought it was okay to die in Indiana to bring Ford back, like an idiot," Stan says, and she runs a hand over her face.

"Alright, where are my glasses?"

"I dunno, Ford had'em," he tells her.

"Oh, Ford," she sighs, and goes and opens the door, where a disheveled-looking and confused Ford(stan????) is still standing. "Get in, you great big doofus."


"Clean livin'. What- what's this?" he asks suddenly, grabbing the front of his shoulder and rotating it experimentally. "Did... did you get shot?"

"Boys," Ripley says wearily.

"What's going on with your knee?" Fordstan asks sharply, leaning on the dresser. "Why aren't you using a cane, you knucklehead?"

"All-Star and Lee. Focus," Ripley says. "What happened? How do we switch you back?"

"It's- oh, of course. The rug's in here," Fordstan sighs, peering down at the floor.

"The ugliest rug in the world is also sinister, huh?" Stan-Ford mutters.

"This is incredibly uncomfortable for me right now," Ripley announces to the room at large. "I love that rug, just so's you know."

"Why aren't you more perturbed by the fact that Stanley and I have switched bodies?" Fordstan demands, and she shrugs.

"You both smell weird and it's not like I'm gonna forget which one's which. Oh, where'd you put my glasses, hon?" she asks, and he points at the sidetable. She hums and puts her glasses on, squinting through them for a second before using her pajama top to clean them off. "Thanks. Anyway, you were saying about the rug?"
"If enough static electricity is generated, it can swap consciousnesses between any two sentient beings," he says proudly, adjusting Stan's glasses.

"That's the stupidest feature I can think of building into a fucking shag carpet," Stan-Ford says severely, sounding way too much like their Pops. They both shudder.

"Okay, I have to agree, also I'm- I'm almost totally sure that shouldn't work like that," Ripley says, frowning. "Okay, so... question, for both of you. If it's that easy to swap back to your regular bodies, is... is there a particular reason you haven't swapped back yet?"

"I, uh... I completely forgot that the rug did that," Fordstan admits.

"I thought I was having a really weird nightmare at first," Stan-Ford says, shrugging uncomfortably. "Wouldn't be the first time."

"...aw, pumpkin," Ripley sighs. "You- wait, you've had this exact nightmare before?"

"I mean, the rug wasn't involved," Stan-Ford clarifies.

"That can't be healthy," Fordstan says, frowning.

"Why are you two not scooting your socks on the carpet to get the static back up?" Ripley asks, scratching her arm. "Also, ugh, can you imagine the kids getting into this?"

"Oh jeez, now I really will have nightmares," Stan-Ford mutters. "I mean, different nightmares than the ones I was probably gonna have, I guess."

"Speaking of nightmares," Fordstan says, straightening up. "You told Stan about Bill, but you didn't- you didn't tell me about this other-"

"Bill's still a threat," Ripley says smoothly, standing. "And wowzers, look at the time, it's you guys better get your asses in the right bodies by the time we start watching Jurassic Park o'clock."

"Your demon's still a threat," Fordstan says sharply.

"No she isn't," Ripley says insistently, picking her way across the room without touching the carpet.

"I agree with Six- uh, Poindexter," Stan-Ford says, waggling his six-fingered hand at himself. "Your gal's still hurting you, even if you did kill her."

"I don't want to have this conversation," Ripley says, pointing her finger at Stan-Ford, then at Fordstan, like she can't make up her mind who it is she's gesturing towards. "I'm borrowing your robe because I want to. See you in twenty minutes, you both still need showers."

"We have to have this conversation!" Fordstan says, and she shakes her head.

"Nonspecific excuse not doin' it bye!"

"She picked that up from you," Fordstan mutters darkly, the second she's gone.

"If you run into the TV room while I'm building up static here and tell Soos we can't watch the movie because Bros Before Dinos, he'll definitely listen and put a pause on things until I tell him it's alright to watch the movie," Stan-Ford says, shuffling his feet into the carpet. "But you know she's not gonna wanna talk to you about her demon stuff."

"Why not?" Fordstan asks, looking down at his hands. "She told you about it."
"She didn't tell me everything, she just... needed to get it off her chest." Stan-Ford frowns. "She really needs your help. She thinks she's turning into something like whatever that lady demon was, and I don't know why she's so worried about telling you what's going on, but she... she could probably use some of that, ugh, I dunno. The Ford Pines Lovin'.


"C'mere, you nerd," he says gruffly, pulling Fordstan in for a hug.

Zzzzap.

"Augh!" Stan cries, jumping away from Ford once he realizes he's in the right body.

"I'm getting rid of this awful thing," Ford says quickly.

"That's what I was gonna do before your wife decided she liked it," Stan says firmly, and Ford grunts at him, taking a knee so he can start rolling it up. Stan sees no point in waiting around and letting one of the kids realize the shower's free, so he dashes over before anyone notices.

(He really needs a bigger couch, Stan thinks once they finally get everyone together to watch Jurassic Park. The kids are wedged up on his lap and Soos is on the floor with Ripley and Fidds, and Ford is more than a little uncomfortable-looking in a kitchen chair next to Stan, at least until the movie really gets started and Ford starts yelling at the tv for getting its science wrong. Soos laughs and tells him that if he feels this strongly about movie science, he's gonna love to hate Independence Day. Stan and the kids agree, so... guess that's another movie Stan's gonna go out and buy so he can show his stupid siblings some good shows. It gets better once they start showing the chubby guy from Seinfeld "hacking" and Fidds gets in on the crotchety-old-man yelling.)

(Ford gets up first, at the end of the movie, and gives Ripley a hand up, and when she stands he pulls her in close and whispers something to her and she blushes and presses her face against his sweater and makes dinosaur noises. Stan figures that's a success, then.)

(They don't have that talk they all really need to have, but between Ripley and Fiddleford neither Stan nor Ford can convince them to play poker, so Stan digs out an Uno set and they play that for a while after the kids go to sleep and Soos goes home, and it's really weird not to have to go downstairs to work on the portal to bring Ford home, but... eh. He'll live. Ford still goes downstairs to work on whatever he's up to down there and Ripley still goes to bed alone and Fiddleford still looks at his brother like he doesn't quite trust him again, but in the middle of the night when Stan goes to check up on everyone Ripley's snoring away and Fiddleford's stretched out to almost his actual height in his sleep, one arm dangling bonelessly off the edge of the couch. Ford acts surprised to see Stan in the basement, but accepts the hot mug of coffee and tells him he really does mean to be in bed within the hour.)

(Stan tosses the rolled-up rug into the bottomless pit, but it's too much to hope for and a minute later it lands on the grass where he'd been standing. Ford goes and drags it into a closet where it can't hurt anybody, for now.)
She wakes up twice- first when Ford stumbles in and clumsily tucks himself into bed, then when he starts having a nightmare a couple hours later, twitching and whimpering in his sleep.

Ripley puts an arm around him and he makes a muffled noise into his pillow, but she falls back asleep too quickly to ask him if he's awake.

He's gone by the time she gets up for real, but his side of the bed is still messed up and warm, so she stretches out and pops her joints and delays getting up as long as she can before she starts hearing the light clanging of pans. Stan's in a cooking breakfast mood, which is enough to get her up and out of bed. She checks the clock on her pocket phone and sighs, shoving her feet into her slippers with a gloomy sigh. She understands why she can't have the carpet anymore, she just really misses working her toes into the musty shag texture. Maybe Ford'll want to go shopping for another rug later.

The rain starts off as a light drizzle while Ripley's digging into her Stanlette- which she figures is bound to be better than some omelette that wasn't made with extra love or Stanliness- and proceeds to become a torrential downpour as the kids meander downstairs and start eating.

"This'll be fun," Ripley comments, nudging Dipper. "We haven't had training in the rain before."

"You're gonna make us practice in the rain?" Dipper asks, alarmed.

"No," Stan says, before Ripley can answer. "You'll all catch pneumonia or, I dunno, break your necks in the mud."

"Hypocrisy!" Ripley gasps, pointing a fork at him across the table. "We spent most of yesterday in an underground swamp full of weird funguses and a dinosaur death monster! This has gotta be safer!"

"Ripley," Stan says wearily, pinching the bridge of his nose under his glasses. "Take the day off. Watch TV with us. All this fitness has gotta be bad for your health."

"What a thing to say," Fiddleford remarks under his breath as he walks in, taking a seat at the table on Ripley's other side. "Mornin', Pines clan."

"Morning, Gr- Mister Fidds," Mabel says, elbowing Dipper fiercely. Ripley has no idea why the kids are engaging in a minor war next to her, but she'll have no part of it.

"Well, what're you guys gonna do today?" Ripley sighs, poking her eggs around.

"Board games, movies, I dunno, whatever," Stan says, sliding a plate down in front of Fiddleford. "You wanna tell Ford to come eat?"

"Mm, 'kay," she sighs, getting up but very, very slowly.

"You okay, Aunt Ripley?" Dipper asks warily.

"Yeah, you're acting like a Grunkle today," Mabel pipes up, feeding a part of her omelette to Waddles. Ripley chooses not to comment on the fact that the omelettes have ham in them.
"I'm just worn out to heck from yesterday, I guess," Ripley admits, refilling her coffee and making up a mug for Ford.

She manages to catch him downstairs in the middle of a jaw-cracking yawn; he blinks owlishly and gives her a small smile as she hands his coffee over.

"Guess you didn't get much sleep last night, huh?" she asks, and he shrugs.

"I don't typically get more than three or four hours at a time, anyway," he says, taking a deep gulp of the coffee. She leans over to eyeball what he's working on, tapping a fingertip on the open pages of his Journal.

"You missin' 'bout a third of the pages in this one, kid," she comments, and he sighs into his mug.

"Yes, I'm aware. The blasted trouble is I have no idea what it is I'm missing," he admits. "What happens when one neglects to write a page of contents and then leaves the book in another dimension for three decades, I suppose."

"Sounds about right." Ripley takes a seat at the console, picking up the Journal and leafing through it. "Well, you got Blood Rain in here."

"Nobody likes-" Ford starts to complain, before he stops, frowning. "Blood Rain was one of Bill's spells."

"I know, it's gross," she counters, flipping pages. "Grendelkin. Lobstrosities. Puffboys? Oh, the other puffboys page is gone, that's too bad..."

"A number of the spells Bill taught me were in that one," Ford says, looking over at her. "Check to see if Mind-Control is in there."

"How am I supposed to do that? You numbered things arbitrarily and nothing's marked," she counters, handing him the book. "Honestly, Ford, you need an editor."

"They're diaries, they weren't intended to be read by anybody else," he points out, and she reaches over and puts a hand on his shoulder.

"Sweetheart, darling. You put research integral to your daily life in these diaries without an index. You know every time Dipper runs into a critter out in the woods he has to spend like half a minute flipping pages?"

"Goodness," he says, wincing. "Perhaps a... condensed version is in order."

"Like something that would actually be a useful and helpful manual for living in the weirdest place in the Continental United States?" Ripley asks innocently. Ford coughs.

"Well, we can work on compiling the work into a... user-friendly textbook later," he says, and Ripley grins a little at the we. "Of deeper concern is the fact that several of the spells that are missing can be used offensively and to wreak great harm on innocent civilians."

"Assuming the person who has them is mentally capable of spellcasting and has all the right materials," Ripley replies, waving a hand.

"You said you and Stan stole this one a few days ago," he says, looking and sounding stressed. "From whom, if I may ask, did you-"
"Gideon Gleeful, he's that bleach-white Hummel doll lookin' kid in the commercials," she explains. Ford blinks several times at her.

"You're saying my Journal was in the possession of a, a ten year old?"

"You think he's ten?"

"But I hid it so-"

"Stanford, honey, the kid lucked out. It was bound to happen eventually. Heck, it happened with Dipper this summer."

"That's not possible," Ford says, a touch sharply. "I may not be the engineer Fiddleford was, but I constructed hiding places with multiple failsafes. Codes had to be broken in order to find the pieces of each puzzle, someone would have had to be strong enough to-"

"Ford, stuff breaks down. The cleverest hidey-hole in the world isn't going to work if a rat happens to chew through the cables or... you know, whatever." She finishes off her coffee, folding her legs. "Look, if you really think that little kid is, I dunno, somehow capable of casting spellwork that-"

She trails off, thinking about the amulet that Mabel destroyed, the cursed Egyptian termites that are now living the rest of their afterlives as a well-loved firefly hivemind, the scattered little shrine to Gideon's hatred of the Pines family that she and Stan found in his bedroom the day they broke in and stole the Journal.

"Well that doesn't look like a good face you're making," Ford comments from behind his mug.

"Son of a bitch," she sighs at him. "Now I gotta go deal with that awful child again. You coming?"

"I really ought to get this done," he says, but at least he sounds apologetic.

"Well, come upstairs and eat the omelette Stan made you, you need some more protein before you waste away," she says sternly, pulling him to his feet.

"Yes, dear," he says, but he's smiling and walking willingly along with her, so. There is that.

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The nice thing is, Gideon ends up coming to the Shack himself. The not-so-nice thing is that Gideon seems to think he can just break in and steal stuff out of Stan's safe- which, granted, Stan did to Gideon, but the kid doesn't know that, he just suspects it. Ripley takes a sort of perverse glee in the kid's face when Stanford comes upstairs asking what all the ruckus is and Gideon realizes there's two of them. The kid flees at the threat of being whapped with a broom- Ripley honestly isn't totally sure she should be worried about the kind of mischief this kid could get up to if he's so easily dealt with, but anytime she starts to feel a little bit sorry for the kid she remembers Mabel and Dipper and he wouldn't let me say no and he tried to kill Dipper to make me date him. That, at least, puts an end to her feeling sorry for the nasty little dingleberry.

The fact that he thinks that he can outright steal the deed to the Shack and that it does, apparently, work that way around here... well, Ripley has very little to say about how the laws in Gravity Falls work, but whatever. It's the work of ten, fifteen minutes to crack the safe open and move the deed to somewhere safer than Stan's office, but by the time she's stowing it away she's got a nasty headache and her mood is fouler than ever.

The rain lets up, at least, so Ripley elects to go for a jog rather than be kept cooped up inside for
another minute. The pine-resin-after-rain smell does a lot to soothe tension she's not even fully aware of until it's gone. She leans back against a tree trunk, eyes closed for just a moment. She should be happy, she reminds herself. She has a family and she has Ford and she has a place to sleep and food, and too much of her life has been spent without any of those things. She shouldn't be feeling like this.

Her phone rings and she spends a few seconds fumbling in her pocket before she glances at the contact name and brings it to her ear.

"Sanchez's House of Sausages," she answers, and there's a snort of laughter on the other end.

"H-hey, I was busy for like, a week and a half, so, I didn't, uh, I didn't-"

"No problem, Rick, it wasn't like, it wasn't an emergency, we got stuff sorted out. We didn't use the Monster Portal," she adds brightly. "And we got Ford back anyway."

"No- no shit? Didn't know you had it in ya," he says, impressed, and she sighs.

"Nah, you know I'm a dumbass, it was Fiddleford mostly. Hey, so, when you comin' to visit?"

"I don't- I d-don't-" He bites back a breath that sounds suspiciously like a sob.

Ripley frowns, sitting down on the roots of the tree. "Buddy, why don't you tell me how your week went? Sounds like it went shitty."

He exhales shakily. "F-fuck you."

"Sanchez, look. Bring Summer and Morty. If you're not comfortable staying in Casa Pines, I got a buddy who runs an inn, and I don't mind owing him another favor. Just... come visit for a weekend. It's quiet."

"You're c-c-constantly getting harassed," he says, exasperated.

"Yeah, and you're a big harasser, you'll fit right in," she tells him flatly.

"Look, after- after the week I've had I really don't... need to be around two guys who look exactly like an ex of mine," he admits quietly.

"You have an ex that looks like Stan and Ford?" she asks, and he's silent for several long minutes before she makes the connection. "Ohhh. Right. Yeah. Hey, I didn't- I didn't realize things were that serious with, uh-"

"Well apparently he didn't, either," Rick mutters.

"Oh, come on, you should come visit anyway. Look, bring the kids, they'll enjoy the outdoors. You and me, we'll drive out for Portland for a couple nights and you can tell me your sorrows over something fruity and alcoholic."

"The kids're pissed at me," he says quietly.

"Well, so what else is new?" Ripley asks, blowing a breath out as a bird circles overhead. "Come on, Beth'll thank you for giving her a weekend to do, I dunno, adult middle-class white people things with Jerry. The kids're used to your sci-fi shit, so this nice vaguely paranormal spooky forest type setting'll be a nice change for them. You'll reconnect with Fidds and the Pines men, we'll have a bunch of drinks to keep you off the hard stuff, I'll tell you the story of how I killed thirty-five nuns,
"I dunno," he says, and she doesn't know this Rick as well as she knows the one who lives with Hyde, but that quiet little defeated voice can't possibly be a good sign.

"Portal in, spend two or three nights in a small town drinkin' biker moonshine with me, portal home," Ripley coaxes. "Or, hey, we could even bully Ford and Stan into going on some kind of weird adventure with us, and you can get out some of your pent-up feelin's with a good ol' fashioned yelling match. We could steal something fancy together. A vacation, Rick. Come on. Get your mind off whatever your regular bullshit is."

"You're really desperate," he jabs halfheartedly, and she grins up at the canopy.

"Rick, you don't even know. I'm losin' my mind with boredom around here," she says, only half lying. "You don't even know. Yesterday I almost got eaten by a pterodactyl and I was like, Okay go for it, man."

"A pterodactyl," he repeats dully.

"Right? What kinda cornfed huckleberry small-town bullshit is that?" she demands, and he chuckles a little.

"Alright, alright... maybe, okay, I don't wanna make plans right now."

"That's coz you a beeyotch," Ripley drawls out. "Alright, man, call me when you're in plan-mode, I'll look up the coordinates for your portal gun and we'll set you right up."

"Later, I guess," he says before hanging up. Ripley pockets her phone, already in a better mood than before. The jog back to the Shack takes a little longer than she remembers, but the kids seem to be goofing around or something, because they're nowhere in sight, not even Soos- although Ripley does appreciate that they technically have an adult with them, she doesn't want anything to happen to Soos either. She makes a mental note to have a serious talk with the kids again about venturing off into the woods. When she walks in, Stan's lounging in his chair in his underpants with the TV on, like normal. Ripley sits on the armrest, resting her elbow on the top of Stan's head.

"So, I invited our mutual friend to come over," she tells him, and he grunts, flipping channels until he stops at Baby Fights. "And his grandkids. So that'll be nice!"

"What mutual friend- oh, no, not Rick, tell me it wasn't Rick," Stan says, looking alarmed.

"Stan, I ain't fond of lyin' so I won't say such a thing," she tells him. "And you ought to-"

She pauses, because he's looking past her with a perplexed expression, half angry and half confused.

"What are you looking for now, you little hobgoblin?" he asks, and she turns and is equally surprised to see Gideon, his powder-blue suit filthy, his platinum-blond bouffant fallen to one side and stuck with a few twigs and leaves, like he's been rolling in the dirt.

"Hey-" she starts, and he looks up and she gets a good look at his eyes, and immediately Ripley feels the urge to throw up. She doesn't throw up, but she does spring to her feet, her voice a roar. "Get out of that child, NOW!"

His fingers snap and the world goes dark.
She opens her eyes to a grayscale forest and a mint-green sky, a woman's voice singing sadly about the end of the world and echoing all around.

"Ripley?" Stan asks, and she looks over at him, scratching the back of his head. "What are you doin' here?"

"Dunno. Who's that singing?" she asks, and he looks surprised.

"It's... Skeeter Davis," he says, after a moment.

"Fuckin' depressing," she says, looking down at herself, at the interesting cocktail in her hand. She takes a sip- it's fruity and pink and alcoholic, but otherwise she has no idea what it is. "What are we doing outside?"

"I don't... know," Stan says, confused. "I was watchin' TV with you and then... Gideon showed up?"

Ripley points, suddenly remembering. "That's right! I thought- I thought he was possessed by Bill!"

"Oh, great, so we got dragged outside by some possessed third-grader?" Stan asks, scowling. Ripley blinks at him, then looks up at the sky.

I wake up in the morning and I wonder, why everything's the same as it was, I can't understand, no, I can't understand, how life goes on the way it does...

"I don't think we're outside," she says, pawing at her chest until she has her star sapphire necklace in her fingers. "I think we're in the mindscape."

"Mindscape, huh? Ford had a couple'a things in his journal about how to get in there, but I haven't been in mine for years. Is this what your mindscape looks like?" he asks, frowning.

"What? No, mine's all clouds and swimming pool toys and margaritas," Ripley replies, blinking. "Wait, whose mindscape are we in, then?"

"Well, the soundtrack makes a point for it bein' mine, but I don't remember the sky looking like that," Stan admits. "And you're drinkin' a Cosmo, which makes it possibly yours."

"Ah, well, I don't know what a Cosmo is," Ripley tells him, pointing skyward. "But the green looks like mine. How do you know what a Cosmo is?"

"Don't get off track, here," he says, scratching his chest through his shirt. Ripley snaps her fingers and she's dressed in her spaceship pajamas and Mabel sweater.

"Nice," she says. Stan waves a hand and a can of Pitt shows up in his grasp.

"Okay, come on, we need to stop playin' around," he says. "This seems like a bad sign, that we're both in some kinda... half yours-half mine mindscape."

"...yeah, shit, it is," Ripley says, dragging a hand across her face. "Oh gawd, it probably does mean Bill's up to no good."

"That's the triangle who hurt Ford?" Stan asks, cracking his knuckles as soon as she nods at him. "Let's see if we can find him."

"Should be easy enough," she says, putting her drink down and holding out her hands. "Mindscape, bring us to Bill." The forest flashes past in a series of flickering images, until they're both stopped...
inside... well... sort of like an M.C. Escher drawing of the Shack in black and white, little splashes of vivid color creeping across the warped boards like vines.

"Nice trick," Stan tells her, and she shrugs.

"We can literally do anything we want," she tells him, and his eyes light up. She knows what he's going to do the moment before he does it, and she steps calmly aside as gold coins fall in a clinking cascade through the ceiling, bouncing off of Stan's head and shoulders as he laughs. She folds her arms and pretends to be annoyed, and he grins and winks at her.

"Alright, alright, enough screwin' around," he says, and the money disappears with an audible pop. "So where is this Bill joker, anyway?"

"I dunno, Stanno," she sighs, her arms dropping to her sides. There are maybe a dozen doors haphazardly placed around them, coloring lights flashing behind each of them. "Looks like we're inside your memory zone, though, he must be looking around for something in one of your memories."

"What makes you think it's my memory zone?" he asks, and she gestures pointedly at their surroundings- the tattered chair, the dinosaur skull table, the TV- and he grins sheepishly. "Alright, you have... you may have made your point. Well, what does your memory zone look like?"

"I dunno, if I had a memory it just popped up whenever I thought about it," she shrugs.

"Doesn't seem all that tidy," he points out.

"We can swap mental exercises later, brobro. First off- what's in your head that Bill wants?"

"How on Earth am I supposed to guess that?" Stan asks, bewildered, and Ripley nods slowly.

"Well... before... when it was me and Ford, he wanted to know where Ford was," she says, frowning. "But... that was because Bill had minions in a lot of worlds that could capture us and bring Ford to the Nightmare Realm. And the few times he did know where Ford was, he liked to fuck around with Ford's head."

"Gonna kill that triangle to death," Stan mutters, seething.

"He's not here, though!" Ripley says, sitting down on the dinosaur skull. "I mean, he doesn't own this dimension yet! He'll never get Ford from here unless he's here himself, and he would need the portal open for that, so... God, what does that bastard actually want?"

"Why did he want with my brother in the first place?" Stan asks, and Ripley looks up at him, frowning.

"Well, what does any demon want?"

"Pitchforks," Stan says automatically, and behind a door they can hear the faintest echo of a younger man's voice, good afternoon sir, you look like a man who'd put a stanco-brand pitchfork to good use.

"What... else would a demon want?" Ripley asks, after a moment's pause.

"I dunno, what did your demon want?" Stan counters. She puts a hand to her face, her fingertips touching the ridge of scar tissue crossing her cheeks and nose.

I want you, Ripley. I think you're beautiful.
"Somebody to own. Somebody they can be," Ripley says slowly. She looks over at Stan, frowning.

"Make it hard for Bill to find anything," she says, and his fists clench at his sides as he nods. The room explodes into every room in the Shack, all jammed together in a discordant jumble, doors everywhere, labels missing or just plain wrong, half of them in gibberish. Ripley looks around with her mouth open, before she turns and gives Stan a huge grin. "Stan, you know you're a genius, don't you?"

"I dunno about that," he says, startled.

"Honeybear, my mindscape is usually just me hanging out in an innertube talkin' sass to whoever's dropped in on me," she says, beaming. "You have to be an actual genius to have a mindscape like this."

"You don't mean that," he says, ducking his head, and Ripley lightly punches his arm.

"Stop callin' me a liar, pumpkin. So now what, you wanna go see if we can find that damn space geometry and knock his ass out of our heads?"

"Sounds like a plan to me, darlin'," he says firmly. After a split second, she grabs his hand and they start checking doors.

The first door is two little boys giggling and shoving each other as they walk down the beach. The next is Stan driving down a sunny road, the Stanleymobile's windows down, the wind plucking at his long brown ponytail. The third is a date with a girl wearing hotpants who quickly enough is not wearing hotpants, and Ripley covers her eyes as Stan hurriedly slams the door shut. Ripley jumps to open a door on the ceiling, and almost slips into Stan's bathroom, his dark hair gray at the temples as he carefully shaves and practices welcoming people to the Mystery Shack. Stan- the real Stan, the old man Stan- catches her on the way back down, even though she sort of suspects it only would have hurt to fall down if she'd let it hurt.

The fifth door is a forest, and it's confusing to both of them at first, because it doesn't look much like the forest surrounding Gravity Falls, and it doesn't look like the jungle- according to Stan, at least. If anything it sort of looks like pictures Ripley's seen of the Redwood Forest, but everything is gray-brown other than the meaty red of the tree trunks and oddly, uncomfortably familiar. They both jump back when they realize it's not Stan in the memory, but Ripley, staggering through the trees until she reaches the edge of a cornfield-

Ripley flings the door against the doorframe, backing away as she stares, horrified, at the now-closed door.

"No. No. No, I don't- it's not," she says softly. "This isn't my memoryzone. Your doors shouldn't open onto, onto, onto mine, no."

"What was in there, Ripley? It- it didn't look too bad," Stan offers, and she shakes her head.

"Cannibal Dimension. Don't... don't look in there, Stan, it's..." She inhales slowly. "It's scary. And it's where I first met... that demon lady."

"Cannibal Dimension?" Stan repeats, and she huffs out a laugh, wringing her hands a little.

"I was so hungry then, oh my God... I-I didn't know, Stan, I didn't know where I was until after I'd-"

"Hey," Stan says, and his hands are warm and solid on her shoulders. She dips her head forward and he gives her a squeeze as she plops her head down onto his shoulder. "Hey, don't worry about it.
You're here now and it's over, everything with her is over, and it's gonna be fine, because it's already fine. Alright?"

"Yeah, I'm good," she says softly, and he lets her go. "I just... really hope we don't run into any more of mine in here, is all. Kind of a shitty shock to remember some of this stuff."

"I hear ya," he says, giving her back a rub. "Come on."

"Maybe we should be looking specifically for your Ford-memories," Ripley suggests, pulling her hood up. "Do you think they're all in the same spot?"

"Probably not," Stan admits. "Hey, do you-"

The laughter isn't, by itself, all that threatening- it's loud and they can't tell where it's coming from, but that's true of most of the noises in here.

It's that they both recognize the laugh, the startled horror on Stan's face matching the chill running down Ripley's spine. Their gazes meet, and Stan's jaw drops.

"That's Bill?" he asks, and Ripley nods.

"That guy's a son of a bitch," Stan says shakily, and Ripley nods. "Is he- is he laughing at us?"

"I can't really tell," Ripley says, after a moment. "I mean, usually that little prick is all about gloating, but he's just ignoring us, like we're not even the actual targets."

"Well, yeah, because Ford's the one he wants," Stan says plainly. Ripley looks at him, frowning as an idea comes to her.

"Ford... used to know a way to get into someone's head if Bill was in there," she says slowly. "I mean, he forgot how to do it by the time he knew me, because he'd never bothered to memorize it, because he wrote it down."

"In his Journal," Stan says, groaning. "So... Bill's not laughing at us because he really is laughing at Ford."

"Motherfucker's using our mindscapes to hurt Ford," Ripley snarls, looking around. She puts a hand to her forehead, inhaling sharply. "Okay, okay. Stan, is there a lot in your memoryzone that might, you know, that might hurt Ford?"

"...I don't know how to answer that," he says, frowning. Ripley makes a face, but... well... no, she's not a hundred percent sure if any of her memories can be used to hurt Ford, either. Still, though.

"Well... if Bill's in the memoryzone, and he's laughing at Ford, then Ford's in the memoryzone," she reasons. "So we just... we keep looking for him, I guess. This sucks."

"Yeah," Stan agrees, opening a door and peeking in. Someone throws a punch, and Stan- young, bleeding, dirty, weirdly thin- goes sprawling on wet concrete, lit dimly by a streetlight and the cigarette that goes flying out of his mouth. "Yeesh."

"Aw, baby Stan," Ripley says thickly, reaching out and taking her Stan's hand. He sighs and shuts the door.

"It's the past, Ripley, I'm okay now." She doesn't answer, just pulls him along to another door, brightly colored lights flashing from behind it. She peaks in and barks out a startled laugh at the roller
rink, the young Stan doing spins and skating backwards like a champ. Old Stan groans, tugging on her hand. "Aw, come on, don't look at that, it's embarrassing."

"Oh my God, Stan, you're really good," she marvels, before clearing her throat. "Why, uh, why are you wearing the world's tiniest satin shorts though-"

"Alright, enough, we got places to be," he interrupts, face bright red. He moves to shut the door but she stops him, pointing.

Across the rink, staring with a huge-eyed look of complete adoration, is Soos. Not baby Soos- come to think of it, this memory has to be at least ten or fifteen years older than Soos is now- but Soos of today.

"Soos!" Ripley yells out, and he looks up, startled. "Soos, come here!"

"Mr. Pines! Mrs. Aunt Ripley!" he cries, jogging over and stepping neatly out of the memory. "What are you two doing in here, doods?"

"You never saw that," Stan orders quietly, which Soos ignores.

"You're in our brains, Soos!" Ripley says brightly. "You're in- I guess this is some kind of Bill thing, right?"

"Haha, yeah, Dr. Pines is so mad right now," he replies cheerfully. Ripley breathes out a sigh.

"We figured. So if you're in here with us, does that mean Fiddleford's out in the world watching the kids?" she asks, and Soos laughs nervously, rubbing at his elbow.

"Soos," Stan says in a warning tone. "Are you gonna tell us that Fidds's in here and nobody's watching the kids?"

"Not exactly," he admits, readjusting his hat. "See, the spell to get in your heads was in Dipper's Journal, soooo the kids are in your heads too. And Mr. McGucket also."

Ripley and Stan look at each other with twin expressions of horror.

"But... there's so much that's not childsafe about the insides of our heads, Soos," Ripley says finally. "How did Ford or Fiddleford sign off on this?"

"Well- Dipper's pretty dang convincing when he wants to be," Soos says, shrugging. "Hey, that Bill guy's a real piece of work, though, isn't he?"

"I hate that guy so much," Stan mutters, rubbing his face. "Soos, do you know where everybody else is?"

"I just saw them go searching down the other hallway, they shouldn't be too far off," Soos says apologetically.

"You guys are- what are you guys lookin' for in here?" Stan asks, perplexed.

"Ahaha, doood, Bill's looking for the combination to your safe," Soos says. Ripley blinks.

"Why does he want that?" she asks as they walk, and Soos shrugs.

"Something about helping Gideon take over the Shack, I dunno," he replies. Ripley nods slowly, unsure of where this is going.
"Well- okay, let's meet up with the kids," she says finally. "And Ford."

The trio stops in front of a partly-open door, marked "Pirate memories." Ripley swallows, her throat tight.

"What do you want to bet that the kids went in there?" she asks shakily.

"I'd bet they went in there," Stan replies softly.

"You don't happen to have a bunch of pirate memories, do you Stan?"

"No, not... not really, Ripley."

Ripley nods grimly. "Okay. Okay. Stan, you and Soos should... you should protect Soos out here. If this is one of mine it's... it's not good." She takes a deep, bracing breath and opens the door, poking her head inside.

It's just as bad as she remembers- the cold lights emanating from the wall sconces, the smell of blood and starship fuel, the steady hum of the ship engines audible over the sound of soft crying. Somewhere in one of these interrogation cells, she knows, she'll be able to find Ford, a younger Ford, a Ford who's only got a handful of grays and maybe one or two lines around his eyes. She wants to find that cell; she doesn't think she can handle walking into the other interrogation cell, hearing the questions the space pirates asked during the two week period when they were convinced that Ford and Ripley were spies for a rival faction.

"Jeez," Stan says quietly, making Ripley jump. "Let's go in there already and find the kids."

"You're supposed to stay behind with Soos!" Ripley hisses, glaring at both him and Soos. "This place is creepy, it's gonna creep you guys out!"

"Which is why we're here, Mrs. Aunt Ripley," Soos says firmly. "You're not gonna have to relive creepy stuff alone."

"What he said," Stan agrees, folding his arms. Ripley doesn't know how to respond to that, so she just sighs and turns.

"Okay... this is, uh, this isn't gonna be pretty. Just... don't blame me if you see something gross," she mutters, stepping inside. Theoretically, there are two weeks of memories they could be stepping inside of right now, and not all of them were awful, but-

"Aunt Ripley!" Mabel shrieks, running at her and tackling her with enough force to knock her back into Stan and Soos. Ripley scoops her up and hugs her close, looking into the interrogation cell, and winces. It's not the worst memory of the space pirates, but the Ripley in this memory is shaking and moaning incoherently, bruised and bleeding from a dozen places on her naked torso, shaking her head and trying to resist as the interrogator- blue and spiky-haired and studded with crystalline structures erupting from the skin over her shoulders and spine- reaches into her mouth with a tool.

Ripley shudders and squeezes Mabel tight, running her tongue over the gap in her teeth.

"I told you it'd be gross," she mutters, unable to look Stan or Soos in the eyes. "Mabel, baby, it's okay. Grunkle Ford came and rescued me, sweetheart. Is anybody else in here?"

"N-no, we split up," the girl wails, and Ripley shushes her and smooches the top of her head.

"Hey, hey, hey. It's okay, pumpkin. Grunkle Ford saved me. It's good, baby, it's good now." Ripley
turns and shoulders her way out of the room, stepping back into the darker, shifting arena of what should mostly be Stan's memories.

"Mrs. Aunt Ripley," Soos says shyly, once the door is safely closed. "Are you-

"I'm okay, Soos, honey," she says, and Mabel's hands tighten around her. Ripley meets Stan's gaze and he shrugs helplessly at her. "Let's keep looking, hon."

"Well, I got a thought-" Stan says, clearing his throat. "They're lookin' for my memories of, what, the combination to the safe, right?"

"I mean, I suppose," Ripley says skeptically, and Stan holds his hand up.

"So why don't I just... decide where that memory is and we wait for the kids to show up there?"

"Mr. Pines, you're a genius!" Soos proclaims, and Ripley nods and points.

"I said that, too! Come on, Stan, do your thing, sugar."

"Alright, alright, lemme just-" He laces his fingers together and stretches his arms out with a pleasant crack of his old joints. The hallway around them shifts around and solidifies, and the room... is almost the gift shop, if every surface was covered in doorways and hatches. Soos opens one up and laughs as a tiny Stan- can't be older than eight or nine- squeaks out "Left hook!" and socks a greasy blonde kid in the jaw.

"Ahahaw, you're a little cutie," he snickers, and Stan sighs heavily and shuts the door.

"Stop riflin' through my memories, Soos," he says, feigning grumpiness. Ripley grins at him over Mabel's head, before readjusting the girl's weight a little with a slight cough. She's not sure how normal it is that Mabel's clinging to her like this, but- well- she did just see something horrible, maybe this is normal for traumatized children.

"Hey, buttercup, you want to let go for a second?" she asks, and Mabel shakes her head and tightens her grip. Ripley blinks and pats her back, trying to make soothing noises as Mabel sniffs and makes little whimpering noises into her neck. Ripley winces- it's actually starting to hurt a little bit, and she's not at all sure if it's right or okay to tell Mabel to let up. It's not like it can... really hurt her, though, so...

"Stan!" Ford calls out, leaping perfectly from a wall that, on closer inspection, appears to be a sideways door, and landing right at Stan's feet. "Soos, you found-" He stops, and Ripley can see why- behind Ford, three people are scrabbling to join them, Fiddleford's hands hovering nervously over both of the younger twins.

"Okay," Ripley says, her skin crawling as she tries to dislodge the Mabel clinging to her chest. "What's-"

"Hey, you got a new Mabel!?" the one with Ford asks, looking hurt.

"Aunt Ripley, who is that?" the one on her chest asks, sounding scared.

"Don't," Ripley hears herself say in a tiny voice.

"Ripley, that's- that's Bill," Ford says sharply, pointing a big, fancy-looking rifle at Mabel. "Back away from him, Ripley."
"Hey, nobody needs to be pointin' guns at anybody," Stan says firmly. "Everybody just calm down, alright?"

"Aunt Ripley, don't let Grunkle Ford hurt me," Mabel says softly, and Ripley's arms instinctively tighten around her.

"That's not me!" Mabel cries out, looking offended. Ripley takes a deep breath.

"Dipper, honey?"

He looks terrified to be called on, but he straightens his shoulders and motions to the Mabel at his side. "We've been together this whole time, Aunt Ripley, that's- that's not my sister."

The Mabel on Ripley's chest grabs her face, her tiny little hands shaking terribly. "Aunt Ripley, he's gonna shoot me, don't let him hurt me, Aunt Ripley, please!"

"Hey, just-" Ripley tries to find some way to combat the panic rising in her chest, but Mabel jumps out of her arms and grabs her by the hand, yanking her towards the nearest door and grabbing the handle. "Mabel- or- wait, honey, just-

"He's gonna shoot me if we don't hide, Aunt Ripley!"

"Hey, stop!" Stan says quickly, but Mabel already has the door open and is already pulling Ripley through.

The door slams behind them and Mabel huddles against a wall, her hands over her ears, her eyes tightly shut. Ripley breathes out a shaky sigh, kneeling guiltily next to her and putting a hand on her back.

"It's okay, honey, it's okay. Just relax. Grunkle Ford wouldn't hurt you, he just- you know, he was- he was scared, that's all, baby. Bill's really scary," she says soothingly, and Mabel whimpers and sniffs. Ripley pulls her into her lap and sighs again, pressing a kiss into her hair. "Don't worry, baby, he wouldn't ever hurt you."

"A- Aunt Ripley?" Mabel asks, wiping her nose on her sleeve.

"Yeah, honey?" Ripley asks gently, looking around. It's a long, stone chamber, lit by torches, and they're in a particularly dark corner but it feels so familiar, right up until Ripley hears the sound of metal against stone and the bubbling moan of a dying sacrifice, and she realizes where it is they've gone. Her heart freezes, and she pulls Mabel close. "Mabel, we- we need to get out of here, we need to get out of here right now, baby."

"Aunt Ripley, did you really mean it?" Mabel asks.

"Wh-what? Mabel, what are you talking about?" Ripley asks, eyes darting around. The temple doors open, letting in sunlight, and she can see the nuns, she can see the altars with the sacrifices, the long knives glinting in bloody hands-

"When you said I'm really scary. Did you reeeeeaaally mean it?" Mabel asks, looking up with a too-wide grin. Her whole body stretches out and snaps like a broken rubber band, and the glowing yellow triangle is making a simpering expression at her in her lap, his voice back to its normal, grating tone. "Or were you just trying to flatter me, you flatterer?"

"Get-" Ripley cries out, kicking back and scrambling away as Bill rises into the air, cackling. "Get away from me, you fucking- what are you doing, what are you doing, what-"
"Wow, what a nice welcome," he says, waggling one inky noodle-appendage at her. "I've changed in the years since you've seen me last, One Sword!"

"Liar," Ripley breathes out, glancing over her shoulder at the nearest Sisters.

"Sure am, but not about this! One Sword, do you know how inconvenient it is to have to go to plan B?" He walks his fingers up her arm and tousles her hair, and she flinches back. "I mean, I spend all this time laying down the perfect setup, and you just have to go ahead and ruin it! Boy, if I didn't have a backup plan in motion that you're already playing into I'd be incredibly angry right now!"

Ripley jerks away from him as his eye flashes dozens of bright colors and blurry images, pulling herself to her feet.

"Whatever, you lil pain in the ass, like anybody with two brain cells to rub together actually thinks you're a guy with a plan. You're a skeevy little dick who throws tantrums," she says in as vicious a tone as she can get without rising over a whisper.

Bill snickers, folding his hands together. "Aw, I like how you think you can change what's going to happen by calling me names. Don't worry, though, soon you won't be the only freak who gets to turn into an all-powerful monster who works for me!"

"Ford's gonna fix it," Ripley says automatically, and Bill laughs.

"It's cute that you think anybody can do anything to stop what you're going to do for me, but here's a question, One Sword: shouldn't you be more concerned with what's about to happen to you right now?"

He snaps his fingers and everything in the Temple freezes; he snaps them again and Ripley comes to with a startled gasp, her chest aching as she sits up.

She's no longer wearing her Mabel sweater or her pajamas or her slippers. She's in bloodsoaked black, her clothing torn open in places where ragged, open knife wounds are, at least no longer bleeding.

"No," she breathes out, looking frantically around the room, at fifty corpses, at blood everywhere, but absolutely not at the spot ten feet away where something is waiting and watching, a smile curling every one of her mouths. "No. No. I was gone. I was out. This was over. No. This isn't- this isn't real."

"Did you enjoy your little rest?" she asks, and Ripley puts her face in her hands.

"Wake up. Wake up. This- this is- no, no, this is over, I'm home, I'm not here," she tells herself, and for a moment she almost thinks she can dispel whatever kind of vision or memory this is, right up until she feels the too-warm wetness of a tongue against the back of her neck.

Someone lets out a sobbing wail; she realizes dimly that it's her.

"Haven't you had enough time to pretend you left?" Natashoggoth asks, tangling a hand in Ripley's hair.

Something breaks.

Time passes.

She loses track.
Ripley's shaken awake. It's not Natashoggoth this time, though, it's an old man. Ripley blinks sluggishly at him as he says her name and asks her if she's okay.

"I'm Ripley," she confirms, feeling exhausted. God. She needs to sleep.

Two smaller people- kids, her mind supplies- barrel into her. They're warm, with big soft eyes and fluffy hair, and Ripley's brain does a rapid jog to catch up to what its seeing. Not just kids, The Kids. Dipper and Mabel. Everything else slots into place after that- the old man is Ford. The other old man is Stan. The third old man is Fidds. (What's with all the old men? she asks herself tiredly.) The young man is Soos.

The kids are The Kids. She hugs them both, letting her head drop. Feels real but so did the other thing and smells real and she doesn't know if she could make up their existence out of whole cloth.

She looks over the kids' heads at Ford and Stan and Soos, and tries a smile. "So I guess I missed out on you guys doing something cool to kick Bill out of our heads?"

"We used the power of kittens!" Mabel cries out, popping her head up.

"And synthesized music," Dipper adds, and gives Mabel a little fistbump.

"That's incredibly specific," Ripley tells them, squeezing them again.

"And Grunkle Fidds used hillybilly style hambone-brawling!" Mabel pipes up.

"And Soos used some kind of love-magic stomach beam!" Dipper adds, giving Soos an admiring grin.

(Grunkle Fidds? Ripley sees both of the Pines men question, and Fiddleford shrugs and blushes. Ripley loves it.)

(Ripley pulls Stan to one side before he can start making dinner. What happened to Gideon? she asks, and he shrugs that Gideon was gone by the time anyone stumbled in on them. This doesn't seem like a Good Thing to Ripley, but she's too tired to try to investigate this now. She asks Stan if the Real Mabel saw anything bad. He doesn't think so.)

(I'm taking a little nap, I'm kinda tired from all this sleeping, she jokes, but she goes to the bedroom and lies down, the blankets pulled up around her chin.)

Ford comes in and sits down on the edge of the bed, putting a hand on her calf.

"Probably a lot to catch up on, workin' downstairs," she mutters.

"I have plenty of time right now," he says seriously, and she looks over at him. He drums his fingertips on her shin. "There are a lot of scars I don't recognize. You want to help me catalogue them?"

"Jesus Christ, you nerd," she says softly, and she wants to cry over how much she loves him and his stupid face right now. He actually has a notebook and a serious (slightly hurt) expression on his face. She sits up and starts by unwrapping her legs from the bedsheets and letting him see the fading burns covering the bottoms of her feet. "So. This is from 'bout four months ago. Standing in a pit of burning coals for a while, I don't remember how long."
"Oh," he says, running his thumb over her ankle, before picking up the notebook and scribbling furiously in it for a moment. "And... why, if I may ask, were you standing in a pit of burning coals?"

"Eh, you know how creepy demons get. She liked to have people prove they'd let her hurt'em," she shrugs, and he picks up her ankle again, hesitates, and puts it back down. She isn't sure if he was trying to get a better look or what- and for what reason, she can't imagine- but she lets it slide after he clears his throat and motions for her to continue. She peels off her sweater so she's in her tank top, showing him the still-healing puncture wounds on her bicep. "You ever heard of a chupacabra, Ford?"

"No, what's that?" he asks, blinking.

"It's a new thing. A new cryptid. It got me in the woods near where the gnomes live," she explains, and his eyes widen. She grins. "I killed it, so they gave me, uh... something like sixty thousand dollars worth of gold bullion and that cool walking stick that I keep under the bed."

"Oh, I was wondering about that!" he says, jotting all this down. "Fascinating! Did you document it?"

"Sure did, babe. Oh, and I found a Bi-Grizzly in the woods near Mount Rushmore, they're related to the Multi-Bear who lives around here, too," she adds, perking up. He scoots closer, eyes wide, and she almost laughs at how eager he is to hear more. "I have a lot of info in my journal, if you want to look-"

"Well- I do, I'm very curious," he admits, before awkwardly reaching up to brush the hair out of her face. "But first, I just..." He hesitates, and she turns her face away, too awkward to maintain eye contact. "I saw some of your memories of the time when... when we were apart. I just... I'd like to know which scars are my fault and which ones are the result of that demonic piece of shit who hurt you."

"Aah," Ripley mutters, sighing. She shucks off her shirt, poking a finger at the faint line burned into the skin down the center of her chest. "This is you giving me Sparky before I fell." She grabs his hand and puts his fingertip against a puckered wound on the middle of her back, a little north of her kidney. "Got shot by one of her minions on my way out of a dimension that has an Earth with three micro-suns." She lets go, showing a thin semicircle of scar tissue on her left forearm. "She possessed a kid to see if I could hurt a kid's body. I, uh... I don't want to talk about this one, actually."

She lets her hands drop, and he very, very hesitantly cups the side of her face.

"So... funny story," she says softly. "So the one on my face is mine."

"Please explain," he says, after a startled moment.

"So, so she... uh, she had this thing that her... concubines or nuns or whatever they are, they cut off their faces to show off that they belong to her," she says, steeling herself for the reaction she knows he's going to have. "And I guess, uh... I guess I'm pretty gullible or stupid or... I dunno. She had a way of convincing people she loves them. I-I knew better, I know I knew better, she'd already spent years chasing me down, fucking with my head, she- she only ever came at me when I was weak or hurt or starving, she liked it better when I couldn't fight back as hard, I know that, she's- she just..."

Ripley waves a hand. "She talked me into it, I guess. Mindscape fuckery. I dunno. But hey, I still have my face on. You can thank one of the Rick Sanchezes for that, that guy is a real... real good friend to have."
Ford is blinking rapidly when she spares a peek to see how disgusted he is with her right now. He takes off his glasses, rubbing his fingers against his eyes.

"I, uh. Ripley, that's... that's not how that works," he says slowly, before grabbing her shoulders. "The thing that did that to you, Ripley, that's... it's so goddamn lucky that it's dead right now," he says fervently.

Ripley stares at him for a moment, taken aback. "You're... Ford, I was the one with the knife, I-"

"Savage, shut up," he mutters miserably, burying his face against her neck. "I'm already dangerously close to losing my composure."

"Oh." She clears her throat. "You wanna take a nap?"

"Yeah, sure," he sniffs, and she puts his glasses on the nightstand.

Chapter End Notes

edit: always = already
Fiddleford McGucket lies awake at night and knows that if he had a memory gun right now, he'd use it to erase the sight of two of his best (only) friends sprawled lifeless in the TV room, eyes and mouths partly open, Stan's head lolling to the side, Ripley in a heap on the floor. The only reason he didn't know they were dead was because of the faint blue glow coming from their eyes and the barely-visible movement of their chests- and even then, with what little he knew and remembered, he didn't know if he could expect them to survive.

Thank God for Dipper. Thank God that Ford wrote down how to save them. Thank God Ford knew what to do. Fuck Ford for bringing that demon into the world in the first place.

There needs to be a conversation. Fiddleford doesn't know how to hold one of those, but he suspects he's not going to like it.

He sits up. The idea of sleeping so soon after irrefutable proof that That Thing is not only real but fully capable of entering into his or anyone else's dreams is laughable, if you have a sick sense of humor.

"Hahaha," Fiddleford chuckles, because a mind that can come up with an 80-ton Shame-bot must find a lot of stuff funny.

His feet are bare- not just sockless and shoeless, but actually bare. Between the two of them, Stan and Ripley know just enough about medical care to have felt pretty damn brave about unwrapping his feet last week. A lot of sores and scabbing-over blisters, but if he had originally wrapped them in bandages for some grievous injury, he doesn't know it. They'd spent a while making sure he'd be comfortable and healing, he thinks. And Ripley had gone and bought those squishy rubber clogs for him, so he couldn't get kicked out of places for not having shoes on anymore. And Stan had talked to him- not over and about him, but addressing Fiddleford by name- and...

And for several long seconds, before he saw the unholy glow in their eyes, Fiddleford thought they were dead.

He gets up and ties his robe around his waist- technically, it's Ripley's, and he's swimming in it, but she lent it to him and won't let him give it back until she has a chance to take him shopping for one he likes, even though it means she usually ends up stealing Stan's whenever she wants a robe. He doesn't step into the slippers she bought him, but she likes to go around barefoot, too, so if she sees him she won't say anything.

(He saw the look on her face when she woke up, after That Thing dragged her to some dark corner of her own mind away from her family. Waiting for the other shoe to drop. Waiting for it to be another hallucination or dream, not recognizing half of what she saw until something else jogged her memory. He's seen it on his own face, in reflections in the junkyard, in windows, in car mirrors.)

He's not surprised to see Stanley up, one hand cradling his head as he stares blankly at the kitchen table, a cup of coffee cold at his elbow.

"Any more in the pot?" Fiddleford asks, and Stan brightens up, making a conscious effort to- well, maybe not smile, but he gives Fiddleford a shrug and jerks his thumb at the coffeemaker.
"I'm shocked they can sleep tonight," Stan mutters, as Fiddleford makes himself a mug of coffee. It tastes a little burnt, even over the sugar and cream.

"They're kids, they c'n probably sleep through most anythin'," Fiddleford replies easily, and Stan frowns a little.

"I didn't mean the-" he starts, then stops, nervously drumming the tips of his fingers against each other. "There was a lot of traumatizing stuff in there. The kids didn't... didn't see anything too rough, did they?"

They saw a charming thirteen-year-old wearing Groucho Marx glasses to his own Bar Mitzvah. They saw Ripley as a younger woman with a sleepy Ford's head in her lap, playing with his hair and singing *She Blinded Me With Science* and laughing when he asks if she expects him to believe that's a real song from Earth radio. They saw a Stan teaching Soos as a child how to box, pretending to be gruff until the boy's back was turned and he could let the gooey softness and affection show itself on his face. They saw Ripley thin and scarred and dirty, stargazing with a fluffy orange alien child in her lap, saying something gentle in an alien language before smiling fondly at the stars. They saw Stan from a few days ago, explaining that the Bottomless Pit was in fact, bottomless.

"Nothin' too rough, no. Ya probably can't get away with pretendin' yer not the biggest softy this side of the Mississippi anymore," Fiddleford adds, and Stan snorts. "An' ya can prob'ly expect Mabel to bat her eyes atcha until you give that girl formal boxing lessons."

"Oh boy, my little angel a boxer," Stan says, eyes widening as he spreads his hands. "The perfect attraction! Looks like a butterfly, stings like a sock to the jaw!"

"Yer slogan could use a little work," Fiddleford says, and Stan grins at him.

They saw Stan at Soos's age, a dirty young man hunching over a cheap box of cereal with colorful marshmallows, in a stark, stained motel room, watching gameshows and telling himself *Happy Birthday*. They saw Ripley wake up screaming in a filthy city, instinctively cramming her arm against her mouth to muffle herself as she looks around to see if she was heard. They saw Stan in ragged jeans and a threadbare shirt, crying on his knees with his forehead against the Monster Portal in the basement.

They saw the golden triangle laugh and run rampant through Stan's mind, Ripley's mind, flashing memories that belong to the privacy of their own hearts like stolen laundry.

Frankly, Fiddleford really doesn't know how Ford or the kids can be sleeping right now, either.

"How's your memory lately, Fidds?" Stan asks, and Fiddleford shrugs.

"Bits an' pieces. Context fer things, mostly. Dunno how much of what I'm missin' is just due ta me bein' an old fella and how much is," he mimes using the memory gun on himself before realizing that Stan might not know that it was a memory gun he used, and supplies a little *zap* sound. "Ya know, lasered right outta my brain an' such."

"I hear ya." Stan screws around with the mug, avoiding Fiddleford's gaze. "Boy, nights like this sure do make me wish I had a sixpack in the house."

"You give up drinkin' for while the kids are around?" Fiddleford guesses, and Stan nods.

"I dunno, seemed like the right thing to do. I don't even know that I missed it any before I opened my fridge an hour ago and couldn't figure out where I put it."
"That's... fair." Fiddleford tugs on his beard a little, thinking, and Stan gestures vaguely at him.

"Hey, I'm due for a haircut, you want to go to the barber with me? They can trim that up for ya if you don't want yer hair done. Ford and Ripley can watch the kids."

Fiddleford can't remember the last time someone else cut his hair, and he's a little shaky on it but he's pretty sure he hasn't shaved in decades, easily.

"I-I'm not sure I'd be allowed in the door," he says, after a moment. That seems to make Stan's mind up.

"Yeah, well, you an' me're going in the morning and if anybody tries to stop you I'll slap'em upside the head with Shaky and Scratchy."

"Oh my. Oh boy. Okay, what are Shaky an' Scratchy?" Fiddleford asks, bracing himself.

"Shaky," Stan waggles his right hand, "Scratchy," he waggles his left. Fiddleford nods slowly.

"Yeah, that's about- that's about what I figured."

They end up spending the whole night talking- Stan excuses himself as having slept all through the adventures earlier in the afternoon, and doesn't ask Fiddleford to explain why he's too restless to sleep. When Ripley and the kids notice how tired they both seem, they seem to accept that the two of them are just too old to not be inexplicably tired sometimes. Ford only helps illustrate their point when he shambles in late for breakfast, his hair flattened and sticking up on one side, and seems to need serious help getting situated before he's totally awake.

Stan and Fiddleford get back from the barbershop just in time to watch Dipper and Mabel's short but spirited attempt to jump double dutch, Wendy and Ripley holding the ends of the jumpropes and cheering them on. The kids take a tumble and Stan looks a heck of a lot calmer about it than Fiddleford feels, giving the kids a small wave once they get up and notice their arrival.

"So I guess you're not gonna make it on the professional circuit," Stan says, sounding disappointed in them. Fiddleford is frankly amazed at how easy it is for the man to pretend these two kids aren't the sun in his skies.

"Mr. McGucket," Wendy drawls, pointing a finger. "Lookin' good."

"Toot toot, we're on the handsome old fella train," Ripley adds, hands on her hips. "With our foxy conductors Stan and Fidds!"

"Eugh, gross!" Dipper laughs, as Ripley gives him a hand up.

"Not gross! You look beautiful," Mabel says seriously, eyes huge and sparkling with delight.

"W-well, I figgered anythin'd be an improvement," Fiddleford says shyly, and Stan slaps the middle of his back and nearly sends him sprawling.

"Don't sell yourself short, buddy, ya look good," he says warmly, and Ripley nods.

"Yeah, like, a kind, sweet, nont Threatening, mysterious, handsome older gentleman," she says enthusiastically.

"Yeah, or like, the kind of grampa who has a garden and sneaks snacks to the kids when they're
grounded," Wendy adds, somewhat less enthusiastically but quite a bit more realistically.

"Come on, Grunkle Fidds, jump rope with us!" Mabel commands, taking his hand.

"Yeah, you could probably do some fancy hambone tricks," Dipper adds, and Fiddleford feels himself grin a little at the slightly challenging note in the kid's tone.

"Alright, fellers, let's see if these old bones can keep up," he says, and everyone whoops.

(Fiddleford can't remember the last time anybody was so undisguisedly happy to see him. He knows his inability to remember anything like this happening has nothing to do with the memory gun and everything to do with his failings as a husband and father and friend. He knows he doesn't deserve the way these people are treating him, the way they talk to him, the way they think about him, the way their eyes light up when they notice him. He doesn't deserve this family after what he did to his other family.)

(Amanda and Tate used to look at him like that. Amanda used to talk to him and think about him like that. Tate used to think he hung the moon.)

(He's not even a hundred percent sure when the last time he spoke to Tate in person was.)

Ford is distracted at dinner, picking at his food (dinosaur-shaped breaded chicken nuggets from the freezer section in the store and fries that are either hot and dry as a bone or too-cool and mushy, but Ripley was so proud of making dinner that everybody's forcing themselves to eat.)

"Hey Fordsy," Ripley says cheerfully, waggling a little chicken pterodactyl at him. "Now they're all dead."

"Yes, yes. Very good," Ford mutters, tugging on his hair and shoving a couple of things that were supposed to be stegosaurus into his mouth. She stares at him for a few moments, dipping the pterodactyl in her ketchup.

"Grunkle Ford, do you need any help with what you're doing downstairs?" Dipper asks, spinning a tyrannosaurus slowly on its head and leaving breadcrumbs all over his plate.

"No, no, I don't need any help," Ford says distractedly, flipping through a small stenographer's pad and jotting something down. "My readings can't possibly- no, no, it's..." He groans, eliciting concerned looks from everyone at the table.

"Hey, Stanford, just chill out and eat," Stan says, frowning. "If I'm not bringin' Shack work to the dinner table you're not bringin' Nerd work to the table."

"Darn tootin'," Mabel says brightly.

"I must be taking down the readings incorrectly," Ford says, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "There's no way this should look so-"

"Honey, are you sure you don't need somebody to help you down there? I mean, you're trying to safely dismantle the portal so it can't hurt anything, that can't be an easy job on your own," Ripley asks slowly. He gives her a look- laden with purpose and hidden meaning, if the faces she pulls after she waggles her eyebrow is any indication- and he finally shrugs and sighs.

"I suppose I could use a small amount of assistance, but-"

"Great! Stan and Fidds are both completely capable of helping you out," she says cheerfully.
"But-"

"No takebacks," Ripley adds quickly. "Besides, I'm gonna be busy this weekend, our buddy Rick's coming to visit."

"Our-" Ford stops, looking up at her, half a brontosaurus falling out of his mouth onto his plate. "Rick? Rick Sanchez?"

"Yeah, he's bringing his grandkids, it'll be fun," Ripley tells him.

"What- Summer and Morty are coming here?" Ford asks, frowning. Stan shoves him a little.

"How do you know more about your old college buddy's grandkids than about your big brother's grandkids?"

Fiddleford's sort of wondering the same thing, only Ford puts his notebook down at that question and gives Stan a calculating, searching stare.

"How do you know who Rick Sanchez is?" he asks, and Stan opens his mouth, closes it, looks at Fiddleford with a pleading expression.

"Don't look at me, I can't help ya none," Fiddleford tells him.

"Uh!" Ripley interrupts, turning bright red. "Did I not remember to tell you that Rick and Stan know one another?"

"UH," Stan says, and Fiddleford feels like people have referenced this story before but he can't remember the details. Stan's looking like he wants to bury himself in the kitchen floor right now, so it's probably not a great story.

"...you did not remember to tell me that, no," Ford says, blinking.

"I wasn't going to go around telling people that," Stan says, his voice a little strangled.

"Stanley, can I ask how you met Rick Sanchez?" Ford asks quietly.

"Yeah! Did he figure out right away that you weren't really Grunkle Ford like you were pretending to be?" Mabel asks, and Stan gurgles horribly.

"Whoa, whoa, sweetie, that's a really, that's, that's a question and it has an answer but let's focus on, on what's definitely, uh, so, who wants to hear the story of how I met Rick Sanchez, huh?" Ripley asks, glancing guiltily at Stan. Fiddleford really wonders if she and Stan know how deeply suspicious they get when they're trying and failing to misdirect a conversation.

"That's kinda a weird coincidence, you both meeting some guy who happened to be friends with Great-Uncle Ford," Dipper says, biting the legs off a triceratops. Fiddleford is still trying to figure out if Dipper's being facetious or if he really does think that it's a coincidence, which... technically it is a coincidence. Fiddleford recalls something Ripley said once about Rick being the type to kiss and tell, and he doesn't know if he would have remembered Ford dating Rick Sanchez in college, but... Ah.

"Aaahahahahahaha yeah, it's funny," Stan says, sweating visibly.

"My, what suspicious laughter!" Fiddleford blurts out, before clearing his throat. "Hey, fellers, you know what, this is probably a family meetin' type conversation, I'm just gonna-"

"Oh no ya don't," Ripley says, putting a handful of fries down. "If we're havin' a family meeting..."
you're goin' too, so-

There is a noise outside like localized thunder and an unsettling rushing noise that Fiddleford can't immediately place but makes a knot of anxiety form in his guts all the same. Ford and Ripley both jump to their feet, before the tension melts out of Ripley's body and her war-face is replaced with a sheepish grin.

"You know what, I bet that's them," she admits, edging towards the door.

There's a crash and a litany of curses fries the evening air. If Fiddleford's beard was still long enough it'd have curled in horror. Two high, young voices cry out in protest- "Aw, jeez!" and "Grandpa!"

"That most certainly is Rick," Ford says, narrowing his eyes.

"Hot Belgian Waffles," Stan says, with feeling.

The tall, gangly man with a shock of brilliant silver hair sticking out in every direction steps in the second Ripley opens the door, and stops to give both Ford and Stan a glare so vicious people back home in Tennessee would automatically ward off the Evil Eye if they saw it. He looks like a mess, stains that are hopefully not vomit on his labcoat, stains that definitely are vomit on his shirt underneath.

"Rick! I'm so glad you made it out, man!" Ripley says, apparently oblivious to the pure venom pouring off of the man as she lifts him in a bearhug. "Gosh, it feels like I haven't seen you in forever!"

"Get thirstier," he grumbles, as she puts him down. "So this is it, huh. The... infamous Mystery Shack."

"Summer and Morty!" Ripley booms, gently hip-checking Rick out of the way to drag two kids- a nervous kid a little older than the twins and a lanky girl with a redhaired ponytail- into the house. Fiddleford's almost entirely positive that she's doing everything she can to distract the elder Pines twins from the previous conversation. The vitriol in Rick's gaze makes him suspect this is not going to work out the way she wants it to.

"Dipper, Mabel, let's the five of us," Ripley gestures at all four kids and herself, "we'll go check out something cool while the Old Man Squad hammers out the, uh, the details!"

"The details of what?" Dipper asks, eyes narrowed.

"I'm comin' with you," Fiddleford says, scampering over to join Ripley. He is absolutely not sticking around for whatever's going to happen; his presence here may depend on the charity of these people but he's in no way equipped to deal with chaperoning these three. Ripley's quick, guilty nod says everything about whether his suspicions are valid.

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Turns out milkshakes are acceptable currency for Rick's grandchildren, so the six of them take up a booth at Greasy's and Ripley orders a couple of orders of chili cheese fries. Summer and Morty (?) seem quiet, so far as Fiddleford can tell.

"So I was thinking, we should go on a hike!" Ripley says, forcing cheerfulness.

"A hike, like... trees and whatever?" Summer asks loftily, playing with her phone.
"Weyell, we can... we can make it an adventure?" Ripley looks imploringly at Fiddleford, and he shrugs at her over the top of his milkshake. (Pistachio with extra cherries, which Lazy Susan already knew. She's being awfully nice to him.)

"I think we're pretty adventured out. Alien stuff. Nothing you guys would understand," Morty mutters, playing with his straw a little. Beside him, Summer snorts softly. Mabel straightens up in her seat, still wearing a huge handlebar mustache made of whipped topping, and bangs her fist against the tabletop.

"That's not true! We have plenty of alien stuff here!" she says, and Dipper nods, looking around before leaning forward.

"That's right! We've been dealing with weird alien stuff and monsters and-"

"Gnomes!" Ripley chimes in, scratching her chin.

"-yeah, and gnomes, all summer long!" Dipper protests. "We can handle aliens."

"It's grownup hivemind alien stuff," Summer says, but gently, with a faint smile as she peeks over her phone at the twins.

"Y-yeah, and besides, all your alien stuff is prob-probably just alien stuff we've already dealt with," Morty adds, rolling his eyes a little.

"Yeah, no offense, kids, but like, we're doing alien stuff like, all the time with Grandpa Rick," Summer agrees.

"Well, that's great, fellers, maybe we can do somethin' that ain't dangerous fer once!" Fiddleford says brightly, hoping against hope that he can steer the conversation towards something nice and normal.

"We're not kids, we're-" Dipper starts, before he stops and grins. "You know what? That's probably fine. I can't really see you guys being able to tangle with the Manotaurs."

"Or mermaids," Mabel adds. "Or time travelers."

"You have mermaids?" Summer asks, looking like she's already hooked.

"We've been time travelers. What- what exactly is a Manotaur?" Morty asks skeptically.

"Yeah, what is a Manotaur?" Ripley asks suspiciously.

"Kids, I'm sure ya don't need ta compare yer near-death experiences with the Smiths," Fiddleford says waringly.

"I mean, there isn't a comparison, they've n-never been shot at by Gromflomites," Morty points out.

"And they've never been possessed and terrorized by ghosts," Dipper replies. Ripley lets out a soft, guttural growl and squeezes her spoon so tightly that it bends; Fiddleford's deeply concerned but the kids seem not to notice.

"Pretty sure they've never been trapped in d-dozens of decaying realities because of freezing time," Morty says, and Fiddleford and Ripley exchange horrified glances.

"What do you kids do with your grandpa?" Ripley asks weakly.

"Uh, yeah, number one, we've also traveled time, so if you're wondering how the high five got
invented in the 1840's instead of in the late 1970's, you have Mabel to thank for that," Mabel says heatedly, before licking off what's left of the whipped topping mustache. "Number two, sounds to me like you guys just couldn't handle getting almost murdered by cursed wax figures -"

"I knew it!" Fiddleford blurs out, then claps a hand over his mouth. "Sorry."

"Can't handle it?" Morty repeats, sounding offended.

"It's honestly not a competition," Ripley says bracingly. "Look, guys, we don't actually- danger is bad, kids! Remember the chupacabra? That was a real thing that apparently could have killed any one of us!"

"But you killed that," Dipper says, blinking faux-innocently at her. "You'd keep us safe, Aunt Ripley."

"Are you kidding? She didn't just kill a chupacabra, she killed a chaos god. H-heck, if she was with us I wouldn't be scared of anything we found around this dump," Morty says, adding, "No offense." Ripley's starting to look green around the gills.

"You killed a chaos god?" Mabel asks, blinking.

"You know what, kids, why don't we go to the lake?" Fiddleford says, grabbing Ripley's forearm under the table. "We can go find the derelict remains'a the Gobblewonker an' see if them beavers're doin' okay!"

Ripley gropes around until her hand finds his, and squeezes his fingers tightly. "That's a great idea! You kids want to go find a broke-up robot monster?"

"We don't have a boat," Dipper points out, and Ripley clears her throat.

"I bet we can borrow one, though. You kids, just, ah- eat and I'll make a couple calls. Fidds, please keep an eye on these rascals."

"It's almost nighttime, don't these two kids have to go to bed?" Summer asks, and the sad thing is, she doesn't even sound like she's trying to make them feel young- she's probably got a lot of experience babysitting, Fiddleford laments. She sounds pretty sensible and responsible.

"We can stay up til ten thirty!" Dipper says, holding up a finger. "It's not even seven yet!"

"And we were up past midnight rescuing Mermando, my merman almost-boyfriend!" Mabel adds.

"I'm going to see if we can get our hands on a boat," Ripley repeats, sounding strained. "Kids, please don't do anything that'll make me embarassed to look Lazy Susan in the eye." She pauses, looks momentarily horrified at what just came out of her own mouth, and flees to the parking lot. She probably doesn't realize that the Ripleymobile's in full view of the diner window, Fiddleford thinks, because he can see her bent over almost double with both hands on the hood, clearly having some kind of attack.

"Can you kids keep from killin' each other long enough fer me to go put that fire out?" Fiddleford asks wearily.

"We'll be good, Grunkle Fidds," Mabel says sweetly, batting her lashes at him.

"No promises, Old Man," Morty says, chin in his hands.
"That's as good as I'm gettin'," Fiddleford sighs, before heading outside and crouching next to Ripley. Neither of them speaks for a few moments.

"Gonna git dark soon," he says, after a while.

"Those kids are really something," she wheezes finally.

"They seem to take after their Grunkles," Fiddleford says reflectively. "And the Smith kids seem to remind me a lot'a what I remember about Rick from college. T'ain't much, granted, and most of it revolves around drinkin' and the occasional punk show, but what I do remember."

"It's a good thing," she replies, swallowing. "They're good kids. All four. I just... they really... it's-"

"I'm feelin' pretty overwhelmed m'self," Fiddleford says gently. Ripley nods enthusiastically. "Ya don't wanna go home yet, do ya?"

"I'm an idiot," Ripley whispers. "Stan and Rick used to date. I meant to tell Ford and I forgot to tell him, and we're gonna get home and the house is gonna be burned down because I forgot to tell him beforehand and the three of them are gonna fight."

"Yeh've been pretty busy, t'wouldn't make ya some kinda idiot," he points out. Ripley sniffles.

"I think it's gonna hurt Stan and Ford and Rick. All of them."

"How would Stan an' Rick datin' hurt Ford's feelings?" Fiddleford asks, after a moment. Ripley hangs her head.

"Because Rick thought Stan was Ford, apparently. So now Rick's upset at Stan, Ford's gonna be upset at Stan, and Stan's gonna be upset because everybody's upset with him, and this is all my-"

"If th'next word is fault you an' I're gonna have words," he says flatly. "Yer not responsible for them three an' their bad decisions."

"I'm a little bit responsible," she mutters sulkily, and he sighs and rubs the back of his neck.

"Well, right now we're gonna go onto the lake at night an' find what's left of one'a my favorite killer robots," he says. "We'll panic over all that other stuff later. Sound fair?"

"Sounds fair," Ripley tells him quietly. He gives her a hand and she stands, looking at her phone. "Hey, do you feel comfortable stealin' a boat?"

"Pretty sure I've done it in the not-that-distant past," he tells her, and she nods and sniffs again.

"Alright, let's go steal a boat with a bunch of kids."

(Unexpected bonus: the kids look like they were only just about to start a foodfight by the time Fiddleford and Ripley are back inside the diner, and haven't actually started throwing food around. The younger three look incredibly guilty; Summer just looks like she's used to weathering worse storms.)

The lake is very nearly dark when the Ripleymobile pulls up, and after roughly twenty minutes Ripley comes back, sweaty and pleased, and ushers them all into a decent-sized fishing boat. It's not too far to get to the waterfall cavern where the Gobblewonker was stuck; Mabel and Dipper tell Summer and Morty everything they can about the Gobblewonker machine, with Fiddleford interjecting a handful of times to explain something they must not have understood at the time. It's the
first time Fiddleford's compared notes with the kids over that whole incident, and the Smiths look suitably impressed.

"Gobblewonk-butt should be right behind this-" Ripley starts, then pauses, pulling the boat up short and dropping anchor. "Hey, Fidds, shouldn't we see the Gobblewonker's butt from here?"

"Can you get closer?" he asks, and she frowns, squinting at the falls.

"Nah, I think we'd all drown to death if I tried. Hey, but I know there's a hiking path to get to the cave entrance, we can park the boat on the shore and get a closer look." After a few more minutes, they step out, trekking over to the waterfall in a single line.

"I can't believe w-we ended up hiking anyway," Fiddleford hears Morty whisper to Mabel.

"Half of what we do in this town involves hiking," she whispers back.

"And here we-" Ripley says brightly from the front, before cutting herself off and scratching her head. "Fiddleford, you didn't back the 'wonker out of the cavern, did you?"

"No ma'am," Fiddleford tells her, peeking around her side. The cave entrance was free and clear of robot debris. He scratches his jaw through his new, shorter beard. "I seem t'recall removin' the head and neck from the body to try t'break it down, but the pieces were too heavy to move without robot assistance."


"That sounds ominous," Dipper comments. "We should go check to see if the head and neck are where you left them."

"Yeah, can you imagine if the gnomes got their hands on that thing?" Mabel asks, and both she and Dipper shudder.

"Cave exploration at night with no flashlights and nobody who knows where we are," Summer remarks. "Sounds safe to me."

"I mean, if you guys are scared we can just go home," Dipper says charitably. Fiddleford bites back the urge to swear.

"W-we'll be f-f-fine," Morty says, shooting a glare at Summer. She sighs heavily, shrugging. "Whatever."

They edge along the rocky path- Fiddleford sort of grateful to be wearing shoes to protect his soles and sort of wishing he was barefoot so he wouldn't slip so much- until they get inside the cavern, which is very nearly pitch black. Summer sighs again and holds out her phone, the bright LCD lighting up a little bit of the cave.

"I bet I could use my sword like a torch," Ripley says reflectively.

"How about ya don't," Fiddleford says sharply. "There'll be flashlights an' such in the Gobblewonker if'n we can find it."

"Smart Adult," Ripley mutters, taking out her own cellphone and holding it out like Summer's doing. It takes some searching, but eventually they spot it- looking sad and lifeless, right up until they got
"Boy, I wish we had a little more light," Ripley says meaningfully. "I could stand off to one side with my sword lit, I'm just saying."

"Ain't that mighty dangerous?" Fiddleford replies.

"How would a sword help?" Morty asks, and that's how Fiddleford knows Ripley's going to do it—it's like every time she thinks she might impress a kid she absolutely has to do whatever it is.

"Well how about WOTCHAAAAHH!" Ripley jumps onto a rock and pulls out her light sword with a flourish, which they can barely see because it's so dark, and ignites it with a sweeping motion that nearly blinds them. "Tadaaahh!"

"Wow, it is really bright," Summer says appreciatively.

"Just stand like that indefinitely until we find the flashlights!" Dipper says.

"Hmm!" Ripley replies, her face awash in blue-white light. She turns, holding the sword out, and there's a wide, gaping maw of a cave entrance past her. "Hmmm. Exactly how long are we planning on staying in this cave, ya'll?"

"This was your idea," Fiddleford reminds her. "We could always just head on back to the house-"

"Time check, girls and boys!" Ripley interrupts.

"Eight thirty-nine," Summer supplies.

"There, see? The kids can stay up til ten thirty. We got an hour before we gotta head back," Ripley says brightly. "I'm gonna go into the cave and see if there's anything cool."

"What makes you think there's something cool in there?" Fiddleford asks.

"Well, there were dinosaurs in the last cave we went into," Mabel volunteers.

"That tried to eat us, multiple times," Dipper counters, frowning. "Maybe we should go back, if-"

"Dinosaurs, sure, t-try being chased around by a thirty-foot-tall virus," Morty mutters.

"I'm almost positive there's no thirty foot viruses here," Ripley says after a moment.

"Almost positive?" Summer presses. "Shouldn't you be one hundred percent certain?"

"Honey, you haven't been here long, there's no such thing as certain here," Ripley laughs. "Right, Fidds?"

"Uh," Fiddleford replies, taken slightly aback. Ripley takes a few steps into the cave anyway, whistling.

"I wouldn't mind comin' here for like an all-day thing, caves are neat," she says, turning a rock over with her foot and crouching to look at whatever's underneath. "You get good eatin' in a cave like this."

"Is she joking?" Summer asks quietly.

"Probably ain't a joke," Fiddleford replies, thinking of some of the memories he and Ford and the
kids had to witness in her head.

The five of them trail along behind her- it gets dark quickly the farther she ventures in, there's no real choice in the matter- and the kids pepper her with questions about other times she's been in caves and eaten random things there.

"Okay, Aunt Ripley, what's the weirdest thing you've ever eaten?" Dipper asks curiously, and Ripley makes a soft sound that could be a chuckle in the right light.

"Um, weirdest? Anytime I ate an alien species, I guess," she says, sounding distracted. "I've eaten dragon."

"What about those canned baby eyes you gave Rick?" Morty asks, looking around. "I mean, that counts as the weirdest thing I've heard of somebody eating..."

"Nnngghh," Ripley whines softly, the shadows in the cave trembling and jerking. "Well, I, well, I never ate any, so... s-so... hey, let's talk about something else! Has your Grandad taken ya'll to Blips and Chitz yet?"

"Baby eyes?" Dipper asks, horrified. "Aunt Ripley, where would you even get something like that?"

"Ah, y-yeah, Rick took me there last month, it was weird, i-it had this weird game called Roy where, I-I guess, you're Roy," Morty says, glancing over- it must have hit him that some things aren't totally okay for the younger ears in the group, because Summer's nudging him in the side.

"Oh, yeah, I've heard of Roy," Ripley says, clearing her throat. "I don't know if I understand the appeal, but there's a lot of fun stuff to do at Blips and Chitz, I'm hoping we can all take a big trip out for a weekend there. I had another Rick who I was friends with who told me about it."

"You know more than one version of Grandpa Rick?" Summer asks, perking up a little. "What's he like?"

"Well, you know- younger, for one thing, maybe about two or three years younger than me," Ripley says, smiling over her shoulder. "Didn't talk about his home life much, just the important stuff- had a teenaged sister, had a wife and daughter, I guess that's your mom, huh? Shoot, that's weird to think about, your mom's the same age he is. Time dilation shenanigans are a wreck to work with," she says with feeling.

"What do you mean?" Mabel asks, and Ripley shrugs, poking her head into a low cave entrance before deciding to turn another way.

"Well, like- like, for example, sweetie, when I last saw your Grunkle Ford, he was 42 years old, and now he's 60. That's... that's a lot of time to miss out on somebody," she says quietly. "Three years to my eighteen. Doesn't seem entirely fair, does it." She swings and stalactites that probably took hundreds of thousands of years to form fall to the cave floor, and she gestures for them to follow her.

"Hey, Aunt Ripley, that doesn't make sense," Dipper says after a moment. "Grunkle Stan and Great-Uncle Ford should both be sixty-two."

"Ayup," Ripley agrees, and Fiddleford blinks, contemplating that for bit. "I don't think they've done the math yet- I feel like Stan'll either start gloating about being the older twin or pouting about being the old twin, and either way, I'm not here for that nonsense."

"...yeah, that'll be a fun fight to watch," Mabel huffs a little. There's light up ahead, and Dipper straightens up immediately.
"Oh! I know where we are!" he says excitedly, rushing ahead. "We're coming up on the Man-Cave! I had no idea the cave systems spread out as far as the falls!"

"The what-now?" Fiddleford asks, frowning. Something about this seems like a bad idea. "Actually, if'n I recall correctly, the whole area's lousy with'em- caves, tunnels, bunkers, you name it."

There's a loud, mammalian roar from within the cave. Everyone freezes and looks startled- well, everyone but Dipper, who grins, beats his fists on his chest, and roars back.

"Ooh, this is gonna be interesting and educational," Ripley says in a small voice, nudging Fiddleford.

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The less that can be said about the Manotaurs, the better- although, Ripley was right, it was... interesting. And educational. (Turned out most of the Gobblewonker's body got dragged up to the Man-Cave for, and this is a quote, "making Pituitaur's bedroom look flippin' sick.")

Dipper and Morty, at least, aren't at each other's throats anymore, too busy gushing over how cool their sisters were in the face of those hypermasculine herdbeasts. (If Fiddleford never sees another fist, bicep, nipple, or nipple-fist-bicep hybrid, it will be too soon.)

They're just climbing back into Ripley's car when her phone rings. She groans, gesturing at Fiddleford. "Answer it, please?"

"Okay," he says, fumbling for the outdated flip-phone. "H-hello?"

"...Fiddleford?" Ford asks, sounding both exhausted and surprised. "Is everyone alright? Why didn't Ripley answer the-"

"Tell'em I'm driving," Ripley says, buckling up.

"She's driving?" Fiddleford tries. Ford sighs noisily on the other end.

"Alright, well... we became... concerned over how late it's getting."

"Is it very late?" Fiddleford asks, surprised, and Summer pipes up from the backseat to tell him that it's eleven oh eight. "Aw, breadbaskets, we didn't realize the time."

"Tell him I'm driving," Ripley repeats, backing the car up before pulling out of the parking lot. The two younger kids are already starting to nod off back there- even Morty looks a little bleary-eyed.

"She told me to tell you she's driving," Fiddleford repeats. "We should be home soon."

"Very well. Rick's taking the kids to the Holiday Inn near the mall, so they won't be staying for too long after you get here." Ford pauses, and was he always this stiff and formal on the phone, or is it just lately? Fiddleford honestly can't remember and doesn't know if that's normal or not. "I'll see you presently, then. Goodbye."

Fiddleford stares down at the phone in his hand, then glances back at Ripley. In the near-darkness, it's hard to tell what her face is doing, but her tone is a little too curious when she speaks.

"So you guys talk about anything important?" she asks.

"Ya know full well we didn't," he tells her, and she hums and turns on the radio to an Oldies-and-Classics station, and Patience and Prudence start singing.
Although we're apart, you're part of my heart, and tonight, you belong to me...

"That's creepy," he mutters.

"They sing it in The Jerk," she replies distantly, and starts humming along under her breath.

My honey, I know in the dawn that you will be gone, but tonight

you belong

 to me.

Just to little old me.

Chapter End Notes

Quoted lyrics in last chapter- The End of the World, by Skeeter Davis.

Quoted lyrics in this chapter- Tonight You Belong to Me, by Patience and Prudence.
(yeah, the creepy one)
They are not being hunted; they are not hungry.

It is an exceptionally good day.

He slings an arm around her shoulders- he's still taking cues from her on what to do and what not to do, but she leans into his chest with a small, happy sound that he's sure she isn't aware of making. She doesn't often ask to see or write in his journal, but she'd asked after dinner if she could use it to write down her thoughts, and he was happy to oblige.

He tries not to read over her shoulder, but he can't help but notice that her handwriting is terrible- more than terrible, it's downright unreadable.

The borrowed pen scratches purposefully against the page, ending a sentence with a little flourish that looks like an interrobang, and then she draws a symbol- a circle, three arrows pointed into the center, and an outline that almost looks gearlike around it.

"I keep thinking we'll run into John, even though I know we... probably won't," she tells him, putting the pen down. "But John belonged to an organization and some of them were dimension hoppers. It's not unreasonable to think I might run into him again, is it?"

"No more unreasonable than thinking you might have run into me," Ford points out gently, and she sighs, fingers tightening around the journal in her hands.

"I've run into others from his Foundation," she adds, sniffling. "People who must have been from his dimension, or- or something close to it, people who wore the same badge he did. It's not stupid to think he's okay out there."

"I know it's not stupid," he tells her. "You're okay, and you were a kid when you got separated from him. He sounds like he had quite a lot of training. If you and I could survive out here, I have no doubt that he's doing alright for himself."

"I was still Other Me when he met me," she says quietly. "I don't even remember how long we were together. I don't remember getting separated."

"I know," Ford says quietly, pressing the lower half of his face against crook of her neck, just above the collar of her shirt. It's been less than a year, but it feels like longer sometimes. She smells like sweat and machine oil, like she always does, and under it the scent that inexplicably reminds him of clover honey, which he usually only gets to smell on her if they're somewhere with ready access to bathing facilities and indoor plumbing. It hasn't been too long since they were last in a dimension with hot showers. He doesn't understand why physical contact like this makes her feel better sometimes, but he doesn't really think he needs to know the why of it.

"What if- what if he needed me to do something and I didn't and now he's dead," she mutters anxiously, one of the few times he can remember that she admits that he may not be alive. She snifflies again and folds in on herself.

"It's alright, you're alright," he says into her scarred and dirty skin, and she puts the journal down and turns and looks at him, biting her lower lip.

"Why do I remember things about home, like- like the Civil War and that pie can be fruit or meat or custard but pi is three-point-one-four-one-five... nine?" He nods, and she continues. "How come I
can remember useless information about a world I might never see again, but I don't even remember
my name or my family or almost anything about the guy who saved my life?"

"I don't know, Ripley," he says, taking her hands in his. He looks down, laces their fingers together,
but when he looks up she's changed- older, more gray in the ragged blonde hair, chapped lips
peeling and bloody at the corners, fresh cuts and scars on her face, her neck, her hands, her arms.
She looks so tired. She looks like she did in the memory Ford and Fiddleford and the kids stumbled
onto, the memory the adults recognized as going bad in time to rush the twins out of there, the
memory Ford saw just enough of to slam the door behind him and wonder wildly if there was a way
to lock it down forever and ever.

"Oh," Ford says quietly. It's a dream. It's been a while since he had a dream with Ripley in it.
Right.

He clenches a fist, banishing her from his view, and looks around- wheat field, darkness, an eternal
evening sky, jumbled constellations from different nights with Ripley across countless dimensions.

He wills himself awake; decades of practice and he can do so almost instantly, gasping for breath.

Ripley is on her side, her back toward him, and he turns and curls himself against her body, pulling
her close. She smells unnervingly like Stan- same soap, same shampoo, same detergent- but
underneath it, still, the faint scent of clover honey. He knows- well, suspects- that what he thinks of
as "clover honey" is some other smell that his brain has failed to identify properly in the last thirty-
some-odd years, but when he closes his eyes and breathes in deep he can see it- a clear glass jar, his
mother dipping a spoon into it, thick golden loops drizzling onto toast and into tea.

He doesn't intend to go back to sleep, but he must at some point, because the next thing he can clearly remember is waking up to an empty bed.

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After speaking to Stan over coffee- he's still angry at him, but less so than he was yesterday, because
he understands in a way that most Ricks would (and which this Rick emphatically does not) that the
deception was necessary at the time- and discovering the location and directions to his target, he
walks to the Holiday Inn next to the mall. It takes nearly two hours, but it gives him ample time to
think, and- well, he doesn't know for sure how this is going to go down, but there's a Dunkin Donuts
next door and he's pretty sure that if Ripley were here she'd tell him to bring a peace offering.

Summer answers the door to their room, eyeballing the box in his hands for a moment. "Open it up."

Ford complies; she reaches in and snatches a glazed blueberry donut and starts eating it. That was the
donut Ford had assumed Rick would eat, so he's not sure what Rick's going to do now. "Grandpa Rick, it's your friend Ford, he brought food."

"Ugh, why," Rick grumbles from somewhere inside, although the faint echoing quality of his voice makes Ford think that he's likely in the bathroom.

Morty edges Summer out of the way and squints down at the selection, before grabbing the donut with strawberry frosting and sprinkles. Ford had initially assumed Summer would want that one, although mostly only because that's the one Mabel would have wanted. Ford's starting to wonder if he's not very good at guessing what other people want in a donut. "Rick, it's assorted, what kind of donut do you want?"

"Blueburrghherry," Rick replies from the bathroom.
"Sorry, there was only the one," Ford explains apologetically. There must be some sort of algorithm that would accurately predict what type of donut someone would want. Maybe he can think of one later, use the populace of Gravity Falls as a test group, there's a long list of interdimensional contractors out there that would pay out the nose to get their hands on something like that-

"A-alright, what do you want, Pines?" Rick grumbles, stumbling into the room in the same clothing he wore the day before.

"I have a proposition for you, Sanchez," Ford says, holding the donuts in front of him like a shield.

"Y-yeah, no, you're married, I'm not gettin' involved in that," Rick says, disgusted.

"Not that type of proposition," Ford says sharply, as Rick inspects the ten remaining donuts with a look of feigned disinterest. "I thought you might enjoy accompanying me on a venture related to the intersection of science and mysticism-

"Uh uh, yeah, okay," Rick mutters, picking out the Bavarian cream donut Ford had honestly figured Morty would want to eat.

"-and break into a child's bedroom and possibly intimidate him and his family," Ford finishes.

"What in the actual f-f-fuck, Pines," Rick says flatly.

"For old times' sake," Ford adds brightly.

"I have zero old times with you regarding breaking into a child's bedroom, you f-

"C-137 and I," Ford says, and Rick sighs in apparent recognition.

"That asshole? Okay, well... I mean, it's another me, can't be too fucked up-"

"No, no, all Ricks are plenty fucked up," Ford reassures him, handing the box of donuts off to Morty. "We were visiting your grandchildren."

"Ew," Summer mutters. "So you two are gonna go be gross together somewhere while Morty and I are stuck here?"

"Oh, no, no, of course not," Ford says brightly. "The twins have a teenaged friend named Wendy who courteously extended an invitation to you both for a day of," he checks the note he wrote to himself earlier, "hang out in some open graves down at the cemetery and throw things at the convenience store Ripley burned to the ground last month."

The teenaged siblings are silent for a moment.

"Y-you could always stick with us and play lookout while we terrorize some random family," Rick suggests around a mouthful of Bavarian cream.

"Cemetery sounds good," Summer says pleasantly.

Rick drops the kids off in his ship- and how familiar, how strange, how like Rick to have the same home-built flying saucer he used fifteen (?) years ago, how like him to deny the sentimentality of the situation. (Ford absentmindedly fingers the star sapphire round his neck, and declines to comment on anything like sentimentality.)

"Just like old times, huh," Rick comments in an acerbic tone, and Ford squares his shoulders in the front seat.
"Well-"

"For me our old times are getting drunk and listening to *Dark Side of the Moon* and fucking," Rick says harshly. "Only that wasn't even you, so as far as I'm concerned we don't have old times, r-right?" Ford considers this for a few moments.

"Alright, well... that's... not..." He looks over, and he can't tell if Rick's screwing with him or not. "The other Ricks I've met have... met more of me. I'm... more than a little surprised to hear that you hadn't."

"Ehh, I try to stay away from most other Ricks," he mutters, rolling his eyes and parking on top of what is now a **collapsed** section of white picket fence. "If you h-haven't noticed, mostly Ricks are assholes. I can't stand' em."

"They're not so bad," Ford says, shrugging. "At least, not the ones I've met. Except for Fishlips Rick, he's a... strange fellow."

Rick snorts mid-swig, spraying his sleeve with whatever it is in his flask, just as the front door opens. "Why, Stanford Pines," a tall, somewhat egg-shaped man in a straw hat says, smiling widely down at them. "And you've brought a friend how-" Confusion dawns as the man looks Ford over. "You're-you're not Stanford-"

"As a matter of fact, I am," Ford says seriously. "And you're Bud Gleeful, correct?"

"Y-yeah, I-"

Ford swings hard, planting a fist in the man's pink jowls and knocking him to the ground. "That's for trying to kidnap Ripley and chasing her through the woods, you ambulatory pile of human excrement. If you ever come near my wife or anybody in my family again, you'll force me to do something I really will **regret**."

"Hahahaaa, shit, Pines, you're a fuckin' b-beast!" Rick crows, coughing. "W-wait, what-?"

"You're crazy!" Bud says, backing up on the floor and bunching the rug up against his body. "Stay away from me, I'm callin' the cops, I won't let you-"

"I invite you to try to stop me," Ford growls softly, "from exacting my vengeance on what has apparently been a long-term attack on several members of my family by yourself and your abominable albino child."

"I'd listen to this guy if I were you, homeslice, h-he's got me playing Good Cop and I don't even give a fuck," Rick says happily, taking another swig from his flask. Ford takes out a pistol- normally a signal flare, now completely harmless, as he hasn't carried flash charges for it in years- and points it at Bud's quivering body.

"Would you like to disclose the location of your son before I-"

"He's upstairs, second bedroom on the right!" Bud cries out, and both Ford and Rick stop and stare at him, aghast.

"W-wow," Rick says finally. "No hesitation at all."

Ford holsters the pistol, narrowing his eyes. "If I see you again, Gleeful, it will be entirely too soon. Come on, Rick, let's get this over with."
"Not gonna lie, I'm a little hard right now," Rick slurs, and Ford makes a soft, horrified noise. Rick snorts another laugh.

The Gleeful child is upstairs- napping, it appears, curled up on top of the bedsheets in a powder-blue suit, glossy white hair pinned in place under a hairnet. Something in his dream doesn't agree with him, he makes a soft, scared little sound, and for a moment Ford is moved to—well, not exactly pity, but close to it. The feeling fades when he thinks about this child trying and almost succeeding in murdering his niece and nephew, and summoning Bill Cipher to torment his brother and spouse.

"Wake up, Gideon," Ford says briskly, and the boy's eyes open at once. He makes to say something accusatory and stops, swifter than his father in discerning that Ford is indeed not Stan.

"Who are you and whaddya want?" Gideon asks, and if he's not afraid he's either very sheltered or very confident. Ford holds out a hand.

"I want the pages you ripped out of my Journal." Gideon's eyes go wide and round, and he looks up at Ford's face.

"Yer the Author of the Journals," he says, doing the same thing Dipper did- it's more than a touch unnerving. "Yer the six-fingered man. You an' Stanford- yer brothers at least, but- twins?"

"That's broadly correct." Ford narrows his eyes. "You seem very bright for a boy of ... eight? Seven?"

"I'm ten," Gideon snaps.

"You're very bright for a boy of ten," Ford continues, and Rick chuckles darkly. Ford ignores him. "It's a shame you haven't tried turning that intellect towards something useful-"

"Like theoretical quantum dimensional studies," Rick chimes in.

"-like engineering or something, Rick, we're not encouraging theoretical quantum dimensional studies in minors," Ford corrects sharply.

"I-I have so many questions," Gideon says in a hushed voice, rooted to the spot.

"That is of no concern to me," Ford tells him sternly. "Perhaps you somehow thought I would overlook your harassment of my niece and nephew, as it occurred prior to my return to Gravity Falls-"

"-uh, that was just- we were jus' playin'," Gideon says quickly, turning doe eyes on the two unimpressed men before him.

"-but surely you realized that siccing Bill Cipher on my brother and wife would have far-reaching consequences," Ford finishes, and Gideon flushes an unnatural purplish color.

"Cipher tricked me," the boy says sharply, his face twisting. "You tricked me. You wrote down how to summon'im and that he was a trustworthy fella and that he would grant me the knowledge I seek-not that he was some insane demon who'd steal my body or that he'd get the knowledge by muckin' about in Stanford's mind. D'you think I woulda done it if I'd known what he'd do?"

"I think you might have done it to them if you didn't have to bear the physical consequences," Ford replies, and Gideon's eyes narrow. Ford frowns, sighing. "I suppose some of the responsibility is mine- I did not go back and edit my Journals completely before consigning them to the hidden nooks and crannies that were meant to be their permanent resting places."
"Yeah, that's why you didn't burn'em," Rick mutters, and Ford shoots him a narrow look before turning back to Gideon.

"What did Bill do while he was occupying your body?" he asks, and Gideon shudders and hugs his left arm to his chest.

"I dunno, I was... he threw me outta my body and ran away before I could figure out how to move around," he admits. "I woke up in the backyard covered in..." The boy's eyes glaze over momentarily, and he shakes his head. "I don't know what happened, I don't know what he did. And even if I did, why would I tell you?"

"Because you are alive on this planet and he is capable of destroying it," Ford tells him, and Gideon just blinks at him. Ford sighs.

"You seem to be a very shrewd child, Gideon. You read my Journal and put much of what I wrote to use. I think you can imagine what will happen to you- what I am capable of- if I don't have every scrap of paper torn from my Journal returned to me at once."

Gideon frowns at him, clutching at his bolo tie. "I refuse. Those pages are all that stands b'ween me and... me an' -"

"Gideon," Ford says quietly. "You're ten years old. Any situation that would call for the summoning of dark forces from beyond this mortal veil is best handled by an adult. You're not old enough to shoulder the burden of protecting yourself with the kind of tools you've got."

Gideon sneers at that, and Ford's heart sinks a little as he recalls the lightning-fast cowardice of the man downstairs.

"You don't know what yer sayin'," Gideon says contemptuously. "You don't know what I'm up against."

"I have some idea, kid," Ford says, frowning. "So here's some food for thought: Bill Cipher is not to be trusted. Not because he's evil- which he is- and not because he's a liar, although he is one. No. I have spent thirty years paying for the sin of thinking I could be useful to him, and that my usefulness meant something to him. When that betrayal hit, I was thirty-two years old, with twelve doctorate degrees, with an enormous research grant and political connections enough to fund whatever I wanted to do, and I spent all of that time and money and those favors on exactly what Bill wanted, and nothing else. What do you think a child with a fourth-grade education would be worth to that creature?"

Gideon is silent, and Ford holds out his hand again.

"Give me my Journal pages before I subject you to one of the dozens of truth serums I have on my person. I can assure you, none of them are pleasant."

"An' what do I do when I can't defend myself 'gainst somebody or- or-"

"Like who?" Rick asks suddenly. Gideon's eyes stray towards the door, but he is silent as he pulls pages out of hiding places- one under his pillow, one in a special-looking box in his nightstand, one from within the frankly enormous pompadour on his little head- until there is a pile of nearly two dozen ripped, crumpled pages laid out on his bedspread.

"That's nowhere near all of the pages that are missing," Ford says with a frown, and Gideon holds his hands up.
"That's everything I have in here. I used to have twice as many, but half of'em got stolen when I kept everything in the same place."

Ford exhales slowly through his nose, tilting his head at the boy.

"You do realize that if I ever have reason to even suspect that you have any other pages, the consequences will be... severe."

"Y-yessir," Gideon mutters sullenly, looking down.

"Very good. Pursue a nonlethal hobby, kid," Ford says, and lightly elbows Rick's side. "Come on, Rick, we've got things to do."

They're in the ship and heading towards the Shack when Rick clears his throat.

"You, uh... you think the kid's okay, though?"

"What kid?" Ford asks, and Rick almost hits a tree because he turns bodily in the seat to give Ford a pointed Look. "Who, Gideon?"

"No, Babyf-f-face Nelson. Yes Gideon! Christ, Pines," Rick sighs noisily as they pass over a line of cars at a stoplight. "You don't get to be a fucked-up ten year old without some other fucked up shit happening, in my experience."

"I know less than nothing about how to deal with... children issues," Ford says warily, and Rick scoffs.

"Whatever."

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Lunch is hot dogs- Fiddleford and Ripley are still out doing whatever it is they've been doing all morning, and it's an exceptionally cold meal without the kids as a buffer between the three old men. Ford knows after yesterday they'd still be a bit raw, but he's not entirely sure he understands what the problem exactly is between Stanley and Rick. Stan was right to deceive Rick, and when he realized he couldn't continue with... their relationship without compromising the secrecy of his mission, he cut ties between them. And Rick was obviously emotionally invested in no small part due to the nature of Stan's deception, and he's right to be angry- but by Rick's own admission, he purposefully let Stan think he was far less attached than he really was long before things ended. Ford isn't sure why they can't both agree they were both right and wrong in this situation and move forward.

He takes a small bite of his hot dog. Stan only buys off-brand mustard, and the buns are stale. It's not an incredibly enjoyable meal by any means.

Soos steps into the kitchen, takes in the sight of three silent, awkward old people picking at their food, and lets out a nervous laugh.

"Wow, doods, you, uh, you're bein' awful quiet. Hey, Dr. Pines, who's your science friend?"

"Soos, this is Rick Sanchez," Ford says, and Rick mutters a quiet yo and plays with his now-empty flask. "Rick, this is, ah, Stan's employee, Soos."

"Hey, uh, Mr. Pines, there's a tour group drivin' up," Soos says, almost apologetically. "When should I say the tour's gonna be?"
"Tour?" Rick echoes, but softly enough that Ford doubts Stan heard him.

"Just give me a minute, Soos, I'll be right out," Stan sighs, standing and fixing his tie and fastening the button on their father's old suit jacket.

"Oh, drat," Ford says suddenly, plopping his dreadful hot dog down onto the table. "I meant to take Rick down to the lab to see if we could figure out why I can't get an accurate reading off the portal downstairs- we can't go through the entrance if there's a tour group in there."

"Oh, don't worry about that," Stan says, sounding surprised. "I'll have them out of here within the hour, Ford."

An hour of sitting at the kitchen table in contemplative silence sounds terrible; Ford forces a small smile of gratitude anyway.

Luckily- perhaps even miraculously, Ford's willing to admit that some things point towards the existence of a benevolent higher power- Fiddleford and Ripley come in through the kitchen door barely five minutes after Stan leaves Ford and Rick alone. Both of them are wearing enormous floppy straw hats with brightly colored flowers and bows on them, shopping bags hanging off of their arms.

"Nice hats, nerds," Rick snickers, and Ripley beams at him.

"Thanks, Rick! Yeah, you won't believe what they sell at malls nowadays, we passed by this kiosk that sells only fancy hats, so we got us some!"

"I feel pretty!" Fiddleford agrees, tipping his hat at them.

"You're certainly both very colorful now," Ford agrees, blinking. "What's in the bags?"

"Shorts, mostly, I got a bunch of shorts now, Fidds and I needed shorts. Oh, show'em your cup shirt, Fiddleford, it makes ya look real cool and handsome," Ripley adds brightly.

"Aw, shucks," Fiddleford says, blushing. He reaches into a bag and pulls out a white t-shirt with a bright teal and purple zigzag design sketched around the entire chest. Rick bursts out laughing, the soft, genuinely amused chuckle Ford has heard only rarely from the other Ricks he's known.

"W-well, shit, I wasn't sure where you were goin' with it, but yeah, that is definitely a cup shirt."

"Right!?" Ripley asks, grinning. Ford is terribly lost.

"Hey, Ripley, can I uh, can I pick your brain for a second?" Rick asks, and she nods, waving at him to follow her back to her and Ford's room as she takes her shopping bags back. Ford opens his mouth, but Fiddleford's already passing through on his way to his room. Ford follows along after, and holds up his hands when Fiddleford turns and gives him a quizzical glance.

"Fiddleford, I- I'm sorry," he says, and Fiddleford blinks, unmoving. Ford clears his throat. "I'm sorry for everything. I understand that you may not... remember everything, and to be totally honest there are some things I've forgotten after thirty years myself, but... I just want you to know that I'm sorry."

Fiddleford takes off his glasses, cleaning them with the hem of his shirt. "Some'a them nightmares never went all the way away, Stanford."

"I know. I know, I've had the same nightmares, Fiddleford, all this time. I..." Ford takes a deep
"...breath. "It's been somewhat mentioned that I was an enormous asshole to you."

"Yeah, I bet she said it like that," Fiddleford agrees, putting his glasses back on.

"Fiddleford, I-" He swallows. "I ran into you. Another you, during the- during the thirty years I was wandering. You were my best friend there, and I just..." Ford's throat is tight and dry but if he doesn't say it now, he never will. "I couldn't sleep for a week after that, I was so... I've missed you terribly, and I wished I could make it up to you and I never thought I would get the chance, and I... Fiddleford, if I could take it all back, every stupid and unnecessarily cruel thing I said and did-"

"You can't, Ford," Fiddleford says, sighing. "You can't take it back or away. I tried, and..." He looks over, frowning up at Ford. "I might not remember everything you did, but I remember the way it made me feel. Stanford, I..." He takes a deep breath. "Ford, I ain' makin' excuses for what you did, or what I've done since, but I... I know you wasn't quite yerself and I know I'd want a chance to fix things." He gives a suspicious sniff.

"Can you find it in your heart to forgive me, old friend?" Ford asks hopefully, and Fiddleford gives him a wry little smile.

"O'course I do, you enormous asshole."

The hug is brief and tentative, but it is a hug, and Ford is terribly relieved to know that door isn't closed forever.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

They're eating dinner in the parlor- all five Pineses plus the Sanchez-Smiths, Fiddleford, Soos, and Wendy makes too big a party to eat together anywhere else- and Ripley is telling them all the story of how she stole the Ember Heart of Cryttaria when there's a knock at the door.

"Nose knows," Wendy says, putting her finger on her nose, and Soos and the kids all immediately follow suit. Fiddleford blinks and puts his finger against the side of his nose. Rick and Ripley also, after a moment, touch their noses, looking expectantly at the elder Pines twins.

"What?" Stan asks self-consciously. "Also, somebody get the door."

"It's got to be you and Great-Uncle Ford," Dipper explains.

"Oh, that's- that's ridiculous," Stanley huffs.

"I can name something else that's ridiculous-" Rick starts, and Stan jumps to his feet.

"Let's go, Sixer."

"Sure," Ford says, pushing his mostly-untouched shrimp lo mein away. (It's a little... burnt, but he's been pretending to pick at it ever since he noticed Ripley frowning at him for not eating.)

They open the door to a trio of Ricks. Stan makes a sound like he's choking on his own tongue; Ford slaps him on the back, blinking at the Ricks.

"Ricks. To what do we owe the pleasure?" he asks amiably.

"Greetings, Sixer. Fiver." The one in the lead doesn't seem to notice or care that Stanley is coughing up a lung, giving him only the briefest glance before continuing. "Uh, this is just a, you know, a courtesy call, making sure you're the right Ford for this dimension, you know."
"That's... quite unlike you," Ford says diplomatically, patting Stan's back. "As you can see, I'm native to this dimension, and I'm more than happy to provide you with as many saliva samples as you could possibly want in order to prove it. You have a swab? I'll swab right now. We're actually quite busy at the moment, so I'd like to keep this quick-"

"Ah, yeah, not so fast, Sixer Pines. DNA sensors are picking up an unusual number of Ricks in there-" the leader Rick says, and Stan snorts.

"Well, I guess one Rick is more than the normal amount, sure-"

"Look, of course it's going to look like there are a lot of Sanchezes inside," Ford says, waving Stan aside. "Stan, go finish eating, I'll handle this. This dimension's Rick brought Summer and Morty over for the weekend, that's all."

"Y-yeah, what about the other one?" the left-hand Rick says- Ford isn't sure which Rick it is, he's got a leather jacket over his labcoat with the sleeves rolled to the elbows. Stan huffs, trudging back to the parlor. "These things say there are four, and we know Beth's back home, so-"

"Your sensors are wrong," Ford says simply. "It's just Rick and his grandchildren in there. I mean, not just them, our family and Stan's employees are also inside, but- anyway, one Sanchez and two Smiths, that's it."

"Number one, it's three Sanchezes," the leader Rick interrupts. "And our sensors are never wrong. We're the ones who built them."

"Ricks, I normally get along with you," Ford says pleasantly. "And we have had some pretty good times, assuming you're not like the Rick of this dimension who has never met any of me."

"Hah, I'll say," mutters right-hand Rick, tipping bright orange-framed plastic sunglasses up onto the top of his head.

"I'm giving you three five minutes to walk in, see that there's only the one Rick here, and walk out. And if you stay any longer or do anything else, I'm not going to feel particularly responsible for whatever fate befalls you," Ford says, taking a step back. "Come on. Say, how's Cowboy Rick?"

"Oh, he's- h-he's alright, giant fuckin' nerd, as usual," Leader Rick says dismissively, unholstering a portal gun.

"Pfft," the Rick replies, stepping into the parlor after Ford. Rick and his kids are glumly picking at their food and shooting sullen glances at the new arrivals, while everyone else (with the exception of Wendy, who is generally unimpressed) is in a state of discomfort- although not particularly shocked-looking, Stanley must have given them adequate warning of what to expect. Ripley's nowhere to be seen, though.

"Where'd Ripley go?" Ford asks.

"Sh-she's in the shitter," Rick says quickly, and Mabel and Dipper turn a deep crimson.

"Language, Rick," Stanley snaps, before giving the other three a mistrustful glance. "So what do these weird Ricks want now?"

"We're just here to make sure Softy Rick isn't hosting another illegal gathering of noncompliant
"That's Stupid Pines," Leader says offhandedly, poking at his device. Everyone at the table bristles—Sunglasses Rick, at least, has the grace to look uncomfortable with what his associate just said. Ford decides that if he does start shooting, he'll save that one for last, give him a chance to prove himself.

"Get out of my house," Ford says softly. There's a soft, slightly arrhythmic tapping from under the table where Fiddleford's sitting, and Mabel's hand is clutching the front of her blue and orange rabbit sweater.

"This thing still says four," Leader tells him, frowning. "Look, Pines, it's actually pretty serious, o-okay? If the Galactic Federation's sensors pick up what we're finding, th-then not only is your Earth in danger of being forcibly annexed—"

"I believe I said to get out."

"-but you and Stupid Pines are absolutely going to be thrown into a Federation prison."

"Get out of my house, Ricks. I'm not asking," Ford snarls.

"Look, c-calm down," Rick—from now on, Ford's going to remember that—says nervously. "If one Rick gets arrested, they c-could use him to capture all Ricks. Th-they're just being careful, even if they're being dicks."

"The extra Rick you're hiding is endangering all of us," Leader Rick says flatly.

Ford frowns at them, and Sunglasses Rick clears his throat.

"It's probably interference from the downstairs portal—my Ford's portal used to screw with my sensors all the time before he dismantled it. If these guys say there's only three Sanchezes, there's only three."

"You want to be responsible if this blows up?" Leader Rick asks drily, huffing. "Fine. Pines—destroy the portal. I've been to the worlds where you didn't, and you don't want that kind of fuckup on your conscience."

"Language," Stanley mutters sullenly.

"Let's move, Ricks," Leader Rick says, and before Ford can protest against it he fires his portal gun at a wall and steps through. Sunglasses Rick shoots them all a sympathetic glance before he follows Biker Jacket Rick out, and the portal closes.

"No offense, man, but you're a bunch of jerks," Wendy says finally.

"Seriously, Rick," Morty says, frowning down at his food.

"Do you—do all of your copies say that about Grunkle Stan?" Dipper asks, scowling.

"Hey, kid, don't get upset over it, it's true most of the time anyway," Stanley says jokingly, ruffling Dipper's hair.

"No, it f-fu—"

"Language, for cryin' out loud!" Stanley interrupts.

"It isn't true and you know it!" Rick snaps. All of the kids are looking nervously at one another, but
Soos's starting to get that look he gets when someone says something kind about Stanley, and
Fiddleford looks like he's still processing what just happened. "D-dammit, Stan, you- you kept up,
whenever I started talking about my own personal projects and shit-"

"Okay, why don't I just wrangle these guys out of here so you don't have to keep stopping for
language," Wendy suggests, standing. "Come on, guys, before your uncle has a stroke."

"You're not an idiot, and you're- you're fun to be around but you're frankly embarrassing to be
around because you're some kind of-of good person, I mean it's p-pretty fuckin' stupid that you think
you're not, like you weren't the goddamn love of my life," Rick spits out, like it's a curse. Stan looks
floored, and Mabel is now making the same face Soos is, her loyalty to this Rick instant and bright.
Ford suspects his face is doing the same thing Dipper's is, and tries to school his expression into
something remotely resembling professionalism.

"Okay, getting real feelingsy now, guys, come on," Wendy insists, finally ushering the twin children out of the room. Morty and Summer look extremely uncomfortable, and after a few seconds of stunned silence they leave, too.

"I must've been pretty stupid if I didn't know that," Stan says, after a minute or two. "I just- I
honestly just... I thought you were just..."

"Screwing around, having fun, not caring," Rick grumbles, taking out his flask. "Well, that's what I
wanted you to think, so-"

"You didn't even want me, you wanted Ford, I just- I thought it was better not to lie anymore, I knew
it was gonna hurt you if-" Stan says pleadingly, and Rick snorts angrily.

"Alright, I'm out," Fiddleford says, and Ford agrees, wanting no part at all in Round Two of that particular fight. They pause in the doorway- Soos is obviously quite clearly committing this all to memory, entranced. Ford doesn't want to wade back into that mess to retrieve him.

"He'll be fine," Ford says confidently, and Fiddleford rolls his eyes.

"Let's go git yer wife."

"Um, is she- is she not indisposed?" Ford asks delicately, as they stroll through the hallway.

"Rick told'er to hide out in yer room until th'other Ricks left," Fiddleford explains, knocking on the
door. "After Stan came back an' told us what was up. Seemed pretty sure they might try to collect,
uh, collect a bounty on 'er head?"

"Oh, that's... pretty cold, but I'm sure we could have talked them out of doing anything rash," Ford
says, after a moment. "It wasn't a huge bounty the last time I checked, only something like eleven
hundred flurbos-"

"Thirty-four hundred, thank you very much," Ripley says cheerfully, swinging the door open. Ford
blinks- she's in a completely different set of clothing from what she'd been wearing only a few
minutes earlier, every curve of her legs and hips on display in a pair of black-and-purple shorts that
look like they were painted on, several scars from old stab wounds completely visible on the soft,
rolling surface of her stomach from under the edge of her very-short yellow shirt. It says "BOOKS"
in black print across her chest. "Look, Ford, crop tops came back! Crop tops, Ford!"

"What's a crop top?" he asks faintly.

"This better not awaken anything inside'a me," Fiddleford says, after a moment. "It's an eighties
fashion thing, Ford, ya missed it."

"Oh, drat, sorry. I forgot you wouldn't know about crop tops," Ripley admits, hands on her hips. "The sales lady at the store said this shirt is dramatic and daring, and also shows my love of books."

"Why did you change clothes?" Ford asks, unable to look away. The silver chain of her necklace is visible, although the pendant is hanging down inside the shirt itself.

"Uh, you know, I was bored and I didn't know how long I was gonna be in there- why, is- is it weird? I thought I had the hang of this dimension's fashion," she says doubtfully, reaching back to put her hair in a ponytail. "Wait, why am I even asking you? Fidds, doesn't this look like what people were wearing at the mall?"

He considers this, stroking his beard a bit, before nodding. "Ayup. Tight pants, crop tops, we musta seen a dozen gals wanderin' around in this same getup at Sears alone."

Ford shrugs, rubbing the back of his head. "I'll freely admit I haven't left the house nearly enough to have encountered this outfit elsewhere. The shorts look like that shirt you used to have in the Fingers dimension, though."

"It does?" Ripley glances down, then back up at him. "So it does! So is it safe for me to come out or what? Our Rick was actin' kinda squirrelly earlier."

"The other Ricks have gone, but Stanley and Softy Rick are having another fight," Ford says apologetically. Ripley's eyes go round behind her glasses.

"Softy Rick?" she asks, grinning. "Our Rick is Softy Rick!?"

"He's less ornery and dickish than the other Ricks," Fiddleford concedes, and Ford chuckles a little.

"Yes, but he's so much less of a jerk than the other Ricks that they've all collectively decided that it's his defining characteristic," Ford explains, and Fiddleford puts a hand to his face, slightly alarmed.

"An entire multiverse of infinite options and this is the nicest Rick that exists," Fiddleford says weakly. "Oh my. That's... really... very interestin'."

"It really is," Ripley beams, tugging on her BOOKS shirt a bit. "You know what, I'm gonna swap this out for my shirt with a robot on it, this one's gonna be for a special books-related occassion. One moment, guys."

"Sure," Ford says, sticking his hands in his pockets. Fiddleford lets out a low whistle. "What?"

"I don't think my crop top's gonna fit the same," he sighs, heading off to his room. Ford takes just a moment to thank the stars that he wasn't on the same shopping trip with Ripley- she would probably have forced him into purchasing a 'crop top' of his own, and the thought of every one of his scars and ill-advised tattoos on display makes him wince. He thinks about it, then knocks on the door again.

"It's just me now. Can I come in?" he asks, and she makes a noise that sounds like a yes, so he comes in.

"Hey," she says, the sleeve of a t-shirt in her mouth. She pulls it out and shows him that she's trying to pull the price-tag off; he takes out a small pocketknife and cuts it for her. "Are Stan and Rick really fighting? Like, fight-fighting?"
"Rick said Stan was the love of his life," Ford divulges, and Ripley gasps.

"And I missed it! Oh my god, what else?"

"He said Stanley's smart and fun to be around and a good person," Ford adds, and Ripley buries her face in her hands.

"Ohhh. My god. Ford, this is now my favorite Rick."

"He's my favorite Rick now, too," Ford admits, and she pats the bed next to her. He takes a seat, wrapping his hand around hers, carefully lacing their fingers together.

"Softy Rick," she repeats happily. "I'm going to screw with him until the end of time over that name."

"Yeah, I figured as much," he says, looking up at the art on the walls- mostly Mabel's, some Dipper's and Fiddleford's. "I apologized to Fiddleford earlier, too. Properly. I know you... I know you were very concerned that I might not."

"Aw, Fordsy," she sighs, nudging his shoulder with hers. "I'm glad you two talked. Is everything good?"

He hesitates- the portal downstairs isn't completely dismantled, it's still giving off worrying readings, and his brother isn't a closed book but sometimes the pages are in a different language, and the trust Fiddleford is placing in him is fragile, and he's sure he's not exactly the best influence around those children-

-but, on the other hand, he's safely home, surrounded by friends and family, and Stanford Pines is sitting arm in arm with the love of his life.

So.

"You know what?" he says brightly. "Everything is good."

(Later, they watch a movie- West Side Story- and Stan and Rick come join them a few minutes into it, red-eyed and sullen, but when Stan sits down Rick elects to sit flush against his side, and after a moment Stan puts an arm around Rick's shoulders, before Mabel climbs up onto Stan's lap and makes herself comfortable, and Morty moves so that he sits with his back against Rick's knees. When Wendy leaves to grab snacks, Dipper tucks himself into the space between Ripley and Ford, glancing uncomfortably at Wendy whenever the famous love between Tony and Maria is mentioned. Stan charms everyone in the room when it turns out that he knows nearly all of the words to Cool and Gee, Officer Krupke.)

(Later still, when Ford can't sleep because he's hot where Ripley's wrapped around him and cold everywhere else because a blanket would be too much, he pulls an arm around her and runs a hand across the skin of her side, tracing the scars he was there for- an attempted assassin in the Lizard Rat Dimension, a burn from a close call with Bill's henchmen in a cloudy dimension they never explored fully, the place where he had to stitch her up in complete silence and darkness- and smooths out the scars he wasn't there for, as if banishing them.)

(He tucks his face against her neck and breathes in. Clover honey.)

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